Life, Avengers Style

by KieraPSI

Summary

Following his sentencing in Asgard, Loki and the Avengers have defeated the Mad Titan with the help of Asgard and its allies. Along with his wife Kara, Asgard's new goddess of Fire, Loki must settle down to life on Midgard as an Avenger. Sequel to Fire and Ice, this sequel will be added to sporadically. Rated M for sex and coarse language.

Notes

Author's Notes: To my new readers, if you haven't read The Broken God and Bride and Punishment, you may want to do so, it will explain the backstory. To those who have read it...Welcome back, gang! The format will be a bit different this time around. While it will be largely time sequential, we won't necessarily have a continuous storyline. Loki will be in nearly all of the chapters to some degree as this is basically the story of him serving his sentence and becoming the person he was meant to have become all along. Enjoy!
"It will be totally awesome," Beth enthused. "All of the exhibits are decorated with Christmas lights and such; they’re serving hot chocolate and apple cider, Santa will be there for the kids, and it will be so much fun." She smiled at them as the group pretty much glowered in unison. "And it’s for charity; the proceeds are going half to the Children’s Zoo and half to discounting rates for school groups so that more city kids can learn about the animals."

Now she had them. Tony sighed. "I could just write them a check," he muttered.

“You could do that too, Tony,” Pepper said. “You’re not going as heroes; this will be all incognito…well, more or less. Some of you will probably be recognized at some point. This is just something for us all to do together.” Tony shrugged and nodded.

“Yeah, think of it as a teambuilding activity,” Steve told them all. She grinned at him. He’d been all over the idea when she’d shown him the article in the paper. He’d apparently never been to a zoo. While it was true many of the animals would not venture out in the cold and dark, he’d still love it.

Kara was frowning, as was Loki, but at least Loki’s frown was thoughtful. “Pretty lights, things to see, strolling along at your leisure, it will be romantic,” Beth wheedled.

Loki’s expression softened further and he gave Kara a small smile. “Shall we be romantic, love?” he asked her as he lifted her hand to his lips. Yes! Another one hooked!

“I suppose. They have something like that at one of the California zoos, it was kind of nice.”

Beth turned her pleading gaze on Darcy and Bruce. They were freshly returned from Asgard and while they weren’t arguing or anything, they’d been spending a lot of time apart. “It’s up to you, Darcy,” Bruce said. “I’m okay with it either way.”

“Christmas, huh?” Darcy mused. “At least there’ll be lots of real people there.”

“Darcy, there were real people in Asgard.” Oh boy, that sounded like an old argument.

“Not human people…or excuse me, mortal people.” The brunette was suddenly the focus of several annoyed stares. Beth had already had a convo with Steve about the fact that he might live a lot longer than she would. Clint had the same problem with Natasha. Logan, who was off visiting his X-Men friends, was also going to live a very long time and God only knew how long Loki and Kara would live; they were both, for all intents and purposes, immortal. Tony had been grousing about it, again, just the other day and had spilled that Bruce’s lifespan, thanks to the other guy, was likely to be super long as well. Had Darcy finally been told?

“I’m sorry, Darcy. If I could change things, be normal again, I would. You know that.” Yep, Darcy knew. “Come on, honey. Let’s go stroll in the zoo, admire the lights, just do something normal.”

“Okay. Yeah, I’m in.”

Beth smiled and looked at Natasha and Clint. Well, more at Natasha. “We all missed out on Halloween and Thanksgiving between you guys saving the world and us all going to Asgard, what do you say?”

The very pregnant Black Widow frowned down at her baby bulge. “It would be an acceptable way
to get some light exercise and fresh air,” she decided.

“Wonderful! I’ll call in and get our tickets arranged. They open at five-thirty; it’ll be dark enough by then. We can go out to dinner after, if that’s okay with everybody?”

“Not Mexican,” Nat said quickly. “I love it, but the spices keep the baby up.”

“How about Italian?”

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Darcy frowned down at the outfit she’d decided to wear. It had several layers, since she figured it would be pretty cold at the zoo; but it was cute. The boots alone had cost her a week’s salary; well, a week’s salary when she was just Jane’s assistant. Her current salary was awesome, much higher than most poli-sci grads could expect. But then, most of them didn’t get jobs being the Social Media Director for the Avengers. Damn, she loved that title, it even sounded important. She finished buttoning the silk blouse and pulled the cashmere sweater on over her head. It was a really nice sage green that matched her eyes and hugged the boobage. “Not that I want them highlighted,” she muttered.

A knock sounded on her door. “Miss Lewis, Dr. Banner is at the door,” Jarvis told her.

“Thanks, J; could you pop it open for me?” she asked as she reached for the pendant Queen Frigga had given her as a thank you gift for helping Bruce navigate the intricacies of negotiation. It was a gorgeous piece of gold and held a golden topaz stone. Frigga had been great; she’d been the one whose shoulder Darcy had cried on when she’d overheard some of the delegates offering Bruce sympathy for his attraction to a ‘mortal whose light would be doused in the mere blink of an eye’. She blinked rapidly to stop the tears in their tracks. Darcy Lewis did not cry goddammit. She was the strongest of the strong, the toughest of the tough, the…

“Hey, Darce; you okay, honey?” That soft warm voice made all of her strength melt away like ice under the summer sun. She grabbed a pair of tissues and held them at the corners of her eyes to catch the tears so her mascara wouldn’t run and give her raccoon eyes.

“Sure, fine. Be with you in a sec.” She took a deep breath and was about to let it out slowly when Bruce closed the gap between them and wrapped her in his always surprisingly strong arms. I mean, seriously. Everyone knew the Hulk was strong, but nobody suspected it of Bruce with his absent-minded professor look. “Don’t, please.”

“We need to talk about it, honey. Pushing the issue aside isn’t doing either of us any good.”

Why did he always have to make sense? “What’s there to talk about? I’m going to get old, you aren’t. Not any older than you are now, anyway.”

“Ouch. Gee, thanks.” He loosened his hold and let her turn to face him. “Darcy, just because I don’t seem to be aging now, doesn’t mean that I won’t in the future; I just don’t know what will happen, no one does.”

“Lady Eir seems to think you might be immortal, or as immortal as they are anyway.”

“She also said she’s never seen anything like this. Come on, Darcy. You were okay when you thought you’d end up with an old man while you were still fairly young.”

“That’s different.”
He sighed. It was a tired sound. “And here I thought I’d be rejected because I was too dangerous to
love; not because my aging stopped. It’s ironic.” She looked up in time to see his sad smile slip
away. “We can call it quits if you want. I-I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

Did she feel obligated? She’d broken down and told him that she loved him one night in Asgard
while they stood on their balcony looking out at the alien constellations in the night sky. She’d
meant it, too. No one had ever taken her so seriously; made her feel smart, important, cherished.
Most men just saw her as sexy and sarcastic; a hot bod with not much going on otherwise. Bruce
saw her, he loved her, not her boobs, not her pussy. He loved Darcy Lewis, all of her. “I don’t
want. Geez, Bruce; I’m just scared. Just…I don’t know.”

“Okay. How about an easier question? Do you want to go out with the others tonight?”

She smirked. “Yeah, I do. I wish I thought they’d spike the hot chocolate with Bailey’s though.”

“We can have some of that later.”

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It was a nice night; Kara was glad they’d decided to come. The lights were pretty awesome, people
were smiling everywhere, and they even had carolers; just the right kick to get them into the
Christmas spirit. Well, most of them. She stole a glance at her husband. Loki was peering into one
of the enclosures at a big black cat, jaguar or panther; she wasn’t sure and was too lazy to go
looking for the sign. The animal was half in and half out of the heated part of the habitat. Evidently
all of the lights and commotion had sparked its interest. “Reminds me of you,” she said playfully.

His eyebrow lifted. “In what way?”

“He’s sleek, powerful, beautiful and dangerous as all hell.”

“Hmm, yet you managed to make me purr.” She laughed as he tugged her closer and nuzzled her
jaw. “Your skin is so warm,” he said softly before nipping her earlobe.

“It’s damn cold, I’m compensating.” They were both wearing light jackets and scarves. She’d
added a brownish newsboy cap with rhinestones. Darcy had called it ‘the ultimate redhead’s hat’ as
the shade complimented her hair. Her scarf was forest green cashmere and Loki wore the silk one
he’d worn in Stuttgart. That had raised a few eyebrows amongst the team, but her ever-mischievous
love had insisted. He did enjoy putting people on edge. “Stop that,” she told him as he began
kissing down the length of her neck.

“Why? You know you love it.”

“I’m not an exhibitionist.” He sighed heavily. “No, I’m not going to make an exception for you,”
she scolded. “There’re lots of kids around.”

“Very well.” He petulantly pulled the collar of her jacket back up to cover the skin he’d exposed.
“Tonight, you owe me.”

Kara had to laugh. “Once we get back to our rooms,” she agreed.

“Damn, it’s cold.” They turned as Tony and Pepper made their way to the enclosure. “Wait, why
aren’t you freezing?”

Loki smirked at him. “Frost giant?”
“Oh, right. Aaaannd?” he asked, looking at her.

“It’s part of my pyrokinesis, Tony. I can self-adjust my body temperature to deal with the cold.”

“I did not know that. Did I?”

“I’m not sure if I ever mentioned it. You didn’t go to Jötunheim with us.”

“Damn. Color me jealous.”

Pepper stared out at them wistfully from the depths of her down filled coat and hood. “I have to admit, I am too for a change.”

“I’m sorry,” Kara offered.

“I’m not.”

“Loki, be nice.”

He grinned. “If I were being nice…” he trailed off as she frowned at him. “Oh, very well. Pepper, take off your glove.” Loki sighed when she hesitated. “Do you want to be warmer or not?” The glove was yanked off hurriedly. “Place your hand on mine,” he instructed, holding his hand level, palm out.

Pepper complied and a green glow surrounded their hands for a moment and then seeped into hers. “Oh! Oh, thank you, Loki, that’s much better.”

“Wait; did you just make her not feel the cold?” Tony asked.

“No, but the ward will take the edge off of it for her. If you two hold hands, bared hands,” he clarified. “You will be covered by it as well.”

Tony immediately pulled his right glove off and took Pepper’s left hand. “Damn, Rock of Ages, I owe you a solid.” Their honorary brother grinned as Loki frowned at him. “Get it? Rock, solid… no?”

“No. Pepper, have you never told your fiancé that he has an utterly juvenile sense of humor?”

“Frequently. But you know how he is, Loki.”

“Unfortunately. Ah well, for your sake, you get to keep the ward. It’s your choice whether he gets to keep possession of your hand. I’d insist he pay for the privilege in some manner were I you.”

“If you were me, Tony wouldn’t have made it past his thirty-seventh birthday. Luckily for him, I have a much higher tolerance for his antics.” Pepper turned to frown at her fiancé. “Tony, if you don’t want to continue freezing your backside off, you will make that appearance at the Children’s Hospital at Montefiore that Beth suggested.”

“Cap will go; all the kids love that red, white and blue.”

“The boys want to see Iron Man and you will give them Iron Man; no debate, you’re doing it.”

“Damn. Okay.”

Kara gave Loki a sidelong glance. “Happy now?” she asked him.
“Yes, actually.”

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“Damn, it is fucking freezing,” Clint muttered as he watched Natasha peer at an exhibit which purportedly held wolves. All that could be seen where gray lumps of fur gathered near the entrance of an enclosure.

“Wimp.” She shot him what, for her, was an indulgently fond look. “You’d have never lasted one winter in Russia.”

“I admit it. Let’s just hope that Merida takes after you and not me in that area.”

“Brianna is doing just fine,” she retorted.

He grinned. Loki’s suggestion to use reverse psychology to get the name he wanted for their baby was working. Nat was totally convinced that Brianna was the name she wanted. Now he had to work on the middle name. “Merida Sophia Romanov,” he insisted.

Nat’s stubborn expression emerged. Not that most people would recognize it as a stubborn expression. It was mostly just a setting of her jaw accompanying a slight frown and an even slighter narrowing of her eyes. “Brianna Merida Barton and that is final. Deal with it, Hawk.”

“I don’t get a say?”

“You wanted Merida, we’re using Merida. I don’t want her to have a Russian name, so she’s using Barton. Stop arguing with me.”

He heaved a sigh. “Fine; it can be Merida Brianna Barton, then.”

“Hawk.”

Her voice had gone dangerous. Damn that was sexy. “Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you’re annoyed with me?”

“Do you have any idea how much I want to rip your penis off and make you eat it when you say things like that?”

Whoops. “Sorry, Nat. Okay, Brianna Merida…Barton.”

“Good choice.”

This time he hid the grin. The game would be up for sure if she saw it. And she would see it, six months plus pregnant or not, the Black Widow didn’t miss a thing. “It’s still damn cold,” he muttered, careful to sound sullen about it. He frowned as Kara and Loki came into view; the two were only wearing light jackets. “That is so damn unfair.” Nat frowned at him. “Look at them; not cold at all. Fuck.”

Her eyebrows rose. “He is a frost giant; well, half, anyway. He just wore trousers and his boots in Jötunheim and it was much colder there; and Kara is the goddess of Fire.”

“Yeah, yeah; I get that, but it’s still annoying.” He grinned suddenly. “Hey, Loki? Your godchild is gonna freeze here; anything you can do to help?”

The smug bastard smirked. Yeah, he still thought he was a bastard most of the time, though he’d really grown to like the guy. “A bit cold, are you, Barton?”
Shit. Like his beautiful Natasha, Loki didn’t miss a frigging trick. “Yeah, you caught me.” Loki’s smirk deepened and Kara was looking pretty damn amused too. “Aw, come on, buddy. Help me out here?”

“Natasha, would you like to be a bit warmer?” Loki asked instead.

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“Fine, glove off and lay your hand on mine.” He held out his hand and once Nat had done as instructed the telltale glow of his magic seeped into her. “There; it’s all done.”

Clint looked from one to the other. “Aw, now that’s definitely…”

“If you hold your lady’s hand, you’ll be warmer as well,” Loki informed him.

He shot Natasha a pleading look. “No more arguing with me about Brianna’s name,” she told him. “She’ll be Brianna Merida Barton.” She held out her hand to him with a firm frown.

“Oh, you win; Brianna Merida Barton it is.” His smile answered hers as he took her hand. He sighed at the almost immediate relief from the cold. Stealing a glance at Loki as Nat started to turn away he raised his free hand. “Thanks, man; for everything.” Loki’s only response was a wink.

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Loki stifled a laugh as he overheard Bethany whispering to Steven. “I didn’t realize it was going to be this cold. Do you think they’ll be mad at me?” she asked.

“It’s New York City in the third week of December, honey. If they weren’t expecting cold, it’s not your fault. Now go ahead, drink your cocoa. That’ll warm you up a bit.” He watched the two blondes from the shadows. Rogers stood so that he blocked the light breeze from further chilling his lady; ever the gentleman. “Do you want mine, Beth?” he asked as the girl tossed her empty cup in the nearby trashcan.

“No, but thanks. I’ll go into sugar overload if I drink anymore. I wish they had coffee.”

“Oh kill me now, Loki thought as Rogers delivered that bit of tripe. He flinched as Kara elbowed him in the ribs, hard. “What was that for?” he asked.

“I felt that disdain. Be nice; he’s being sweet and reassuring. That’s what she needs.”

“I’ve been nice, all evening,” he groused. “Heimdall is likely laughing himself sick.”

“Oh, he’s doing no such thing. I’ll bet he’s very proud of you.”

Loki borrowed one of her pat responses. “Whatever.”

“Cute. Now go help Beth.”

He rolled his eyes for form’s sake and approached the couple. They truly did look an unsettling bit like those dolls that Tony had shown him on the internet; Barbie and Ken, they were called. “Too cold, are we?” he asked, forcing a kind note into his voice.

“A bit, yeah. I guess it doesn’t bother you?” Bethany responded.
“Bother, no; but it is colder than I prefer. May I help take the edge off of it for you?”

“Really?” Steven interjected. “You can do that?”

He shrugged. “Now that the majority of the restrictions are off of my use of power, yes.”

“That would be amazing,” the soldier continued. “Beth’s been pretty miserable.”

“So I saw. Bethany; remove your glove and lay your hand on mine.” He held out his hand and established the cold mitigating ward as soon as she obeyed. He was pleasantly surprised at how quickly she had complied, and that she did so without question or hesitation. “How is that; better?”

“Oh my God, yes. Thank you so much, Loki! I was feeling totally frozen.”

“You’re welcome. I’ve owed you a favor. You and Dr. Nassar did a wonderful job caring for Nyvorlas; I doubt he would have recovered nearly so well without you both.”

“That’s just my job as team physician; you really didn’t owe me, honest.”

“Hmm. I chose to see it that way. Please don’t deny me the pleasure of returning what I saw as a favor.”

“Of course not.” He stiffened as the girl threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “Thanks,” she said again as she released him. “Are you two enjoying the lights?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s quite festive.” He had to smile at her enthusiasm. Hmm. “There is a Festival of Lights in Asgard once every five of your years. The entire city is lit only by scented candles in special lanterns with colored crystal panes. Floating lanterns holding candles travel down the canals. The celebration should be coming up sometime in the next year. Perhaps that would be something for the team to plan on attending? I’m certain my mother would enjoy hosting all of you again.”

“Really? That sounds awesome. Steve, don’t you think so?”

“It does. Thanks, Loki; if you can nail down the dates, we can put it on the calendar and make arrangements ahead of time so we don’t tick off S.H.I.E.L.D. by all taking off without notice.”

“I’ll do that.” He turned to leave them. “Captain; is this not supposed to be an evening of romance? Why are you not holding your lady’s hand?” Letting his smirk emerge he walked off and listened closely.

His attention was rewarded a moment later when Rogers discovered that holding Bethany’s hand extended the cold relief to him and muttered: “That son of a gun.” He kept his laughter soft enough for the humans to overlook.

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Darcy was too damn cold. In fact, she was freezing her tits off. Bruce knew this because she had told him so in no uncertain terms at least five times already. Yes, it was definitely cold and he’d bet that her nipples were hard from that cold and straining against her bra; it was doubtless terribly aggravating. Of course, if she’d try to focus on something else, like the Christmas lights there were purportedly here to admire, she probably wouldn’t be quite so miserable. He hated it when she was miserable. It didn’t help that he was part of the reason for her mood. Or rather, his idiocy in experimenting with gamma radiation was. The best thing that ever happened in his life had come about because of the worst thing that had happened; and he’d end up losing that best thing, again, because of the worst thing. That was so damn depressingly ironic. He tried not to hate anything,
but with irony, he was losing the battle. “You know I’d never leave you, don’t you?” he asked; trying to continue the conversation they’d had earlier. She flashed him an annoyed look. “It won’t matter to me how we age, either of us. I love you and I’ll stay with you, no matter what…so long as you’ll have me.”

“I’ll be ancient and wrinkly and you’ll still want to hold me? Will you still want to fuck me?” she asked.

“I’ll still make love with you for as long as we’re both physically capable of it and you’re still enjoying it. If you’re not enjoying it anymore, we won’t; if you are, we will.” This time her expression was doubtful. “Darcy, I won’t care. Love is about more than what’s on the surface. You are about more than your looks and your body; you’ll always be extraordinary to me.” Oh crap. A tear was making its way down her cheek. “Honey, please don’t cry.”

Darcy sniffed. “Not crying,” she insisted.

“Doctor? Can I have a word with you?” Oh damn, what did Loki want? “It will only take a moment.”

“Go,” Darcy said. “I’m going to duck into the loo. Hopefully there’s some heat in there so my ass won’t freeze to the seat.”

“Okay, Darce.” He waited until she’d disappeared into the restroom and then walked over to where Loki waited. “What is it?”

“I noticed you’re having problems with Darcy.”

“I’m sure it’s very amusing.”

“No, actually, it is not. Would you like us to speak with her? Before I was sentenced Kara and I faced much the same dilemma. We could both reassure her from our own points of view that you are sincere and will truly still love and desire her.”

“I don’t…you know, why not? It couldn’t hurt. That would be great, thanks.”

“One more thing; hold out your hand; remove your glove first.”

Bruce stared at him. Loki’s gaze was kind of challenging, like he was daring him to trust the trickster. Hell, they’d saved each other’s lives on Jötunheim, he could trust him here. If not, the other guy would come out and the zoo would have a Loki shaped hole in its concrete. They could probably use it as a tourist attraction. “Okay.” Loki covered his palm with his far longer hand and the god’s signature magic gathered. Bruce tried not to flinch as it disappeared into his own body. His eyebrows rose as he felt a bit of warmth seeping through him.

“I had to do this on you rather than Darcy. Your system is unique and I didn’t think her being warded from the cold would transfer to you by touch as it does for the other couples.” Loki’s thin lips curved up in his trademark combination smug and mischievous grin. “As a bonus, if Darcy wishes to be a bit warmer, she’ll have to hold your hand for the rest of the evening.”

He chuckled ruefully. “Oh, you are sneaky. Nice job, I’m impressed.”

“I thought you might be.”

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“Now was that really so hard?” she asked Loki when they’d returned home from dinner.

He turned the patented Loki Glare of Death on her for a full minute before his mouth twitched. “Not the way I went about it, no,” he allowed.

“And that was fine; you’re allowed to have fun when you’re doing something that’s nice. In fact, you should have fun with it. What I do want to know is how you managed to make both Nat and Clint think they scored off of each other.”

“I took a page out of your book, literally.”

“Huh?”

Loki smirked and pulled one of her old psychology textbooks off of their bookshelf. “I’d been reading and decided one of the principles was very similar to how I convince others to take the side I wish them to take with none the wiser. Our godchild will be named Brianna Merida Barton, the name you and Thor most approved of, and both Barton and Romanov each believe it is their own idea and that the other did not approve of it. They now each think they’ve had their way over the other’s objections.”

“When in reality, they both would likely have chosen something else?”

“Yes, most likely.”

“Loki, they’re the parents; naming their child whatever they want is their prerogative.”

“How many times have you complained about the names some of your celebrities gave their children? Didn’t at least one of those children legally change their name to something far more reasonable once he reached adulthood?”

True. David Bowie named his son Zowie. Poor Zowie had insisted on being called Joey in school and then had later changed his name to Duncan after some family member or other. “But some don’t, that’s why there’s a woman running around out there named Moon Unit who has a brother named Dweezil.”

“I believe that makes my point. Did you really want a godchild named Sophia?”

“You’re the one who objected to Greek names. Which reminds me; what do you have against the Greeks?”

He sighed. “I had a run-in with Ares over a maiden named Arionna. Turned out she was his child; how was I to know? He hadn’t claimed or acknowledged the chit in any way. She wasn’t even aware of the relationship.” She waited as he frowned fiercely. “It wasn’t as if I’d taken her maidenhood. All I did was kiss the damn girl and he was ready to start a war over it.”

Crap. Apparently the Greek pantheon was real too. “Wasn’t he their god of War?”

“Well, yes; but I hadn’t harmed her in any way. He should have been flattered that she was so remarkable that she caught the attention of a god.”

“Do they have a separate Realm somewhere?”

“No, they’re here on Midgard; but they’ve faded a great deal. Zeus is fairly reasonable but his son is more of an ass than...ah...”
“More than you used to think your father was?”

Loki glanced skyward uncomfortably. “Yes, obviously I was mistaken about my father, which makes Ares even more of an ass than I’d thought.”

“But everything got straightened out.”

He scowled. “If you can call it that. I was the one who was penalized though I was not at fault. I was courting the chit in good faith. Ask Thor, he was caught in the backlash as well. We were both banned from Midgard for over a century. The worst thing about it was watching Odin apologize to that bastard Ares for my behavior when I had done nothing wrong and then being chastised over the whole affair in front of the entire Realm at a formal court.”

“How did Thor get caught up in it?” Loki mumbled something she couldn’t hear and threw himself down on the sofa. “Loki?”

Rolling his eyes Loki sighed. “He stood up for me at court and insisted that I was as innocent in the matter as he was and that if I were to be punished, then he would take the same punishment as it would be equally undeserved.”

She stared at him. “And you later had the unmitigated gall to deny him the title of brother?”

“Yes, well, I was dealing poorly with the shock of finding out what I really was.” He fidgeted as she continued to frown at him. “I have apologized, you know.”

“I do know. I’m sorry, that was just kind of amazing to hear. From what I’d heard before all he ever did was put you down.”

“No, not always; I suppose never when it truly counted.” Loki let his head drop back on the sofa and sighed. “I do love him, you know; even when he’s being an ill-mannered oaf.”

“Yes, you do.” She sat down beside him and caressed his cheek and jaw. “And I love you.” Letting her fingers trail down his neck and across one shoulder she leaned in to press a kiss to his frowning lips. “And I’m so very proud of you. You made everyone feel good tonight; thank you.”

“So does that mean it’s your turn to make me feel good?”

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His Kara gave him a languorous smile as she straddled his legs. “I did promise,” she agreed.

Loki chuckled. She was very happy with him and a happy Kara meant a very cooperative Kara so far as bed sports went. Oh yes, this was shaping up to be a lovely night. He kissed those tempting lips and ran his hands down her still a bit too prominent spine. “Your weight is starting to stabilize, but you still need to eat frequently for a while longer,” he told her as he gripped the firm globes of her backside and pulled her more tightly against him.

“I’m trying. I did eat a whole pizza by myself tonight.”

“Very impressive, how…” the sound of an alert cut him off.

“Avengers, assemble,” Jarvis announced.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” he spat. “Now what?” He stood and pulled his armor to him using his magic then did the same for his lady.
“Captain Rogers requests your presence on the launch pad, your highness.”

“Which one of us, or both?”

“Both, sir.”

He growled his annoyance at the interruption and pulled his now armored lady into his arms and shifted them to the roof. “What is it,” he spat at the soldier.

“Loki, calm down, it isn’t his fault.”

Clenching his jaw he stared her down for a moment and then relaxed. “True. Sorry, Steven. What do you need me to do?”

Rogers gestured to the modified Quinjet and they followed him on board. Clint jumped in after them and ran to the cockpit. “Stark’s gonna meet us there,” the archer told them as Banner arrived and strapped in.

“Okay, team. We’ve got a group of would-be international terrorists that have wired the Brooklyn Bridge to blow. We’ve been called in as they’ve got some high-profile hostages in the middle of the bridge, they cut off a motorcade, trapped them on there. It seems the people in the motorcade, a bunch of diplomats, are their target rather than the bridge itself.”

“Did they leave the hostages in the vehicles or have they gathered them all together?” Loki asked.

Bruce hit a few buttons and an image sprang to life between them. The hostages were sitting in the middle of the span, back to back in a huddled circle. “The bad guys seem to be spread out across the entire length of the bridge. That’s going to make it difficult to take them out,” he said.

“But easier to protect the hostages.” Loki frowned as he considered his options. “I can’t shift all of them out of there; I’d lose some of them in the void. I can shift myself to the spot in the midst of them and shield the entire group from any harm short of the collapse of the bridge itself.”

“That’s a good start,” Rogers agreed.

“Hey, guys? Jarvis found the frequency for the signal they’re using on the detonator control. We’re blocking it as of…now,” Tony reported.

“Great job, Iron Man. Okay; that means we need to just go after the individual terrorists. Hellbringer; can you drop them empathically?”

“When they’re spread out the entire length of the bridge? Ah, no. I’m good, but that’s even out of my league. I can’t fry them as a group either.”

“Well, we didn’t want to go that far, anyway.”

“Speak for yourself.” Loki knew his tone was sour, but couldn’t care less. These pathetic cretins had ruined his plans for enjoying the favors of his lovely wife and he was pissed. Kara frowned at him and he shrugged in return. “Should I lie and pretend I’m pleased to have our evening interrupted?”

“Loki, chill. This is what we’re here for,” she scolded.

That brought him up short. It was true; since the Battle of Central Park, as the second invasion had come to be called, the usual suspects that kept most of the special teams across the planet busy had
lain low; probably petrified that they’d be next after seeing film of the destruction of Thanos. The most he had been called upon to do since their return from Asgard was rescue work arising from natural disasters. “My bad,” he muttered over the communications unit they all wore. Stark snorted in response.

“I’m going to take over from Hawkeye,” Banner told them. “I can protect the QJ from boarding,” he said, using Tony’s latest abbreviation that yet again seemed to catch on with all of them. “I really don’t think we want my other angry and on that bridge.”

“Good thinking, doc,” Rogers agreed. “The Hawk can go high and pick off targets individually. Iron Man, scope out the entire bridge and call out locations as you identify them. Kara and I can go down the middle and pull out targets that have too much cover for Hawkeye to take out.”

“Kara, take my weapon,” Loki insisted, pulling his scepter from hammerspace. “I know you won’t want to burn them. The energy blast will do them a lot less damage than your fire if your projections aren’t enough to keep them off of you.”

“You do realize I can likely punch their lights out at this point?”

“Yes, but you have to get too close to do so. I’d rather you stay safe.” He glared at Rogers who had chuckled. “You may find humor in my protectiveness when you allow Bethany to take the field.”

“Right, sorry. Okay, we ready to do this? Let’s go!”

One of the women amongst the hostages shrieked when he materialized between them, attracting the attention of the terrorists assigned to guard them. He threw up a shield seconds before a rain of bullets was loosed. The twit screamed in full-voice as they bounced harmlessly off of the magical barrier. “Do cease that caterwauling,” he snapped. “You are safe.” The woman gaped at him. “All of you stay down and relax while the Avengers take out the enemy, hmm?”

A man in an expensive suite frowned at him. “The bridge is lined with explosives, do they know that?”

“Yes, that’s being handled. Where is your security?” He didn’t see a single person amongst them that could possibly be such.

“Replaced by the terrorists at some point, well, most of them. The few that were still our people died trying to stop them.”

“I see.” He tapped his earpiece switching it from the team channel to one that was monitored by S.H.I.E.L.D. “This is Loki. The embassy that was targeted was betrayed by false security personnel; you might want to look into it.”

“Roger that.”

“No, not Rogers, Loki. Are you deaf?”

There was a slight commotion on the other end before a new and this time more familiar voice spoke up. “This is Hill. Tell Rogers to brief you on radio jargon. You were being told that we understood your warning and that we would take care of it.”

“Ah. Thank you for the clarification, Deputy.” He looked out beyond his shield. Another of the women in the group was staring at him. “What?”

“You-you’re Prince Loki?” she asked breathlessly.
“I am.” He prepared himself mentally for the rant about homicidal maniacs that was sure to follow.

“Can I have your autograph?”

That had to be the very last thing he was expecting in the middle of a hostage situation. “Woman, do you realize that you are still in very real danger? This is not the time to be seeking mementoes.” She turned back and stared at the ground, her cheeks bright pink. He sighed. “I don’t do autographs, but after everyone is safe you may take a photograph if you wish.” The embarrassed woman wasn’t the only one who looked excited at the prospect. “Yes, any of you may, but until I tell you that you are completely safe, stay quiet unless you have vital information.” Thankfully, they all fell silent.

“Loki has a fan club,” Stark said in a sing-song voice.

“I’m certain Iron Man would be happy to pose for photographs as well,” Loki said sweetly.

“You son of a bitch.”

“It takes one to know one, Tony.” Loki smirked as he listened to the lighthearted grumbling that ensued as his teammates worked to take out the scattered terrorists. Yes, his teammates; what a concept. One hundred and nine years and nine months to go. He could handle that.
“Thor looks so sad,” Pepper said quietly. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Short of finding him the love of his life? Come on, Pep. Sure, Blondie’s hurting, but he’s a big boy, he’ll deal.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have insisted he come for the New Year’s celebration. It’s terribly couple-centric, particularly in this group. We should have left well enough alone.”

“Yeah…uh, no. Since the BOD decided we had to have a public party, it means that there will be a hell of a lot of available women there. He’ll be swamped with attention, he’ll flirt, admire all of the different beauties and even if he doesn’t find a special one, he’ll be reminded of how many fish there are in the ocean. It’ll be fine.” Tony shrugged. “That’s how I dealt with it all the years I was alone.”

She turned to frown at him. “No, you dealt with it by drinking. Heavily.”

Tony had the good grace to look sheepish, and he didn’t deny it, thank heaven. Otherwise she would have had to give him a serious piece of her mind. “Okay, you got me. So, Plan B, we get Thor drunk off of his godly ass.”

Pepper choked back a laugh. “How much alcohol does it take to get a god drunk? You still haven’t managed it with Loki.” And he’d tried; her intrepid fiancé, in the name of science or so he’d claimed, had organized a drinking game wherein Loki had to drink every round and only one of the remainder of the group had to drink in any one round. Since everyone but Natasha had gotten in on the game that meant the god drank ten shots to their one. He had barely been tipsy after thirty rounds, three shots for each of them, thirty for him.

“Huh. That might be a problem.”

“Tony, you’re a genius, or so you continually proclaim,” Loki said as he and Kara got off of the elevator. “Why is it you always seem to be having a problem you cannot resolve?”

“Because I’m forced to deal with Æsir and Jötnar and what have you on a daily basis,” her genius shot back without missing a beat. “Seriously, Lokes; what does it take to get you guys drunk?”

Inky eyebrows shot up. “Copious amounts of Asgardian ale or mead, generally. Or some varieties of Álfar wine. Midgard’s alcoholic offerings are rather pitiful in their potential for inebriation.” Loki smirked at Tony’s frustrated hand gesture. “Why are you so obsessed with getting me intoxicated?”

“I’m not. I was hoping to get Goldilocks to loosen up for the party tomorrow night so he can have a good time.” Pepper tried not to laugh at the disgusted expression that accompanied Tony’s statement, but it took every ounce of willpower she possessed.

“Ah, well.” Loki’s smirk had disappeared and he actually looked thoughtful. “Perhaps finding a willing woman to seduce him would do the trick.”

Kara groaned and rolled her eyes. “Why is it men seem to think getting laid fixes everything?” she
asked. Pepper shrugged. It was something she’d never understood either.

“Hey, it worked wonders for your own personal Frost Giant,” Tony said defensively.

“No. Falling in love worked for Loki, not getting laid; that’s a totally different thing.”

“Have I mentioned how greatly I detest your euphemisms for lovemaking?” Loki muttered.

“YES!” they chorused.

Tony went back on the attack. “Besides, getting laid and making love is not the same thing at all. I make love with Pepper; I’ve gotten laid by lots of different people, it’s totally different.”

“Did I need the reminder?” she asked him. He winced. “I think what Tony meant was that feeling wanted and desired is a good way to brighten a man’s outlook on life. Thor needs to know that just because Jane isn’t the love of his life it doesn’t mean he has to be lonely until he does find his, um…”

“Other half, according to Frigga,” Kara supplied.

“Exactly. So, Operation…what should we call it?” Pepper frowned as Tony muttered something under his breath. “What was that?”

Loki snorted. “GTL; I imagine that stands for ‘Get Thor Laid’. Could you be any more crude, Tony?”

“In my defense, yes, I could, easily.”

“Rebound?” Kara offered. “What?” she asked as they stared at her. “We’re trying to get him back into the swing of things and that’s what a rebound encounter or even a relationship does. It takes your focus off of the failed relationship and opens your eyes to the possibility of a new one.”

“Operation Rebound it is,” Pepper agreed.

… …

“I have nothing to wear.”

Clint looked over his shoulder at the flat statement. It had to be hormones. Natasha was never at a loss about clothing. Of course, with her pregnancy advancing, her choices were a hell of a lot more limited, but it still wasn’t like her. “Should I get a car brought around and we’ll go get you something new?”

A deep sigh answered him; also atypical. “Let’s just skip the event. I look like shit.”

Aw fuck. “You look like a gorgeous woman who is six months pregnant; still beautiful, just in a different way. I think you look as sexy as all hell.”

She gave him a grateful look; again, what the fuck? “You’re biased, but thanks. At least you didn’t give me the ‘you’re glowing’ or ‘you’re radiant’ line.”

Nat was glowing and she did look radiant, but since she was looking radiantly murderous he had decided not mentioning it was the better part of valor. “Babe, I love you and I wish I could make everything better, but I’m kinda lost here.” He carefully rubbed his hand up and down her upper arm, trying to be comforting without her thinking he was being condescending. It was a damn delicate balance these days.
She turned into him, wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his neck. Oh, this was really bad. Thankfully Beth had warned him that pregnancy could seemingly give a woman a complete personality transplant. He just had to go with it, whatever the hell it might be. “I love you too, Hawk,” she mumbled. “I know I’m totally off here, it’s been a long time since I’ve felt this vulnerable. I-I’m not handling it well.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re handling everything great. I know it’s been tough, but you haven’t done the whole woe is me crap like some women. You’re strong, firm, and smart about everything. I’m in awe.”

Nat looked up at him and just stared for a minute, her mouth hanging open. Finally she shook her head slightly and hugged him instead of just clinging to him. “I take it back.” She smiled, one of her rare real smiles where her eyes lit up, and then stroked his jaw. “You really can do the sensitive with words deal. I’m impressed.”

He grinned. “Thanks. Now, do you want to go shopping for a new outfit?”

“Since this event is going to be all over FacePage and Darcy’s planning on using it to announce my pregnancy, I suppose I’d better.”

… …

Tony smirked as he had Jarvis close the connection and headed out on the deck to check the weather. He preferred to feel the weather rather than just have Jarvis report it. Besides, he’d spent nearly an hour making last minute personal invitations to a number of high society single women that he’d discovered hadn’t responded to the initial official invitations sent out by Stark Industries’ Public Relations Director and needed to breathe. He’d casually told them that Thor, the currently unattached Crown Prince of Asgard, would be in attendance. All but one of them had accepted on the spot and that one had declined only because she had just accepted a marriage proposal over Christmas. “Oh yeah, Point Break isn’t going to know what hit him,” he said as he rubbed his hands together.

“What did you do?” He spun at the sound of Jane’s voice behind him.

“Uh, nothing.”

“Please don’t bullshit me; out with it, Mr. Stark.”

Oh, that wasn’t good. Jane had been calling him Tony for nearly a month now. “I just made sure that a few lovely ladies were aware that Thor is single. I mean, now that…um.”

“Now that he is? It’s okay, I’m fine with it; he did us both a huge favor. “

“Okaaay. You’re not mad?”

“I didn’t say that. Tony, Thor’s a big boy, he can take care of his own hook ups.”

“Hey, I didn’t set him up with anyone; I just let everyone know he was single. Hooking up is totally up to him and any interested party.”

She stared at him; it was seriously reminiscent of his mother’s knowing look and was starting to make him squirm when she finally let up. “Fine; but if I catch one hint that you’re the architect of a set up, I’m going to be all over you like white on rice. Got it?”

“Got it.” He watched as the astrophysicist stomped inside. “Jarvis, warn me when I’m gleefully
celebrating and someone’s coming,” he said as he headed inside to escape the wintry cold.

“Yes, sir. Sir? Prince Loki is awaiting you in your workshop.”

“What? How the hell did his Royal Fastidiousness get into my damn workshop?” He veered from the kitchen and got into the elevator.

“I believe he used his magic, sir.”

No shit. “That was rhetorical, J…come on, you know better.”

“Apologies sir, you are correct.”

“Damn right I’m correct.” He left the elevator and headed for the sealed doors to his workshop. Activating the voiceprint, retinal scan and fingerprint scan required to open the locks he forced himself to casually saunter in. “So tell me, what good is the best security on the planet if you can just pop in here by twitching your nose?”

Loki frowned at him. “I did no nose twitching.”

“Fine, folding your arms across your chest and nodding your head while blinking, then.”

“Stark, what are you babbling about?”

“You used your magic to violate my privacy; that’s an inappropriate use of power, Bambi. Do you want your mojo locked down again? Shit, after what everyone went through for you to get it back, yet?”

The Lokester looked truly bewildered. “I-looking for you in your workshop, where you spend most of your time, I might add, is considered a violation of your privacy? I don’t understand.”

Tony sighed. “The doors were locked. That meant I didn’t want anyone in here.”

“I did not know the doors were locked until you said so. My location shifting magic does not tell me when doors are locked or unlocked; it simply takes me where I wish to go.”

Okay, that might be a point. But still…huh. “Fine, you get one pass. Does your magic tell you if I’m down here?” The god’s expression closed off and he looked uncomfortable. “Come on, yes or no?”

One disgusted expression later, Loki finally answered. “No; when you’re in here I cannot even tell if you’re in the building.”

“What? Not all-powerful? And why only then?”

“You, of all people should know the difference between being powerful and being all-powerful. The equipment in this room masks the output from your device,” he said, tapping Tony’s arc reactor. “I could not sense you elsewhere in the building, so I assumed you were here as you had no plans to go out.”

“Huh. I stepped out on the deck after making some phone calls. I needed some air.”

The green eyes narrowed. “Therefore you were not in the building for my mojo, as you call it, to find. I searched for you here for two reasons. First, you’re more often here than not when I cannot locate you elsewhere in the building. Second, Kara does not like your workshop as the energies in the air throw her off balance.”
“Next time, just ask Jarvis where I am. If I’m not here, I don’t want anyone in here, got it?”

“Fine,” was his sullen response, “but that would tell Kara that I wished a private word with you and she would demand to know why.”

The plot thickened. He turned and grabbed a stool and shoved it over to Loki and took another for himself. “Jarvis, run the security lockdown.”

“Engaged, sir.”

“Now, what do you not want Kara to know?”

Loki sat down on the stool. “It is not so much that I don’t want her to know as it is I don’t want Thor to know. The fewer who do know the details of Operation Rebound the less likely word will get back to him.”

“Wait, this is all about setting Thor up; not about some deep dark plot?”

“Really, Anthony? Do you still…” he trailed off as Tony raised a hand.

“Yeah, sorry. That was out of line. So, what’s up?”

“I’m certain you are taking steps to ensure Thor, ah…”

“Gets laid. Two syllables, not difficult to pronounce.”

Now that was a sour look. “Finds companionship, preferably with bed sports,” Loki insisted.

“Yeah, I took the liberty of making certain that a number of single women who had been invited to the bash and hadn’t accepted the invite knew that he was unattached. So?”

“That is a good first step.”

“That’s the only step. Jane caught wind of it and not so subtly threatened me. If I try to actually instigate setting him up, she’ll…well, I’m not certain what she’ll do, but I really don’t want to find out.”

“Coward. She’s a scientist; not even as good a one as you. What could she do to you?”

“Thanks for the backwards compliment. She could rat me out to Pepper who could make me couch man.”

“Ah. So close to your nuptials, that would be problematic.”

“Yeah, I really don’t look good with blue balls…aaannnnnd that was one of those sayings. It means being denied sexual release for a long period of time. It’s got nothing to do with your Jötunn heritage.”

“Understood; such as when you say things are ‘cool’ or tell someone to ‘chill’, correct?”

“Exactly.” Loki nodded. Phew. At least he’d caught that one before the god decided he needed another round of mischief targeted at him as payback. “So, if anyone is going to facilitate the hook up, it can’t be me as I promised I was only inviting single ladies and that any hooking up was totally in the control of Thor and the woman in question.”

“I thought Pepper approved of this plan.”
“She does, but if I break a promise, I’m in deep shit.”

“Ah. So, perhaps we should bring…no, I should encourage our ladies to handle this part of the operation. After all, bumbling fools such as us could never handle such with the delicacy it requires.” Loki stared him down with an innocent look, completed with eyelash batting that had Tony going for the better part of two seconds.

“Yep, but lay off the eyelash thing. You’ll give it away. Our girls are pretty damn sharp.”

The trickster chuckled. “I know it. Actually, I shall use it, just to let Kara know that I intend for her to recognize that I’m being underhanded. Else she will feel the intent and be contrary just for the sake of such.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps you could prepare a file of the single women on the guest list for them to peruse so that they may focus their wiles wisely.”

“That, I can do. Oh, and try shifting to the hall just outside my workshop. The wall is transparent.”

… …

“You look spectacular,” Bruce told her. Darcy managed a smile. “The dress is nice, too, but you just…shine,” he said as they wandered through the huge ballroom where Stark Industries New Year’s Eve Extravaganza was being held.

She looked into his dark brown eyes, trying to see if he was just trying to score points or what. Gawd, how did he manage that totally sincere, warm, wonderful…aw, crap. “Thanks. Um, you want to dance?”

He grinned. “How could I turn down such an enthusiastic invitation?” The grin widened as she swatted him playfully. “I’d love to, Darcy.” The music was Blues influenced and the slow beat of the current number was perfect for holding your partner close and swaying comfortably. “So, tonight’s the big night, hmm? Natasha gets her official introduction?”

“Yeah, she’s not going to be able to do undercover stuff anymore anyway; not with a baby to worry about, so it’s time. She’s a little pissed at the fact that the first thing anyone’s going to think about is that she’s the first Avenger to have a baby.”

“Hmm. Technically, Loki was the first to be a parent; though that was about seven hundred years or so ago. Probably doesn’t count.”

“He wasn’t the one who was pregnant, despite what the mythology says. Oh, crap. I forgot to ask him if he’ll talk to the grad students studying Norse mythology and set them straight on a few things. Geez, having him and Thor surface and all is knocking that entire field on its collective ear. According to mythology, Loki was a sworn blood brother to Odin, not his son, adopted or otherwise.”

“Not my field of interest. Now ask me about Greek mythology and I can talk gods. Those stories beat out soap operas any day. Brothers marrying sisters is the least of it and seems more the rule than the exception for them.”

“Maybe none of that is any truer than Loki giving birth to a horse.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” They danced quietly for a while. Darcy smiled as she realized just how comfortable she felt in Bruce’s arms. She rested her cheek against his shoulder. “You okay?” he asked.

“More than okay. I-I talked to Kara…a lot.”
“Oh?”

“And Loki. Did you know that before he found out that Odin was marrying them that he planned to come back here once he was freed, assuming she was still alive, and spend however much time she had left in her lifetime loving her?”

“No, I didn’t. Guess he’d realized he truly loved her.”

“Yep. Of course, he could have used illusion to pretend he was getting old too. You can’t do that.”

Bruce nodded and brushed a soft kiss against her forehead. “I’d let Loki put one on me, though, if it would make you feel better. Assuming, of course, that Eir is right and I don’t age appreciably for a long enough time for it to matter.”

“Really? You’d pretend to get old just so I wouldn’t be getting old alone?”

“In a heartbeat, Darcy; I love you, and I want to have you in my arms for the rest of our mutual lives.” He shook his head and made a cute huffing sound. “I didn’t think I deserved to be loved; didn’t think that I could find a woman who wouldn’t be too afraid of my other to chance loving me.”

Damn it, she was tearing up again. That sucked the big one. Huh. Bruce was pretty much the only person that affected her that strongly. “The Hulk is a teddy bear when it comes to innocent people. When you lost it at that trade meeting the first thing you or he did was pick me up, fairly gently, mind you, and put me over in a corner and turned a table over in front of me so I’d be safe. Then you turned around and roared at them. Volstagg almost wet himself laughing. I don’t think he even stopped laughing when you kind of casually swung at him and sent him flying into the wall.”

“Uh, he, we don’t like being laughed at.”

“That’s the point. He wasn’t laughing at you; he was laughing at how much control you had in that state that you could make sure I was safe before going after the assholes that pissed you off.” She smirked up at him. “You had just gotten done giving them the whole ‘don’t make me angry, you wouldn’t like me when I’m angry’ speech and warned them you had no real control when you changed.”

“Interesting. I half remember it. Sometimes my non-Hulk mind isn’t totally buried. I have been able to kind of talk to that part of my subconscious that’s emerged and remind it that certain people are friends and that we need to help them.”

“See? You’ve got a hell of a lot more control than you think. And you still looked at me like I was the most precious person in the world after you changed.”

Bruce’s crooked grin tugged at her heart. “You are the most precious person in this world or any other, Darce; at least to me.”

Shit, the tears were back. “I-I know,” she whispered.

… …

Thor sighed. “I should not have come,” he said, quietly, for once.

“Nonsense. There are people to talk to, beautiful women to admire, fine food to savor. Relax and enjoy yourself,” Loki insisted.
His brother sighed again and meandered aimlessly through the crowd. “He’s not getting with the program,” Kara muttered.

“Yes, well, you have yet to implement said program.”

“We decided Pepper had to do it. I don’t know these people so I have no excuse to be introducing them to anyone let alone Thor. She’s the official CEO, so that makes her the hostess and it’s her responsibility to make sure her guests mingle with the Avengers.”

“Ah, wise move.” He looked across the room where Thor sulkily picked at offerings from the buffet. “I swear; he is worse than I am.” Giving his wife a sidelong glance, he waited for her to argue the point.

“Easily,” she agreed, much to his surprise. “You’d at least *seem* to be having a good time just to spite everyone, not acting like a child being forced to clean his room or whatever unpleasant chore they give kids in Asgard.” Kara frowned as they watched a tall, lightly curved woman approach the sulking oaf. “Huh. She kind of reminds me of a female version of you. Who is she, I wonder?”

He narrowed his eyes to refine his focus to better see the woman at this distance…adding a touch of magic to augment his vision. “She seems to be as cat-like as you’ve described me,” he mused. “And she does have green eyes and black hair. Otherwise, no.”

“Midgard to Loki; do you realize you just confirmed my observation?”

“Hmm, perhaps.”

“No perhaps about it. Where’s Pepper? Oh, there she is. Let’s find out who tall, dark and slinky is.”

“Well, hello,” a sultry voice purred in his ear. Thor turned to stare into green eyes framed by waves of inky black hair. He immediately looked around for Loki, relaxing as he spotted his brother and his sister by marriage in conversation with Lady Pepper. “You must be Thor; no one else here has the sheer presence you exude.”

He blinked. “I am, indeed, my lady.” Beautiful woman, but there was something…predatory about her.

Her red lips tightened. “My name is Selina, Selina Kyle. I’m an art…collector. I’ve obtained a few pieces from and for Stark Industries.”

“I see. Unfortunately I have little knowledge about art,” he told her apologetically.

“No, of course you don’t,” she said throatily as she stroked her fingers along his biceps. “You don’t seem to be enjoying the festivities,” she continued. “Perhaps you’d rather be elsewhere?”

“Yes, I’d rather be home in Asgard. Midgard is a wonderful place, but…”

“Missing someone there, are you?”

“My friends were otherwise occupied and could not join me for this trip. Their company would have been most welcome.” The woman’s mouth tightened again. Who did she remind him of?

“What a shame. You must be a bit lonely; it seems your friends here have all paired off.”
Thor swallowed a groan. They had indeed. It made his loveless state more painful. He shouldn’t have come. “I am happy for them,” he managed. Gods, she reminded him of Amora.

… …

“Hmm. Thor’s looking a bit trapped,” Raj Nassar said to Dr. Foster, as the sight broke his concentration on the lovely chat they’d been having about the possibility of controlling an Einstein-Rosen bridge to Asgard from this end.

The scientist looked over toward the buffet table and frowned. “Seriously. I’ve never seen him at that much of a loss. Not even after I, uh…”

“After you…?”

She smiled nervously and yes, blushed. “Hit him with our truck. Uh, twice.”

Raj couldn’t help it, he had to laugh. “Well,” he finally managed. “I managed to miss that part of the report; though he looks no worse the wear from it.”

“This was back when he first arrived, when he’d been banished. I haven’t done it since.”

“I’m certain. Just wished to?”

Jane smiled. “No, kick him in the privates, yes. Hit him with a truck, no. Who the hell is that woman? I don’t like her and it has nothing to do with her hitting on Thor.”

That got Raj’s attention. Jane Foster was a very good instant judge of character. She’d trusted Thor immediately, not to mention the seemingly flighty Darcy Lewis, when most people would have kept them at arm’s length. There were gifts and there were gifts. Jane had wonderful intuition; it was doubtless a great help in her scientific endeavors. If she had taken an instant dislike to a woman she hadn’t yet met, there was likely a good reason for it. “Let me find a colleague to send on a rescue mission.”

… …

Thor frowned as the woman continued to not so subtly hint that she’d enjoy taking him off alone. He’d never thought overmuch on how to diplomatically indicate a lack of interest. He’d decided the woman wasn’t Amora in disguise, Loki would have felt her magic. That made her advances no less unwelcome. “Thor, there you are!” a far more open female voice called out. Looking over Selina Kyle’s strategically bared shoulder he saw a short Midgardian, perhaps Lady Darcy’s age. The girl seemed to be of what his friends called ‘Latin descent’ and was wearing a dress the color of the wine in Selina’s glass and clung to the girl’s very curvy figure. “Dr. Nassar has been looking for you,” she scolded, telling him without words that she was part of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Ah.” He smiled at his companion. “If you’ll excuse me, Miss Kyle; Dr. Nassar had requested a word earlier. I must honor that commitment.”

“Of course,” she replied. Her smile was gracious, but her tone was irritated.

He gratefully followed the terribly short, for an Agent, young woman as she led the way across the crowded ballroom. “Does Dr. Nassar truly seek me?” he asked once they were well out of hearing range.

The girl turned and looked up at him with a mischievous smile. “No. But he did send me to rescue you. He and Dr. Foster thought you looked trapped. I’m Agent Ramos, uh, Olivia Ramos. You
know my dad, Joaquin.”

“You resemble him only in coloring.”

“Well, I do look like my aunt, his sister. The height or lack thereof is from my mom.”

“What is your area of expertise? Surely it isn’t combat?”

Her laughter rang out, it was…charming. “No, infiltration and information gathering; I can get into any computer system on the planet so long as I have direct access. Indirect access takes longer. Phil...Agent Coulson used to have me hack into Mr. Stark’s system for him.” Her expression sobered.

“He was a friend to you as well. I am sorry for your loss.”

She shrugged. “It happens. We all know the risks.” Olivia shot a troubled look at where his brother and Kara were chatting with several U.N. Ambassadors.

“Loki deeply regrets every death,” he told her.

“That doesn’t bring them back.”

“No; and that is knowledge that will weigh on his conscience for millennia.”

“Good.” He frowned at her and she flushed. “I’m sorry. Phil wasn’t just a coworker or even a friend; he was my mentor, the quintessential agent. I wanted to be like him.”

“He was your idol.” Thor sighed. “Phil died a hero’s death; but he was also a man of fairness. Had he known the circumstances, I believe he would simply have stepped aside and allowed Loki to leave. You do understand that my brother had no choice?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make it any easier.” Her eyes were downcast and her expression forlorn.

He reached out to touch her soft cheek. “No, it does not. I hope that you will try to forgive Loki for taking Phil from us too soon. I understand that it will be difficult.”

Olivia froze as calloused fingers lightly stroked her cheek. Oh. My. God. Thor was touching her. He was so hot. Damn; and she’d spent the last five minutes basically telling him that she hated his beloved brother. Oh, smooth move, Olivia. She wondered what those calloused fingers would feel like on other parts of her anatomy. “I’ll try,” she promised. “Maybe you could tell me about what he was like before all of the craziness started?”

“... ...

The big softy smiled. “It would be my pleasure.”

“We could meet for coffee, maybe? Are you busy tomorrow?”

“I have been informed that watching football, specifically something called a rose bowl, is a requirement.”

“The Rose Bowl,” she corrected. “It’s a big college game. And don’t forget the Tournament of Roses Parade. I have a professional barista’s coffee machine and a big screen TV; maybe you could come to my place for coffee and watch them with me?”

“That sounds like an excellent plan.”
“Great. I’ve got to run, I’m due back on base in an hour.” She gave him her card, well; one for her most recent cover, which was an art broker, with her address scrawled on the back and received his promise to join her at noon. Practically dancing away, Olivia came to an abrupt halt when the Prince of Darkness, aka Loki, stepped in her path. Her eyes widened as she stared up at his slight frown. “Thank you,” he said.

Okay, that was unexpected. “For?”

“Rescuing my brother from that predatory female; I fear she had nefarious designs upon him.”

“You think I don’t?”

His head tilted to the side. “No. You have an honest energy about you. You would treat with him directly and openly, not involve him in schemes.”

“Okay. Well, you’re right. I like him, but I don’t want anything from him.”

“Good. He needs feminine companionship. But, a warning.” She used every ounce of willpower to avoid rolling her eyes at his ponderous tone. “One day he will find his other half and he will forget all others. You do him a kindness; I have no wish for you to hope for more than he can give you and be hurt.”

Seriously? He…wow. There went her preconceptions. “I understand. I’m kind of set on my career. There’s so much I still want to accomplish and a serious relationship would get in the way.” She shrugged. Sure, Thor was hot, but if she was to get involved with a man, he’d have to be local. Being the youngest recruit ever accepted in S.H.I.E.L.D. was just the beginning of the accomplishments she wanted to rack up. “You ever hear the song ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’? That’s where I’m coming from at this point in my life.”

Loki nodded. Huh, just a short conversation and it no longer seemed wrong to think of him by his name. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Too many on this world demonize such desires for women yet encourage it in their young men. Horribly contradictory and it must be terribly frustrating.”

Olivia found herself laughing, who’d have believed it? “That’s for sure.”

“I’ll see that he gets his lazy carcass out of bed in time to keep his promise to you. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Agent Ramos.” Her jaw dropped and she stared at him. “Tis no mystery; I spoke with Dr. Nassar while you rescued my brother.”

“Ah, good to know. Good night then.”

“Good night…Olivia. Happy New Year.”

… …

“Thor, buddy,” Tony Stark said as he grabbed his sleeve. “We’ve all got to meet the delegation from the FDNY.”

“The what?”

“Fire Department of New York. As a kind of gratitude for their service to the city during the invasions, my Board invited representatives that were active on the rescue teams during both of them to the party to be acknowledged and to meet the Avengers. I’m not hearing they’re thrilled that Loki’s part of the team now, so we’ve got to tread a little lightly, or so Pepper tells me.”
He digested that for a second and then frowned. “I do not think that is possible for many of us.”

“Yeah, probably not.”

He followed the billionaire, albeit reluctantly, to where their friends were gathered. The mortal heroes, the group from the FDNY, not the mortal members of the Avengers, were dressed in what appeared to be uniforms though they looked not practical. He didn’t realize he was frowning until Kara nudged him. “Those are dress uniforms,” she whispered. “They wear them only for ceremonial occasions.”

“Ah, my thanks.” He listened with interest as the firefighters, as he was told they were called, were introduced and it was explained that they were part of the Special Operations Command units that dealt with unusual situations citywide. Two of the dozen being honored were women. He shouldn’t have been surprised, Midgard’s women held many positions of honor in dangerous professions. While they could do so in Asgard, only a very few chose to. One of the women was of the same race as Director Fury and seemed brusque and domineering and of much the same temperament as the director, the other was a tall blonde with eyes the color of coffee laden with cream. Her skin was lightly tanned and her smile both confident and feminine. Thor had to admire her more womanly figure and the way she held herself. Yes, all was going well until individual introductions of the Avengers commenced.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” one of the older men interrupted Lady Pepper, belligerently despite his seemingly respectful words. “But what the holy hell is that terrorist doing with the Avengers?” he demanded as Loki was introduced. Thor didn’t need to have Kara’s abilities to see how deeply the words hurt his brother. Loki’s posture stiffened and his face settled into hard lines. Before Pepper could respond, the blonde firefighter intervened. “Jake, stand down. You were given the briefing. It’s a form of restitution.”

“It is not only that, my lady,” Thor told her. “The invasion was always going to happen; my brother’s actions, convincing the true enemy that he worked for them, minimized the damage and brought the Avengers together to counter the attack.”

“We lost three-hundred and fifty civilians and ninety-three members of the NYPD, FDNY and National Guard. I’d hardly call that minimized.”

“Compare that to the billions that would have been lost had Thanos been given the access to your world he truly desired,” Loki snapped.

“It’s kind of hard to see it in that perspective when you’re pulling crushed children from the rubble of what used to be a day care center!”

He glanced back at his brother in time to see Loki’s stricken expression. “Could I change aught and save even one of those lives, I would,” he said quietly as Kara wrapped a consoling arm around his waist. “Think you it was an easy decision to sacrifice hundreds here to save billions planet-wide? It was not.”

… …

Eleanor Valois stared at the dark-haired Norse god; Loki, god of Mischief. She prided herself on being the reasonable one, for keeping a cool head and here she’d gone and berated this man for something they’d all been told was not truly his fault. And then she’d gone and twisted the knife to assuage her own pain at being unable to save a group of preschoolers. His expression was broken, and she had the distinct impression that he had nightmares over the incident that made her own
look like sweet daydreams. Never in her twenty-six years had she seen a man look so abjectly miserable. Her colleagues were staring at her, waiting for her response. It had taken her two years of the four she’d spent in Special Operations to be accepted into their ranks and then another two years had passed before they not only treated her as an equal, but looked up to her. They’d follow her lead on this. “No,” she managed to say, knowing it was the right thing to do. “I don’t suppose it was.” The fire-haired woman at the god’s side, she’d been introduced as Hellbringer and was the one who’d blown the big bad to smithereens, met her eyes and gave her a small approving nod.

The introductions concluded and a brief speech thanking them for their work was given and they were asked to enjoy the rest of the party. The guys had spread out, some to take advantage of the open bar, others headed for the lavish buffet. Two had stayed with her. Bill Ledbetter nudged her arm. “Do you buy that load of bullshit?” he asked.

“Yeah, strangely, I do.” His gray eyes widened. “Bill, come on. You’ve seen it when guys are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. How many of the veterans who went into the Twin Towers perpetually wear expressions like that?”

Carlos Arroyo, the captain of the other unit that had been called to both invasions nodded agreement. He was one of those veterans. “That guy’s been to hell and back. You can just tell.”

“Shit,” Bill muttered. “Okay, if you two are good with it, I trust your judgment. I ain’t seen nothing get past both of you.” He rubbed a hand through his brush cut sable hair. “I’ll help keep a lid on the guys.”

“Thanks, Bill. I know you’ve got my back.” They headed off as she watched the Avengers chatting and then dispersing to their own partying. She followed the couple who were still huddled together. “Excuse me,” she called out as she came up behind them. They turned and the woman smiled more broadly at her this time. “Look; I—I’m sorry. I was so far out of line you’d need a search team to find me.”

“It’s…understandable,” Loki said. “Losing adults is difficult enough. Children are precious and should be protected at all costs. I do not know that I could have chosen a different location even had I been aware that children would be in the area, but…”

“You would have tried, huh?”

“Indeed.” He glanced to the side as his bulky brother hurried back to him with grim determination on his handsome features. “Easy, brother,” Loki told him. “The lady only offers her apology.”

The blonde looked thunderstruck. A nearly manic urge to giggle ran through her as she remembered that Thor was the Norse god of Thunder. “That is…good. You did not deserve…”

“Yes, I did, and well you know it. These mortals risked their very vulnerable selves to save others; they deserve to understand fully that their work and sacrifice was for a reason other than greed or pride.”

… …

Thor stared at the woman’s chagrined expression and let the righteous anger seep away. “You understand, then, my lady?”


He nodded “Lieutenant.”
“Yeah, I get it.”

“Ah. But you have concerns, still?” he guessed.

“Well, sure.”

“Thor,” Loki interrupted. “Why don’t you have a chat with the lieutenant? I’m certain being in my presence would simply continue to make her uncomfortable.”

He eyed his brother with suspicion, but Loki’s expression was sad and somewhat resigned; he did not have the innocent mien that he typically presented when he plotted aught. “Of course,” he agreed. “Lieutenant? May I escort you to the buffet?”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

… …

Thor turned away and Kara waited and watched. Once it was obvious that her brother-in-law was fully engaged in conversation and not about to look back at them, Loki’s mischievous smile emerged. “Now he shall have the choice of two suitable women,” he said smugly.

She laughed and poked him in the ribs. “Got tired of waiting for Pepper, hmm?”

“Well, yes. I’m told kissing someone romantically at the stroke of midnight is a custom of this celebration. If I allowed the evening to go on much longer he’d have small hope of that.” Loki sniffed disdainfully. “He is not so experienced at seduction as he would have others believe. From what I’ve observed, the women have always chased him.” No doubt. From what she’d heard from Jane and Darcy, Jane had kissed Thor, not visa-versa. “Besides which, I had to have some fun this night.”

Her laughter spilled out again. “Oh, you are incorrigible. No wonder I love you so much.” His trademark smug smirk emerged and he hugged her close. “Come on; let’s go tell Pepper she’s off the hook. We don’t want him overwhelmed.”

Loki shuddered. “That would be a problem. He is rather simple, after all.”

“Naughty of you to talk about your future king like that.”

He shrugged. “That is why he shall have me as his advisor.” Taking her arm as they searched for their hostess, her husband seemed…happy. “One day, all will be as it should. Thor will be sitting the throne and acting the benevolent king while I am the true power in the Realm.” He chuckled at her irritated huff. “No, I am not being egotistical. It is a tried and true method of running a monarchy. Thor enjoys the flash, I prefer the substance; it is a perfect combination.”

“Okay, but don’t share that observation with anyone else. Too many people will be thinking you’ve gone all megalomaniacal on us.”

“Of course not, love. That is knowledge only for family.” He chuckled as she rolled her eyes. “Kara, our parents and Thor are well aware of how it will be, they’ve planned for it. Relax; we were born for our individual roles and we will play those roles well and will fulfill them together.”

“Just so long as you remember it’s my role to keep your mischievous butt in line and I’ll play that role to perfection.”

“You already do, my love.”
Tony sighed as he left the dance floor, Pepper still wrapped in one arm. After the near fiasco with the FDNY, the rest of the evening had gone perfectly. He loved it when a plan came together. Thor had spent the last hour and a half ensconced in an alcove with the blonde firefighter, Darcy and Bruce had disappeared after the big reveal of Natasha’s pregnancy. The pair of former assassins was tucked in another alcove with Bird Brain dashing back and forth to the buffet for tidbits to tempt his cranky better half. Rogers was out on the dance floor with Beth again…or was that still? Every time he’d noticed them, they’d been slow dancing, even if the music wasn’t right for it. Ah well. He’d chalk it up to young love, but technically Captain Spangles wasn’t young. “You,” he said to the love of his life, “throw a great party.”

“Yes, I do,” Pepper agreed. “And no one had to get drunk and blow out windows to make it exciting.”

He winced at the reminder. “Not my finest hour. It’s almost midnight; do I rate a kiss for the New Year?”

“You get one whether you deserve one or not. It would be all over the tabloids if you didn’t get to kiss your fiancé when the ball drops,” she informed him as she gestured out the window that had a decent view of Times Square’s lighted ball a few blocks away.

“Aww, come on Pep, I’ve been good,” he whined. “I even got Jane to loosen up.”

She laughed. “Was that you? I was wondering who got her and Raj talking. They haven’t been more than a few yards apart all night.”

“Yeah, well, I am a genius.”

“Romance is usually my area of expertise, but I keep getting outdone by the men tonight. Raj matched Thor up with Agent Ramos and Loki hooked him up with Lieutenant Valois and now you tell me that you set Raj up with Jane.”

“Hmm, in your defense, you were busy running the entire shindig.”

“True.” She wrapped her arms around his neck as the crowd began gathering for the countdown. He glanced to the side and noticed that all of the Avengers’ couples had emerged and were preparing to kiss. Thor had held out a hand to the blonde firefighter…Agent Ramos had left before the Avengers were introduced, but Loki had informed him that Thor had a date with that hot little number tomorrow. “Huh, you think he’ll get a kiss out of the frosty blonde?”

“I found her to be a very warm person.”

“So? Kiss or no kiss?”

Pepper smiled; damn he both loved and hated that smile at the same time. He heard the countdown begin around them. “Happy New Year, Tony,” she said as she leaned in. The hell with whether or not Thunderpants got a kiss, he was too busy enjoying his to care.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am aware I used a DC character. It simply had to be done. Yes, this is a long
one. Because these are one-shots, they are going to be of varying lengths…however long each needs to be to tell its story. My apologies for taking so long to update; this chapter was especially problematic as while they are one-shots, I do want to keep them in chronological order. Thanks for your patience. Thanks also to MissKikkiKat for collaborating with me on the character of Eleanor Valois and to OC'specialty for creating the character of Olivia Ramos. Hope you like how they turned out!
“Oh my gosh; is that George Clooney?” Rogue gushed as they made their way through the crowd in front of the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Washington, DC. “Wait, isn’t this the National Cathedral? I didn’t know they did weddings here.”

“They don’t, usually. Stark gave a huge donation to get an exception and the Avengers are going to have to do a special appearance in DC this spring on top of that.”

“Wow. Oh, oh…who’s that guy in the eye patch? He looks awful mean.”

Logan glanced at the man Marie was pointing at; Nick Fury. Figured. “He is. Total a…jerk. Good at his job, though.”

“What job?”

“Classified, kid. Sorry.”

“Oh, geez. Come on, I’m a member of the X-Men, don’t I rate?”

“You’re a trainee and no, what he does ain’t associated with the X-Men.” The girl was practically vibrating with excitement. This was not turning out to be one of his best ideas; but when he’d visited his old team over Christmas, young Rogue had pulled out the puppy eyes and the pout and, yeah, he’d caved. Stark had been bugging him to bring someone with him and the kid was one of the few people he could tolerate for any length of time. Plus she was young enough that nobody would tease him about a relationship that didn’t exist. They all knew it was more of a mentor/mentee friendship thing.

“Humph.” She was quiet for a minute and he wondered if he should be worried. “Oh, wow; there’s the Black Widow, she looks like she’s gonna pop any second; still really pretty though.”

“Yeah, but don’t tell her she looks big, she’ll take your head off.”

“I guess that’s Hawkeye with her, he’s the dad, right?”

“Yep.” Logan looked around to see if there was anywhere he could drag the kid off to before…oh crap. Rogue had dashed from his side and planted herself in Romanov’s path.

“Hi!” she began brightly. “I’m Marie, uh; Rogue, from the X-Men. Logan brought me, you know, Wolverine?”

Luckily, the Widow was in a good mood. “Nice to meet you, Marie, I’m Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow,” she said. “Logan speaks fondly of you.”

“Wow, really? He’s a good guy. We, me and the other trainees, we miss him a lot.”

“Is that so?” Romanov’s eyes glinted as she caught his. “Hmm, they say you can’t fool kids or animals. He must be a softy under that gruff exterior.” Crap, now he was going to get all kinds of hell over it.

“Well, he’s tough with us, but ya know, he respects us. Doesn’t talk down to us and makes sure we
know it when we're doing a good job.”

“Nice to hear. Have you met Clint?” she asked and Barton’s eyes widened in terror. Logan tried not to snort out loud at the man’s trapped expression. “Best archer and long distance weapons marksman in the business.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re the Hawkeye.” Kid was still gushing, geez.

“Yeah.” Hawkeye offered his hand after receiving an elbow in his side. “Nice to meet you. Uh, Nat, we’ve got to get in there so you can sit down before the crowd heads in, right?”

“Yes, we do. I’m sure we’ll see you later, Marie.”

“Oh, yeah, totally!” Rogue grabbed his arm as the couple left. “She’s so cool! Wow, do you think I could be like her?”

Damn, he hoped not. “I think you’ll be a much better woman, Rogue. You like people more.”

“Oh, but she was so nice.”

“That’s just her public, off duty face. Trust me, she’s hell on wheels.”

Marie’s face fell. “Oh.” They were able to get a few more yards through the crush when she brightened. “Oh, oh wow, there’s Loki!” He glanced over his shoulder. Sure enough, Loki and Kara were making their way slowly through the crowd. Fortunately the people within the cordon were all either celebrities, personal friends of Stark and Pepper, or business associates, so the pair wasn’t being totally mobbed. The god’s pleasant expression looked strained, though. Marie pulled away from him and headed their way. Definitely not one of his better ideas. “Hello!” she sang out as she reached them.

Loki’s eyebrows lifted but Kara managed to smile back at the kid. She probably felt Rogue’s happiness and enthusiasm. Kara looked past the girl and nodded at him before speaking. “You must be Marie,” she said.

Rogue’s eyes widened. “I surely am; how did y’all know that?”

“Logan just came up behind you wearing a thundercloud as an expression,” Loki said wryly. “I imagine he thinks I’ll rip your head off for accosting us or some such nonsense.”

“Oh. You wouldn’t do anything like that,” she said confidently.

“No, I’d end up back in Asgard, headed for the dungeons this time.” Rogue’s jaw dropped and Loki winked at her. “I meant verbally, my dear. I’m rather known for making acerbic comments to those who annoy me.”

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to annoy you.”

The eyebrows shot back up. “I’m not annoyed, though I expect Logan thought I would be.” He leaned down to murmur in the kid’s ear. “I do annoy easily, you see; possibly more easily than the Wolverine.”

“That’s definitely easy,” she said with a chuckle.

“Hey, I’m right here.” Damn kid.

“Aww, Logan. You know I adore you.”
“Are you enjoying yourself, Marie?” Loki asked. Bastard was practically oozing charm and the kid was eating it up.

“Oh yeah, it’s great. There’s so many famous people and lordy, the clothes! Did you see the dress Beyoncé almost has on? Do you think she glues it down so she doesn’t have an accident with it?” She didn’t give either of them a chance to respond before starting up again. “Your outfits are way nicer. I love that suit, it’s very elegant. How come you’re not in Asgardian clothes?”

“We’re trying not to take away attention from the bride and groom. This is their day,” Kara told her. Loki was looking kinda shell-shocked by Rogue’s non-stop chatter. “Besides, Asgardian formal wear is uncomfortable as all he-ec, at least for me.”

“Oh, but it’s so pretty, I loved the dress you wore to your engage…oh. I guess that’s a bad subject considerin’ what happened an’ all.”

“No, it’s fine,” Loki managed, the charming smile reestablished. “We were truly bored to tears by the whole thing before I was betrayed.”

“Sometimes boring is a good thing,” Kara muttered.

“Why aren’t you wearing coats? Aren’t you cold?”

“She is so precious, Logan,” Loki said to him. The god’s voice had an edge to it, so he took it as a sign to get the kid away from them. “Absolutely darl…”

“Whoa, don’t touch her,” he said, thrusting himself between Loki’s outstretched hand and Rogue’s cheek.

Loki’s green eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t going to hurt her. What kind of cad do you think…?”

“No, that’s not it,” Marie said, peering around him. “He was afraid I’d hurt you.”

“What? Is that true?”

“Rogue absorbs other people’s powers and even life force through skin to skin contact. She can’t choose not to do it, it just happens. So far I’m the only person she’s been able to touch at all without draining dangerously because my original mutation is to heal pretty much instantly. Don’t know what would happen to your mojo if she touched you.”

“I-I see. Thank you, then.”

“Didn’t do it for you. I don’t want her traumatized by hurting someone accidentally. She’s had that enough in her young life.”

“Marie?” Kara said. “If you’d like to talk about that some time, we can get together. I hurt people… more than hurt them, when I came into my ability. It was pretty awful, but I’ve learned to deal with it.”

“Sure, that would be great. Logan can give me your number, right?”

“Right,” he agreed. “Let’s get inside, it’s gonna start pretty soon.”

“It is indeed, assuming Anthony doesn’t get cold feet.”

Logan frowned. “You calling him Anthony again? What did he do now?”
“Apparently he’s decided I resemble a fictional character called Data, whom I believe was an android. I am not amused.”

He had no idea who that was, but he guessed Rogue did because the kid was stifling a giggle. “Oh, no, sugah, you don’t look like Data. Well, except for the slicked back hair and being lean and all. Data is kind of funky looking and expressionless. You’re real handsome.”

“Ah, thank you. Now, we’d best get to our seats. Hmm, my brother is waving impatiently at us; we must be holding things up.”

Most of the guests had wandered inside already. “Let’s go, Rogue.”

She gave him a sunny smile. “You got it!”

… …

Thor had vanished by the time they’d reached the sanctuary. They took seats several rows back from Logan and his protégé; Loki frowned at the back of young Rogue’s head. “Perhaps we should do a controlled experiment with…”

“No, absolutely not,” his lady interrupted. “We don’t know what absorbing the kind of energy we hold would do to her. I’m not willing to risk her to satisfy your curiosity.”

He sighed. “You’re no fun.”

“That’s not what you said in bed this morning.”

No, it wasn’t. They’d had a glorious morning of sensual play before Kara had informed him that they needed to start getting ready for the wedding. “That’s different,” he decided.

“Uh huh. Now hush. Pepper’s mom was just seated, that means they’re ready to start.”

“How do you know these…?” he broke off at her glare. “Fine,” he whispered and sat back to watch the proceedings. Mrs. Potts had indeed been seated. Her ginger hair was mostly silver, but she was otherwise still rather youthful for a mortal of her age. A slightly younger couple sat with her, Pepper’s aunt and uncle if he remembered correctly. Judging by the hair color alone, the uncle was Mrs. Potts’ brother. Yes, they’d been introduced at the rehearsal dinner, but he’d been too bored to note any details. Why they’d had to attend the foolish thing when they weren’t part of the ceremony had been beyond him.

Kara was frowning at him. “You didn’t listen at all last night, did you?” she asked softly and then sighed when he shrugged. “Patrick O’Brien, Mrs. Potts’ brother and his second wife Rebecca. Their two daughters Rachel and Stephanie are Pepper’s maid of honor and one of her bridesmaids.”

He sighed. Darcy and Bethany were also serving as bridesmaids while Bruce and Steven served as groomsmen. Tony had been unhappy about not including Kara and him, but had finally agreed that the media would put too much focus on the gods and neglect the bride and groom. Thor dropped down in the seat beside him after settling S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Olivia Ramos, one of the two Midgardian ladies he was seeing, in the aisle seat. It was no mystery why Olivia had accompanied his brother. Eleanor Valois couldn’t get away from her duties as a FDNY Lieutenant for three days, while Director Fury was more than pleased to have an Agent in the thick of things. “Where have you been?” he asked his flustered brother.

“We were waylaid by Director Fury,” he muttered in disgust. “This is a day of celebration, not one of giving diplomatic reports of goings on in Asgard.”
“My sympathies,” he replied. Indeed, Fury was taking advantage of the involvement.

“Both of you gripe later,” Kara hissed as Tony and Rhodey stepped out of an alcove and stood at the front of the gathering. “It’s starting.”

An annoying swell of music began. It wasn’t the bridal march; that he had familiarized himself with as it would be used in his and Kara’s Midgardian wedding a few months hence. A young woman of rather average appearance with dull straw-colored locks took measured steps down the aisle. Judging by the hue of her gown, a pale rose, she must be Stephanie. A young man he’d been told was the girl’s husband accompanied her. Following at a distance was Bethany. Her pale blonde hair was far more vibrant, and her smile as she glanced up at Steven made her beautiful. For his part, Rogers looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo, even more so than Banner. Actually, the doctor looked more resigned than uncomfortable. Darcy had a tense expression; interesting as he’d thought they’d reconciled.

“Wow, I didn’t think rose pink would look good on her,” Kara whispered.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked in response. The brunette was absolutely stunning. Her full lips were colored a deep burgundy and her bosom took the dress from mundane to spectacular. There was something different…ah, she was no longer wearing her glasses and her eyes didn’t have the flat look that the contact lenses had given her previously. “Is she no longer correcting her vision?” he had to ask.

Kara shrugged but Thor frowned at him. “Eir healed her eyesight, I told you this,” he rumbled, albeit quietly for once.

“You did no such thing,” he insisted.

“I told you, both of you.”

“Um, Thor? No, you didn’t. Maybe you told Tony and Pepper?” Kara suggested.

His brother frowned. “Mayhap.”

Loki repressed a sigh and turned back to the proceedings. A woman walked alone down the aisle now; this one wearing a deeper shade, still of rose. Her hair was a mousey brown and her nose a trifle large. Pepper had certainly been gifted with all of beauty, such as it was, in the family. He favored his own lady with a smug smile. Her looks eclipsed all of them. She glanced away from the procession and frowned at him. “What’s with the self-congratulations?” she whispered.

His smile widened. “I have the most beautiful woman in the world at my side, why shouldn’t I congratulate myself?”

Apparently becoming Æsir did not remove her propensity to blush. “I’m not,” she told him. “Not even now; but thank you. Besides, on her wedding day the bride is the most beautiful woman in the world, even when she’s not. It’s a rule.”

“Foolish mortal rule,” he whispered against her ear and then nipped the edge of it playfully. She shivered and he couldn’t help smiling even more.

“Stop that,” she insisted as the music of the bridal march swelled. “Here comes the bride.”

… …

Tony shifted from one foot to the other. What the hell was he doing? Crap. He could feel a cold
sweat breaking out, mostly on the palms of his hands, but a bit on the back of his neck too. “Easy, slugger,” Rhodey whispered. “You can do this. It’s Pepper, your best friend, your confidante, the one person who has always wanted the best for you. Well, buddy, now you’re getting it.”

“She’s too good for me,” he muttered under his breath.

“Hey, all women are too good for the men they love. That’s not the point. She loves you and you’ll be the best you that you can be for her, right?”

Okay, yeah, he could do that. “Right.” He straightened and shifted his shoulders back and stared at the absolutely elegant vision that approached him. “Damn, she’s beautiful. How did I get so fucking lucky?”

Rhodey chuckled quietly in his ear. “You’re Tony fucking Stark, how else?”

His mouth twitched. “Now I know you’re just trying to make me smile. You never use that word.”

“I’m in the military, Tony. Trust me, I use it. But it has more impact if you use it sparingly; something to keep in mind.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He smiled, however nervously, as Pepper joined him in front of the Supreme Court Associate Justice who would perform the ceremony. “Last chance to run for the hills,” he said to her.

She gave him her patented Virginia Pepper Potts serene smile, the one that never failed to drive him totally insane. It was kind of reassuring. She’d been giving him that same smile for a decade now, and as his wife, she’d be giving it to him for decades to come. “I’m where I want to be, Tony. Aren’t you?”

Oh, low blow. Well, not that low considering his behavior over the years. “Yeah, I really am. Guess I finally earned that reputation for being a genius.”

Her smile bloomed as the justice cleared her throat. They all turned to face the woman. Elena Kagan smiled at the gathering. “Justice Ginsberg took the honor of being the first Supreme Court Justice to marry a same sex couple; that is hard to top. Still, officiating over the event that takes the world’s most eligible bachelor off the market must count for something.”

Their guests laughed and Tony shot Pepper a quick smile. Pepper had chosen the woman to officiate based on an acquaintance formed when Justice Kagan was the Dean of Law at Harvard and Pepper was there studying for her MBA. “Sounds like an accomplishment to me,” he agreed.

The justice winked at him. “Friends,” she continued. “We are here today to join Anthony Edward Stark and Virginia Potts in matrimony. It has been a long hard road that has brought them here; they have endured much, both physically, mentally and emotionally that has tested their love and commitment to each other, yet here they are. That gives hope that their marriage will stand the test of time.” She looked back at them. “I believe you each have personal vows you wish to make?” He nodded and heard Pepper murmur agreement. “It’s traditional,” she said the word wryly. “That the groom make his pledge first, so Mr. Stark, if you would?”

He swallowed and turned to his beautiful fiancé and took her hands in his. “Virginia…ah, I can’t call you that, not even here. You’ll always be Pepper to me. You have been my assistant, my friend, my lover. You know me better than anybody alive and yet here you are, ready to spend the rest of your life with me. Instead of questioning your sanity, which, you know, is in doubt, I am just going to be grateful.” Outright laughter swept through the room. Pepper had her lips pressed tightly
together and her eyes danced with suppressed humor, good. “While my actions may not have always shown it, my heart knew that you were the only woman for me. I love you, more than I can ever express, and I can’t think of anything I’d rather do with the rest of my life than spend it as your husband. I pledge to love you, to honor you, to cherish you, and to always put you first. That means you come before my workshop, you come before my company, you come before being Iron Man, and you come before anyone or anything in this or any other Realm.” A chorus of ‘aws’ resounded.

… …

Pepper blinked back tears. Tony didn’t get mushy often, but when he did, oh my. Justice Kagan was nodding at her expectantly. “Oh, sorry.” She looked back at Tony and grinned as a fleeting urge to tell him she’d changed her mind arose. But no, she couldn’t be that cruel, even as a joke. “Tony,” she said. “We’ve been through so much together, and I’ll admit, from time to time I’ve just wanted to get as far away from the craziness as I could. But I still always loved you, no matter what. You’ve made promises to me and I will hold you to them, but I also have some promises for you. I will always love you. I will always understand when your mind goes off in tangents; that’s how you think best. I’ll remember that the first thing out of your mouth isn’t always what you really mean, so I’ll be forgiving of it. Finally, I will nag you, today and every day, to take care of yourself, to be healthy, to stay as safe as possible under whatever circumstance you happen to be in. I’ll do this because I love you and want to have as long and healthy a life as possible with you.”

“Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty, shall we?” the justice asked. “Anthony, do you take Virginia to be your lawfully wedded wife, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor and cherish her, so long as you both live?”

Tony nodded and then seemed to remember he had to actually speak. “I do, absolutely.”

“Virginia, do you take Anthony to be your lawfully wedded husband, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor and cherish him, so long as you both live?”

A tear tracked down her cheek; it was overwhelming that this was finally happening. “Yes, I do.”

“May we have the rings?” They waited as Rhodey and Rachel produced the wedding bands they’d chosen and handed them to Justice Kagan. She held one out to Tony. “I think you know what to do here,” he was told.

He held out his calloused left hand and she gave him her soft one. Even without his armor, her Tony was always strong and capable, and God knew, she loved him so much. He carefully slid the ring on her ring finger. “With this ring, I thee wed,” he managed with a slight crack in his voice that made her smile.

Blinking back tears of joy she reached out to take the matching band the justice was holding out for her. Tony was looking at her and the absolute awe in his expression reassured her more than any words that she was doing the right thing; that he’d keep every promise he’d made to the best of his ability. She bit her bottom lip as the thought crossed her mind that if he didn’t, she’d sic a god or two on him. “With this ring, I thee wed,” she managed to say with only the tiniest waver.

“By the power vested in me by the government of these United States of America, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

… …
Wow. Just...wow. Steve couldn't believe it. Tony Stark, the sarcastic, self-proclaimed playboy was married. And he looked so happy about it. Beth, across the way, was crying unashamedly. Beth, wow. He found himself daydreaming, just a little, imagining her in the white gown saying ‘I do’ to him. Bruce nudged him, breaking him from his reverie. Tony and Pepper were striding down the aisle, arm in arm and the rest of the party was forming up behind them. He took Beth’s hand and tucked it on his arm. “You okay?” he whispered and handed her the brand new handkerchief that Kara had insisted he carry.

She dabbed at her eyes. “Yeah, thanks. That was just so…”

“Sweet. Yep, sure was. Who’d have thought Tony had it in him?” He grinned at her giggle. “We’re supposed to be in the receiving line at the reception, you up for that?”

“Sure, what a chore, meeting all those celebrities.”

It was a chore, for him, anyway. He looked around the large hall. “I just hope not everyone here is going, otherwise it’s going to take hours.”

“Rats, I didn’t even think about that.” She nodded to Bruce and Darcy who were just ahead of them as the wedding party processed in reverse to leave the church. “How’s Bruce going to manage?”

He gulped. “Uh...that’s a real good question.” Steve was still pondering that question when they joined Darcy and Bruce in the limo that would take them to Kennedy Center for the reception.

Bruce’s eyebrows rose when he was asked about it. “Didn’t Pepper give you the option to sit that one out?”

“Um, no.”

“I’m sorry. I guess Captain America doesn’t get a break.” Bruce’s voice was a heck of a lot more sympathetic than his expression. “Darcy and I will be in charge of entertaining the super-VIPs in the Chinese Lounge until Tony and Pepper finish greeting the bulk of the guests. Then they’ll go join the rest of the guests in the South Gallery for dinner.”

“Super-VIPs?”

Darcy snickered. “Yeah, they trust me with royalty and heads of state, can you believe it?”

“Honey, you were great on Asgard. You should have seen her in action, Steve. She firmly sweet-talked all of the diplomats into cooperating and respecting each other’s opportunities to present their points of view, it was amazing.”

“I can believe it, Darcy’s more than a smart mouth, she’s just smart, period.”

“That’s kind of a funky compliment,” Darcy told him. “But I’ll take it.”

Beth laughed and then patted his knee. “He didn’t mean it like it sounded, really.” He frowned at her. “Steve, telling someone they have a smart mouth is kind of insulting.”

“Oh, no. That’s not what I meant, really.”

“It’s okay, I got that.” Darcy gave him a Loki-worthy smirk. “Besides, I’ve worked hard on my rep for sass. It’s nice to know it’s the first thing people think of about me.”

“Definitely not the first thing I think of,” Bruce murmured.
“Sure hope not,” Darcy agreed. Steve decided to leave that one alone.

… …

“Wait, why are we joining the heads of state?” Kara asked as they were escorted to what they were told was the Chinese Lounge.

“We represent the Royal House of Asgard, my sister,” Thor rumbled.

“Humph. You’re the Crown Prince, you represent them.”

“Sorry, Love,” Loki told her. “Younger siblings get meet and greet duty, remember?” He chuckled at her disgruntled look. “Besides which, I am the Crown Prince of Jötunheim, so we’re representing two Realms.”

“Damn. So when is Helblindi getting married? He really needs to get a different heir.”

“Not for another few months. You can encourage him to hurry that process along when we visit for his Name Day celebration.” She grumbled under her breath until he shook his head. “Leave off, Kara. You can amuse yourself by discussing the guests with Darcy. I’m told she’s all but mastered the Æsir tongue and you’ve been doing quite well with it.”

“There is that. It’s kind of cool being able to speak what amounts to a secret language.”

“Does Mr. Stark have a copy of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s translation software?” Olivia asked.

Kara frowned at the girl. “I think he has his own. Hasn’t he asked you to call him Tony?”

“He has, and I’ll call him Tony when he stops calling me Agent.”

“Good luck with that,” Loki offered. “I believe the man is inherently incapable of using a person’s correct given name.”

“That’s not true. He just finds it boring; you know how hard it is for him to not go off on tangents, that’s because he has ADD.” Loki’s eyebrows rose in question. “Attention Deficit Disorder,” she clarified. “People don’t hold his interest unless he forces himself to concentrate on them by thinking up nicknames.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “If he has ADD, how does he complete complex projects?”

“Ah ha. That’s the billion dollar question. His ADD is balanced by OCD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder,” she explained for Loki and Thor’s benefit. “Which is why he’s considered high-functioning; he reserves the OCD for the tech so everything else is subjected to the ADD. He’d make a hell of a case study if I had a deep interest in those aspects of my field.”

“So by forcing him to use my name, I’m causing him to have less interest in talking to me? I haven’t seen such.”

“No, because he knows if he doesn’t concentrate on you and messes up and uses his nicknames, he’ll have to watch out for consequences. You’re forcing his attention in a different way.”

“I need to study this further,” Loki muttered. “Who would have guessed that mortal minds are so complex? Your book did not go into this.”

“I have dozens of basic psychology books and you’ve only read the one. I think once you got to the section on reverse psychology, you lost interest in the rest.”
“Perhaps,” he admitted sulkily.

“Um, I did have a reason for asking about the translation software,” Olivia pointed out.

“Sorry about that.” Kara gave the agent an apologetic smile. “What was the reason?”

“I thought you might want to test and see if our software can translate that language before you go and use it around the base or one of us so that you don’t think something’s private that isn’t.”

“It’s not necessary, Olivia. If I do not wish them to know what we’re saying, I’ll isolate our speech magically.”

“You are the only one who can do that, brother,” Thor muttered.

Loki gave him a patient look. “Thor, would you be tempted to speak in that tongue when I am not present?” Thor’s jaw dropped as the point sunk in. “Exactly. Come along, now. Darcy and Dr. Banner seem to be a bit overwhelmed.”

… …

An hour and a half; that’s how long they’d been standing there, smiling, nodding, thanking guests for joining them, shaking hands and all of that crap that he hated most in the world. The only thing that kept him going was the fact that his wi-wi-wi-wi… Ahem…Wi-wi…crap…WIFE was standing next to him. He was married. Honest injun, as real as it can get, married. Tony swallowed and wished heartily for a drink. Or several. Pepper was looking at him now, her eyes narrowed. “Only about a dozen more,” she said quietly. “You can make it. Darcy is going to have a full glass of your favorite Scotch waiting for you in the VIP room.”

He flashed his best grateful puppy dog eyes look. “Damn, I love you.”

“I know.”

It was all good, or would be. Several of his bachelor pals had shaken their heads in mock disbelief when they’d come through the line. Clooney had gotten in the best shot at him until he’d given it right back by pointing out that Pepper had married him for love because she already had control of both his company and his fortune. Since at least one of the actor/director/activist’s recent squeezes had taken off when she realized she’d never get her hands on George’s portfolio, it was one hell of a point. Ah, a happily together couple who wasn’t married yet was coming through the line. “Come on, Brad,” he said. “You’ve popped the question, when are you two going to do the deed?”

The blonde actor gave his trademark open smile…the one that actually hid everything the sly dog was really thinking. “What makes you think we haven’t? We’re not all publicity hounds, Tony.” Brad looked at Pepper. “I’d congratulate you, but I know this guy too well. If he gets to be too rowdy, come visit us. I think our house full of kids would be a quiet haven in comparison.”

“Ouch.”

Pepper laughed as she accepted a hug from Brad’s fiancé…or maybe wife? “Our primary residence has more overgrown kids than you have actual ones,” she said. “So I’m sure yours would be much more peaceful. And that’s not even taking into account that we’ll be adding Natasha’s baby to the mix in a few months.”


“The designer is Aleixandre Bailey, out of Greenwich Village. He’s doing Kara’s dress as well. He
also has an exotic collection of evening wear, you should check it out.”

“I’ll call your office for his contact info, thanks.”

“Tony, not a word,” Pepper warned as he opened his mouth to make a comment about the designer’s flakiness. He sighed. “I’ll make it up to you later,” she whispered.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

… …

Loki found that he remembered a number of the VIPs from their engagement ball. Not that they were particularly noteworthy; it was simply that the details of that evening were firmly etched into his subconscious. Kara frowned up at him as he reflexively squeezed her hand. “Sorry, love.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid these people are associated with…”

“Ah. Bad memories; got it.” She stopped and stretched up to press a kiss at the corner of his mouth. “Let’s talk to people so you can associate them with more than being betrayed, okay?”

“If you insist…and I know that you do.”

“Smart man.” Kara stopped them next to two men, one a bit older than Kara and a man about her age. “Hello,” she said to them. “We’re so glad you were able to make it back for Tony’s wedding.” Before they could respond she’d turned back to him. “Loki, I know the introductions went a bit fast before. This is Prince William, Duke of Cambridge and this gentleman is his brother, Prince Henry of Wales; Prince Henry is active in the United Kingdom’s military and is addressed there as Captain Wales. He’s an excellent marksman and is responsible for the injuries to the pair of Chitauri who grabbed you. That’s probably what slowed them down enough for Colonel Rhodes to catch up and get through the gate with you.”

“Then I owe you greatly, your highness,” Loki said, “as do we all. If Colonel Rhodes had not made it through with me, I may not have survived long enough to lure the enemy back here so that he could be stopped so thoroughly.”

“It was my pleasure to put a few rounds into those cretins,” the younger prince said. “We’re certainly glad you made it back in one piece this time.”

“As are we; Kara was quite put out with the enemy for interrupting her celebration. He paid dearly for it.” The two men chuckled.

“We saw the film. That was brilliant,” Prince William said. “We’d been a bit concerned; our advisors had been told the enemy was virtually indestructible, that he could not die.”

“He cannot.” They stared at him, expressions slightly shocked. “He still lives, if you can call having your pieces scattered across the galaxy being alive.”

“That’s…horrifying,” Prince William said.

“It’s well deserved. He’d destroyed not just the bodies but the souls of millions.”

“Good job then,” the younger prince muttered.

Loki found himself liking the young man. “So we thought.”
Darcy ran up to them as they entered the Chinese Lounge and thrust a tumbler full of amber liquid into her new husband’s eager hands. “Bless you, cupcake,” he breathed.

“Cupcake? Seriously?”

“I could come up with something worse.”

“True, that.”

“Any problems up here?” Pepper asked her bridesmaid.

“Nope. Everyone’s been cool. Our own personal royals got here a few minutes after the VIPs and they were making the rounds until Thor took off with Olivia a few minutes ago. I guess Fury called her for something. Anyway, the whole room’s buzzing with how charming a couple Kara and Loki are. You’d never know from the chatter that a few months ago the world thought Loki was a megalomaniacal psychopath hell-bent on world domination.”

“They were half right,” Tony grumbled and she swatted him.

“Tony! He’s your friend, that’s a terrible thing to say.”

“Why? He calls me a narcissistic megalomaniac.”

“Why is the phrase ‘if the shoe fits’ running through my head?” Darcy asked. The brunette raised her hands when they both stared at her. “Hey, both of them are full of it; it’s just that Tony and Loki have different brands of crazy. It’s no wonder they get along so well.”

“True. And they’re both charming in their own way. How is Bruce holding out?” She looked around for the scientist and spotted him chatting with Prince Carl Phillip of Sweden who, it had been rumored, was showing an interest in the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the body responsible for determining the recipients of the science related Nobel Prizes.

“Prince Hottie rescued him about twenty minutes ago. He’s fine now.”

“Isn’t he, though,” Pepper agreed.

“Hey, I’m standing right here, your husband, remember?”

“Tony, I’m married, not blind. You’re the one I’m taking to bed, not anyone else.”

“I’d better be, damn.”

Pepper laughed. It was kind of fun seeing that well-fitting shoe on the other foot. Maybe she should go check on Bruce and check out the prince personally? “You know…”

“Nuh-uh. You’ll say hello, thank you for coming, just like for everyone else,” Tony grumbled.

“Jealous?”

“Do I have reason to…no, I don’t. Sorry. I’m out of line.”

And he recognized it himself, would wonders never cease? “Yes, you were; thank you for realizing it.”
“Hey, still a genius. I married you.”

“So you did.” A loud crash of thunder shook the building. “What in heaven?”

“Uh oh,” Darcy said, and directed their attention to the door where a tense Natasha Romanov headed in their direction, escorted by S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Olivia Ramos. “That doesn’t bode well.”

“Damn it, no. This is my wedding day, this can’t be happening.”

“Take it easy, Pep. I’ll just go get my suit, trash the bad guys and I’ll be right back.”

“No, Stark.” Loki was suddenly beside them, Kara at his elbow. “You will stay here with your lovely bride. Whatever has happened, we’ll handle it.”

Natasha and Olivia had arrived, the Agent slightly out of breath from trying to keep pace with the nearly seven months pregnant Black Widow. “Some clown calling himself Doom has flying robots taking pot shots at the Washington Memorial and some of the other tourist spots,” Olivia gasped. “Fury’s getting civilians evacuated from the area.” She bent over slightly, breathing deeply. “How the hell do you move so fast, amiga? You’re big as a…” she trailed off and gave the Widow a wary look.

“A very pregnant woman?” Natasha offered with a deceptively sweet smile.

“Yeah, that’s it. You’re still in better shape than me and I can make most Agents look like wusses.”

The former assassin’s Sphinx-like smile was her only answer to that question before she turned to the group which now included Bruce. “Thor, Hawkeye, Captain America, Wolverine and Rogue are out there. We have a count of twenty-four mechanicals. There’s twenty-five look-a-likes flying around out there; one of them is an armored person,” she reported.

“Where’s Happy? He has my suit,” Tony asked.

“No, he doesn’t. I insisted he leave it in our suite.”

“Pepper, you…”

“Tony!” Loki’s voice cracked like a whip. “You will stay here with your new wife and your guests. I will handle it.”

“We’ll handle it,” Kara added.

The god’s eyes rolled. “Yes, of course,” he muttered.

“Great,” Bruce said. “Let’s…”

“No. You will stay in case the enemy realizes the value of the targets gathered here,” Loki insisted. “Pepper, allow Tony to have his man bring his armor here and hold on to it in case this venue comes under attack. Then and only then may he surrender it to your husband so that he may aid Dr. Banner in the defense of these people.”

“Good compromise.” She fished in Tony’s pocket and pulled out his phone.

“Damn, I’ve been wanting your hands in there all day, and all you grab is my phone?” he complained.

“Stow it, Tony.” The others took off leaving her with Bruce, Darcy, Olivia and Natasha. Beth was
now heading toward them, looking a little wild-eyed. “Happy, get Tony’s briefcase out of the Limo and bring it up to the Rooftop Terrace Restaurant. Do not, I repeat, do not give it to him unless Dr. Banner authorizes it, otherwise Dr. Banner will be very angry with you.” She winked at Bruce who flashed her a grin. “You two,” she directed to her bridegroom and Bruce. “Go and meet Happy up there. You’ll have a good view in case trouble heads this way.” She turned to the others. “Ladies, split up. Darcy, you and Natasha will deal with the guests here. Olivia, Beth, you’re with me.” She spun on her heel and headed back to the South Gallery where the main part of the reception was being held. “Hopefully Kara will ensure that jerk is taught some manners. Interrupt my wedding day, will he? Hah.”

… …

Natasha waited until Pepper was well out of range before allowing a smile to emerge. “Wow,” Darcy said, sounding awed. “She’s like, General Pepper.”

“It takes a strong woman to take someone like Stark in hand.”

“Maybe we should have just sent her out to deal with this bozo.”

“If she had armor, I’d agree. He wouldn’t know what hit him.”

“You worried?” Darcy asked her.

“No. Pissed off. That’s much worse.” She forced a smile as some of the VIPs followed by their security approached them. “A minor delay in the proceedings. Apparently the White House is dealing with a diplomatic situation and needed a bit of assistance.”

One of the three princes that had approached held up a smart phone. “Minor? I’m told forces from Latveria are taking your capitol hostage because their country was refused recognition by the United Nations on the insistence of your government.”

She grimaced. “It will amount to nothing. The Avengers are dealing with the situation and it will all be handled quickly,” she told Prince William.

“Do they need a hand?” one of the others asked.

“Harry, really. You shoot one alien and suddenly you think to assist superheroes? Her Majesty would not be pleased.”

The youngest of the three rolled his eyes. “It was two, I’ll have you know.” He shrugged. “She’s never pleased by my actions. I haven’t given her a great-grandson, nor have I settled down with a fairly acceptable wife. Someone has to have fun in this family; else what will the Sun and the Daily Mail gossip about?”

Sweden’s prince was chuckling. “Indeed. Would you rather they send paparazzi after your newborn?”

“Gentlemen, if you’d like to help, keeping the other guests calm would make our job much easier,” she told them, placing one hand on her stomach and forcing a queasy look to distract them.


… …
“Captain, what is the situation?” Loki asked as he let go of Kara and settled the communications device in his ear.

“Loki? Oh, I see you. Some despot’s been denied admission to the U.N. and had this bright idea that he could take out part of D.C. and that would somehow change everyone’s minds. We’ve got about two dozen robots of some kind, flight capabilities similar to Iron Man, armed with energy weapons and standard rounds…uh, bullets like the Black Widow’s pistols shoot.”

“All right. Kara, can you pick some of them off?”

“Let me concentrate a minute.”

“Thor’s working up a storm front; he’s been keeping them away from the ground so that S.H.I.E.L.D. and the local police can evacuate the people safely. Hawkeye’s arrows haven’t been doing much good. He’s hits them, but even the explosive ones aren’t enough to take them out. I’ve knocked a few down with my shield, but Wolverine can’t get to them fast enough to rip them apart before they recover and fly off again…oh crap.”

“What’s happened?” he asked as he surveyed the area to plan his best attack.

“They’ve taken a big chuck out of the Washington Monument, uh, that’s the tall narrow obelisk to the east of you. The top looks shaky, if it falls…”

“It already wasn’t too stable after that earthquake and Hurricane Irene a few years ago,” Kara told them, sounding worried. “If it falls it will take out the Lincoln Memorial and there’re still a lot of people there.”

“I’m on it. The rest of you worry about those robots.”

“Brother, do you need assistance with the structure?” Thor asked, his voice crackling as the lightning he had called interfered with his comm. unit.

“No, concentrate on the robots. I’ve a spell that will hold the obelisk while I see if I can restore the damaged area.”

“As you wish; I’ll keep them clear of you while you work.”

“That’s fine…brother,” he said and then shifted himself to the base of the monument. Loose rock was raining down on him and cast a quick shield to deflect it while he worked up the energy necessary to place a retaining shield on the surface of the obelisk. As he began to cast, an explosion caught his attention.

“Got one!” Kara crowed. “It took a bit, but I figured out what makes them burn.”

“Good job, love. Keep moving so that the others won’t be able to target you easily,” he reminded as he returned to his own task.

“Steve, behind you!” her voice called out. Loki forced himself to ignore what was happening to the others. He had his job, they had theirs. If he failed, people would die almost immediately. The rain of stone as the weight of the upper part of the structure shifted was increasing.

“Got the bugger,” Rogers assured her. “Dang, this isn’t the one with the guy in it.”

“If he has any sense at all, he’d have booked out of here when his first robot blew,” she said as another explosion lit up the area. “Okay, this isn’t too hard; the trick is to get them when they’re
not close enough to anything to damage it when they blow. Thor, Steve, Logan, Hawk, can you guys herd them above that grassy area?"

“You got it, Hellbringer,” Logan’s voice agreed. “Hey, Rogue is heading up behind you. She’ll cover your back.”

“How?”

“Hi! I, uh, kinda touched Thor,” the girl said. “Just for a sec.”

Loki looked up to where Thor hovered in midair, supported by the storm front he’d summoned. “Doesn’t seem to have done him any harm,” he muttered.

“I briefly lost consciousness, Loki,” his brother advised. “That is why we made little progress before your arrival.”

“Sorry ‘bout that, Sugah,” Rogue said apologetically. “Anyway, I can redirect some of the lightning for a bit, so I can hold ‘em off if they try and sneak up on you.”

“Okay, good deal. Just don’t ever touch any of the three of us again. It’s too damn dangerous.”

“Yes, ma’am. Logan already read me the riot act.”

… …

Damn kid. Logan took a running leap and snagged one of the lower flying of the robots with his claws. Pulling himself onto its back, he steered it towards the others. They scattered, effectively ending their coordinated attacks. “Nice job, Wolverine,” Captain Smart Ass called out.

“Yeah, whatever.” Ducking as one of the other robots shot at him he nearly fell off. As he shifted his position it occurred to him that only one of the armored figures had tried that. “Track the one that’s shooting at me, that’s our enemy in a robot suit. Cap, Hawk, can one of you knock him out of the sky and sit on him? Hellbringer, Thor, keep blowing up the other ones.”

A flurry of agreement came over his earpiece. No one got pissed that he took over, nice change. The robot he was riding was turning its back toward the others who appeared to be gathering for a coordinated strike…oh, shit, they were aiming at him. He trashed the rest of the ‘bot and jumped just as they let loose. Bits of robot shrapnel flew through the air. “Logan, you okay?” Rogue asked.

“Yeah, kid, I’m fine, just a few cuts.” He frowned down at the multitude of bloody gashes and picked out the pieces of metal so they would heal quicker. Looking up he saw the red, white and blue shield spin like a discus and hit one of the armored figures at the exact same moment as it was struck by one of Hawkeye’s explosive arrowheads. A very human cry of pain came from it before it began to fall. “Nice shots,” he called out to them as he ran to intercept the plummeting figure.

Robot after robot exploded, some hit by lightning, others combusting from within. “Hey guys, sorry I’m late to the party, I don’t have a nifty portable armoring gizmo like Tony’s,” the voice of the Iron Patriot told them. “What can I do to help?”

“Take out some of those robots still in the air,” Rogers told him.

“Negative,” Loki interrupted. “Thor and Kara can handle them. I need someone with hovering capabilities to lift the missing piece of the obelisk into place so that I can fuse it back in. My retaining shield isn’t made to hold for long periods of time and I can’t hold that, lift the piece and do the repairs all at the same time.”
“You got it,” Rogers agreed. “Go help Loki with the Monument.”

Logan looked down at the prone figure in the boring mask. It started to bolt, so he grabbed it and slammed it back down on the ground. Definitely male, he decided. “You ain’t going nowhere, bub.”

Rogers arrived and frowned down at the man. “You, sir, are in deep trouble.”

… …

Tony grinned as Pepper turned slowly, showing off her crème silk négligée. It clung to her hips and the light swell of her breasts and, most amazingly, to her sweet ass. Not that he’d ever use that word to describe it aloud to her, oh no. She’d be all over him for ‘language’. “Damn, you’re gorgeous,” was the praise he settled for. “Don’t tell me I’m not the luckiest man in the world this time, Pep, I know I am.”

She smiled that maddening smile. “Sorry, that’s still Loki. Of course, he was the unluckiest man in the universe for so long that he was overdue.” A few measured slinky steps took her to where he lay on his side and she trailed a hand from his ankle all the way up to his chest. “But yes, you’re extremely lucky.”

The rest of the reception had gone off without a hitch once the other Avengers returned. They’d taken out the robots, turned the bad guy over to S.H.I.E.L.D., fixed the Washington Monument…it was in better shape than before the attack, Rock of Ages didn’t do things halfway, and had been magically cleaned up (again, courtesy of their resident sorcerer) in short order. Rhodey had made it back in time to start off the toasts once they’d all sat down for dinner in the South Gallery of the Kennedy Center. “I guess they’ll be okay while we take our extended honeymoon,” he mused as he let Pepper turn him on his back and straddle his waist.

“They’ll be short Loki and Kara while we go with them to the other Realms,” she said. “But Thor will be here then and Rhody will stay at the Tower that week. They’ll be fine.” His erection was pressing against the wet, oh yeah, crotch of her matching silk panties. “Why are we spending part of our honeymoon in a frozen wasteland again?”

“It’s someplace we’ve never been and most people will never ever see; it’s exclusive. Besides, it won’t all be in Jötunheim. Loki’s taking us to Asgard, Vanaheim and Ljósálfheim too.”

“And then we come back to Earth and go to the South Pacific to soak up the sun.” That was a demand, not a request from the tone of her voice.

“Absolutely, but it’s Midgard, don’t forget.” His ready agreement was rewarded by a slow grind of that very wet crotch against his very hard cock.

“I won’t.” Pepper’s hands moved from his biceps to his chest and he took immediate advantage and cupped her pert breasts through the sheer silk. “I love your body,” he murmured. “You are so damn perfect.”

The smile was back and holy fuck, Pepper was reaching behind her ass to cup his balls in one well manicured hand. A firm squeeze had him groaning and thrusting up against her heat. “Give me your hands, Tony,” she told him as she abandoned his sac and reached for his wrists. He cooperated, wondering what she was up to as she raised his arms above his head.

Tony felt something cool brush his hands and then heard two distinctive ‘snicks’. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered, looking up to see his wrists secured by a pair of steel handcuffs with the connecting
chain threaded through the headboard. “You weren’t joking.”

“You weren’t joking.” she asked. His jaw dropped as she rose to her knees, pushed aside the crotch of those wet silk panties, spread her own folds and began playing with her clit.

“Fuck, Pep; that is so damn hot.”

“Language, Tony. Now tell me; what do you want?”

“Oh, damn; anything and everything you want to give me.”

“Good answer.” She edged up the bed until the tops of her thighs pressed against his upstretched arms and her sweet sex was within easy reach of...oh yeah. “I’m waiting,” she told him. He looked up and gave her his best wicked grin before lifting his head slightly to take her cunt, another word he’d never use out loud in her hearing, in his very eager mouth. He licked, sucked and teased for all he was worth and a groan ripped through him as she reached back to take his throbbing erection in hand. “What do you want, Tony?” she repeated.

“You, Pepper. Always you and only you,” he rasped. She ground her sex down onto his mouth and he damn near lost it. Flicking his tongue hard and fast on that small erect nub as she lifted a bit, he was rewarded with a gush of fluid that squirted from her slick canal. Abandoning her clit he drank down as much as he could catch. “Delicious, babe; damn, I love you,” he told her and renewed his attack on that sweet clit.

“I know.” Her voice was breathy as her abdominal muscles tightened. Another gush of fluid emerged as she had another squirting orgasm. Damn, two in a row. Man, he was good. He moaned as she rubbed down hard enough that his teeth dug into her vulva. She was a hell of a lot better. Suddenly she pulled away and his eyes flashed open. Oh yeah. Her hands pressed on his stomach for balance as she lifted her pelvis and guided his erection into her dripping canal. Pepper moved her hands to grab his hips and then slammed down on him, surprising him into a yell.

“Fuck! Oh, damn, babe; you are the best!”

“I’ll let that one go,” Pepper managed as she lifted her hips in a long languorous slide that damn near made him come.

“I ‘preciate that,” he groaned as she settled into an abso-fucking-lutely breathtaking rhythm that spiraled him into replete oblivion.

… …

She had to remember to thank Natasha later, Pepper thought as she stretched against Tony’s side. Sex with her reformed playboy was always good, but the tutelage she’d received from the former assassin had taken it up a notch from good to great. A wry smile emerged as the ‘Tony the Tiger’ commercial tag line ran through her mind. “You now have your very own kind of snarky nickname,” she informed him.

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm; I’ll surprise you with it one of these days.”

His eyes popped open and widened comically. “Should I live in dread?”

“Maybe.” Dealing with the anticipation would serve him right, she decided.
“Am I getting out of these cuffs any time soon?” he asked. “I’d really love to hold my wife as we recover from the best sex I’ve ever experienced.”

“Oh, of course. Hmm, yes, you do look like you need some recovery time; what a shame.”

“Pepper, you’re killing me here.”

She laughed as she sat up and inspected the handcuffs. “Now what did I do with that key?”

Tony paled. “You—you’re kidding, right?”

Affecting a concerned expression, she made a show of searching the drawer in the nightstand. “Not here, damn; where did I put it?”

“Uh, Pep, this isn’t good.”

“I suppose I could call Loki. He could pop in here and unlock them with magic.”

Groaning as his head dropped back Tony closed his eyes. “Please don’t.”

She enjoyed the slight flush that rose in his cheeks for a full minute before deciding to let him off the hook. “Ah-ha!” she exclaimed. “There it is.” Leaning over, she retrieved the key from where she had placed it, under the edge of the bed.

“Thank god.”

“I thought you didn’t believe?”

“Hey, I had three gods attend my wedding; maybe I’m thanking one of them? They’re kind of hard not to believe in.”

“But you didn’t let me call them to help so why…”

“Pep, unlock me, please?” he whined.

“Well, okay; since you asked so nicely.” A small smile snuck out but she managed not to laugh at his sigh of relief when she pulled the cuffs from his wrists. “Oh, come on; it wasn’t that bad.”

“Bad? Hell no, it was totally fantastic. But damn, Reindeer Games would have laughed himself sick if you’d have called him to get the cuffs off.”

“Hmm.” She let him pull her into a tight embrace.

“Speaking of the devil; I never did get to hear about the bad guy du jour. I kept getting dragged off by one guest or another. Did you manage to find out anything?”

“Yes, it was a scientist named Victor von Doom; apparently he’s now the ruler of some Central European country called Latveria and has taken to calling himself Dr. Doom. Oh, and get this… he’s calling his robots ‘Doombots’. Is that disturbingly cliché or what?”

“Victor…damn. He went to college with Reed Richards; pretty much a genius but not on Reed’s level let alone mine. Wonder what happened to make him go the villain route?”

“Does it matter? He’s in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s custody. I imagine they’ll handle it.” Tony nodded and pressed a gentle kiss against her neck as his calloused palms soothingly rubbed her back. “Let’s have room service deliver a snack, and then get back to our personal celebration, husband.”
“I love the way you think, wife.”

Chapter End Notes

Supreme Court Associate Justices Ruth Ginsberg and Elena Kagan are real. Justice Ginsberg was indeed the first SCAJ to preside over a same sex marriage and Justice Kagan really was Harvard’s Dean of Law. While the Marvel comics call Rogue ‘Anna Marie’, the movie-verse simply calls her ‘Marie’. Unlike many writers, I’m not using Doom as an established villain. He wasn’t such when the Avengers first assembled and since my series begins immediately after that event, he’s still new at the game. For the Clooney/Pitt bits, I’m extrapolating from the various gossip site reports, not fully making it up on my own. The rumor that Prince Carl Phillip of Sweden (a rather hot looking royal in his early thirties) is becoming involved with the Nobel Prizes was started by me, just now. If it spreads, you’re all to blame (wink).
“Are you certain you want us here now that my circumstances have changed?” Loki asked his half-brother. Kara glanced up from the treacherous path to gauge Helblindi’s reaction. Tony and Pepper, trailing along behind them, were so buried in their arctic gear she doubted they could even hear the conversation.

“You mean the return of your magic?” Loki nodded. “Of course,” Helblindi’s sharp voice insisted. “Were it not for you and your lady I would likely not be alive to celebrate this day.” He really believed that, she decided.

“Býleistr could not have succeeded in taking you down...”

“No, but with him dead and Malekith attacking my Realm unimpeded by you and your friends I might yet have died; and the Svartálfar would rule Jötunheim. That would be untenable. Despite your previous actions, you are a hero here, my brother.” Helblindi shot Loki a mischievous look that made it even more obvious than the clan markings that they were brothers by blood. “Besides, you are my heir. It is required you attend me at my name day feast.”

“I sincerely hope you rectify that situation soon.”

“In due time; I must wed my queen first. I will not take advantage of her as Býleistr did.” Both men frowned at the reminder and now they stared at the icy ground that was dusted with a light coating of snow. Not that they needed to watch their step. When Loki took Jötnunn form his balance and agility, already greater than any human, Æsir or Ljósálfar she’d met, improved substantially.

Frowning, she realized she’d never seen any of the Jötnar slip on the ice. “Why don’t your people ever slip on ice?” she found herself blurting out. That Tony heard. His head shot up and she could see his eyes narrow behind the goggles.

The brothers stopped and stared at her. Loki looked as perplexed as she felt, which was reassuring. Helblindi shrugged. “I would have said that we are simply used to it, but my brother is not. I do not know; I shall ask the elders if the question has ever been considered.”

“It’s not important,” she muttered.

“Perhaps not, but now my own curiosity is aroused.” Helblindi’s smirk was back. The path ended at the combination palace and fortress that was carved into a mountain. On their last visit, she’d thought it a glacier, but some of the rock was showing through on this side. Helblindi had informed them this was normal for this time of year when the palace had first come into view. “Once you’ve settled into your quarters, I’d appreciate it if you’d visit with my bride to be, Kara. Skrikja is unsettled about our marriage.”

“Um, wouldn’t it be more helpful for her to talk to one of your people?”

Her brother-in-law grimaced. “Despite my proclamation, many of our females are shunning her.”

“What? Why? Do they think she wanted to be raped, or that she asked for it somehow?” She tamped down her anger. It wasn’t Helblindi’s fault.
“No, they shun her because she spoke out about it and demanded recompense.”

Kara stopped walking and Pepper nearly fell trying to avoid walking into her. “Excuse me?”

“Love, let’s get our friends ins…” her husband began as he tried to pull her along the path.

“Let go, Loki.” She turned to glare at Helblindi. “Are you telling me that they think she should have kept silent?” He nodded. “Why? Do they think what Býleistr did was right or do they think she should be ashamed to have allowed it to happen?”

The Jötnar king looked troubled. “I do not know; she will no longer speak to me of it.”

“None of the other women will either, I take it.” He nodded miserably. “Damn him; he’s hurting that girl, not to mention the others, from the grave. Okay, I’ll talk to her. At least if she won’t actually tell me anything I can probably figure out what’s going on by how she feels about what I say.”

“As I hoped; thank you.”

… …

They had a chamber to themselves this time and braziers had been set up around the room to keep it at what Kara’s SI Tablet told them was a sweltering fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Well, Gymir had pronounced it ‘nigh on sweltering’ when he had greeted them there. Loki found it comfortable in his Jötunn form and just a trifle chilly when he shifted to Æsir. Kara had been able to take off her arctic gear and was just covering up with a fur-lined cloak as she pulled out clothing suitable for the evening meal. “Are you warm enough without using your self-heating?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. I won’t even need the cloak once I’m dressed; well, not in here anyway. Asgardian formal garb is too warm for what I consider normal temperatures so it should be perfect for this.”

“Will you go visit Skrikja before the meal?”

“Do you think I should? It may upset her; I know your brother is looking forward to us all enjoying a quiet dinner together before the festivities begin tomorrow. On the other hand, if I can figure out what’s going on, maybe I can convince her to talk to him about it.”

“Hmm.” He watched as his lady frowned at the outfits she’d pulled out of her pack; the pack that she had once again refused to let him carry, she was an insufferable woman about certain things. The cloak billowed open as she turned and his breath caught. “You’re naked under that thing.”

She snickered at his reaction. “And here I thought Tony was the genius.”

“Heh. Come here wife,” he said in a demanding tone. She started to glare at him but it quickly turned to a smile as she saw him shift back to his Jötunn form.

“Ordering me around again?” she asked as she sauntered over to him and ran her hands up his bare chest to his shoulders. The heat of her palms as her body automatically adjusted her temperature to compensate made him shiver.

He gave her a rueful look. “Only when it’s something I know you want to do anyway.” Ghosting his hands along her hips, up to her breasts he leaned in to steal a kiss or two…perhaps three?

She was laughing softly when he finally pulled back. “We’re going to have to save this for later. I
really should go talk to Skrikja now.”

“Damn. I was afraid you’d say that.” Pulling away she reached for her underwear then gasped as her clothing suddenly appeared on her body. He smirked when she turned to stare at him with one eyebrow raised. “It’s not an inappropriate use; Odin himself said so.”

“Some warning would be appreciated, you know.” Kara’s tone was stern but her lips smiled. “Thank you. I wasn’t looking forward to all of the damn laces and such.”

“I know, love. Go chat with my brother’s fiancé. Let’s see if you can clear up the mystery.”

... ...

“Damn, it’s cold,” Tony griped as he unpacked the clothing Kara and Loki had selected for him. Pepper frowned at him. “It’s chilly in here, but it was positively frigid in the corridor. Is that normal?”

“ Probably. Clint mentioned he felt like he had frozen...uh, privates the whole time he was here. I don’t think they had this many fires in their room though. Huh, you’re right, it’s not all that bad in here,” he decided as he rubbed his hands together in front of one of the braziers.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who wanted to come. Suck it up.”

“In point of fact, I didn’t.”

“Then what are we doing here?” She watched with narrowed eyes as Tony scuffed his foot against the floor like a small boy trying to avoid a question he didn’t want to answer. “Well?”

“Loki was, um, uncomfortable about Kara being the only non-Jötnar here. Odin thought it would be rude to send anyone who wasn’t specifically invited, particularly considering the success of the trade and treaty talks.”

“So were we invited?”

“Loki sent a message to Helblindi asking he invite us so that he and Kara could give us a tour of all of the Allied Realms as a wedding gift. It wasn’t something Helblindi could refuse without being ungracious and Loki got what he wanted without forcing anyone on his brother, kind of.”

“It’s disturbing that your rambling actually made sense to me.”

Her husband managed an affronted look. “Aw, come on. It wasn’t that bad.” He wandered around the room, poking and prodding at the sparse furnishings and peeking behind the few doors. “Hah, here’s the bathroom. It has its own fire pit; and I mean pit, not one of these small dealiobobs,” he said, pointing at a brazier. “The bed is really soft.”

She inspected it. “Hmm, it should be. It’s several dozen layers of fur pelts over some kind of solid base.” Sitting down on it proved interesting; she sank a good six inches. “Oh, it’s warm, too. We’ll be able to, um…”

“Get busy?”

“I was thinking about sleep, but that too, without worrying about getting a chill.”

“Well, all right then.”
Skrikja was sitting in a chair in the corner of the chambers she’d been allotted as the King’s Intended. While she’d allowed the attendant to let Kara in the girl wouldn’t look at her and instead focused a sullen gaze on the sewing she had refused to set down. Kara sighed. This was going to be difficult. “Thank you for agreeing to see me,” she told the bride-to-be politely.

The Jötunn girl shrugged. “I cannot be rude to the sister-by-marriage of my king,” she muttered.

Oh boy. She was referring to Helblindi as her king rather than her fiancé…or husband-to-be as the Jötnar people would word it. Fine. “Not putting down your sewing is rude, you know.” Skrikja’s red eyes flashed at her and she set the cloth down on the table beside her with a huff. “I’m not here to cause trouble for you; I know you’re having a difficult time; Helblindi is worried for you.”

“There is naught he can do.”

“Can you help me with something?” Skrikja frowned at the question she had clearly not been expecting. “I—I’m not familiar with your people and I don’t know anything about your aesthetics, what someone of Jötunn blood raised here might find attractive or beautiful. There’s something human women do just for fun; we rate the men we know on a scale of one to ten based on their attractiveness. Someone who rates a one would be pitied and someone who rates a ten would be all but worshipped. The average, of course, is five or six. On that kind of scale, where do Helblindi, Loki, Gymir and Slingard fall?” The girl frowned at her and Kara wasn’t sure if she was considering the question or confused by it. “In his Æsir form, Loki easily rates an eight or even a nine from human women who don’t know he’s a god. Of course, I think he’s a ten, but I’m biased.”

Ah ha. Skrikja’s mouth twitched, just a bit and Kara could feel a wash of amusement run through the girl. “We do not assign numbers as you do, but we do speak of attractiveness between us,” the girl admitted. “Even though he is far too small, your Loki would likely be a seven here because his look is exotic. His handsomeness rivals that of his brother, but his small size detracts from it greatly.”

“So, what would Helblindi be?”

“He is greatly desired by most of our women, you would call him a nine or even a ten. It is not the crown that makes him so wanted; he is simply excellent in looks and form. Gymir is a seven or perhaps an eight just on looks, an eight or possibly nine if you include his prowess in battle, I think. Slingard only a six, but he is quite admired for his bravery and is wealthy as well, so he could still wed any he wished.”

“Do the other women envy you, then?”

“No.” Skrikja’s expression closed off, damn it, and depression washed through her.

“Why the hell not? You’ll be queen, you’ll have the handsomest man in the Realm to love you, and you’ll have the best of everything.”

“All know he weds me only out of duty and pity,” Skrikja snapped as she turned away.

Oh, shit. The girl really believed that. “Um, honey? Helblindi may have looked at you first out of duty, but when he did look, he was impressed. Loki tells me that his brother was boasting of his future wife’s beauty when he visited us on Midgard.” The blue face turned slightly in Kara’s direction and one red eye was visible through the fall of straight black hair. “He was so enthusiastic
about your looks that Loki had to tell him to keep his comments to himself or I’d be offended by how he was focusing on your beauty instead of your courage and intelligence.”

“He said I had courage?”

Not exactly, but…hmm. “He was very proud of your strength of will; even Gymir was really impressed with you.”

“The others…they think I played on his guilt to become queen. That would be a shameful thing.”

“Well, sure; but you didn’t. You just spoke up for what was right. It was his idea to marry you.”

Skrikja was facing her fully now. “Do you truly believe he desires me?”

Kara thought of the flash of need that had run through Helblindi when he told Loki he’d have to wait to be replaced as heir. “Oh, I’m positive. I think he’s afraid to come on too strong; he doesn’t want you to feel forced to accept him…he doesn’t want to remind you of Býleistr.”

“Our king is nothing like that níðhöggr!”

“Hmm, I’d have called him a bilgesnipe, but I agree; Helblindi is an honorable man.”

“He is a good king and I am not worthy to be his queen.”

Crap. It felt like Skrikja should be crying, but there were no…oh. Loki had told her that in his Jötunn form he had no tears. That made sense, traditional tears would freeze. She stood and crossed to the girl’s chair and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “Helblindi thinks you are more than worthy; he wonders if he is worthy of you.”

… …

Helblindi glanced nervously around the high table. Court had gone well; Skrikja had smiled shyly at him as was appropriate for her station. After her seeming withdrawal at last night’s private dinner he’d been relieved when she’d gladly accepted his escort and accompanied him to the throne with her head held high. Remembering Kara’s advice to ensure that his Intended knew he desired her he’d pressed his lips to the back of her hand before seating her on the small bench that sat on his left. Loki and Kara had approached, bowed and then taken their seats on the heir’s throne and a stool to his right. His craftsmen had built steps and a platform to slightly raise the seats of his brother and his brother’s wife so that their smaller stature was not so glaringly obvious. He’d made proclamations and had accepted gifts. His Skrikja had embroidered him a finely woven chiton with runes for good fortune, strength and health. She’d personally dyed and spun the fibers from the alpaca wool he’d brought back from Midgard and had even woven the fabric herself. It was a fine garment and he’d wear it proudly. His Midgardian guests, The Man of Iron and his bride, had gifted him with rare beverages and preserved fruits and vegetables from their Realm. Loki and Kara had presented him with a brooch made of a metal they’d called ‘platinum’, set with a wine red crystal they’d named ‘garnet’. They’d told him privately that the stone had a powerful ward set in it that would protect him from an initial magical attack should Malekith or his pet enchantress come here. While there was no longer anything here the Svartálfar ruler could want, Loki was concerned that in his rage over being thwarted in his designs on Asgard the half-breed would target Helblindi for revenge. “Loki?” he asked as he turned to his brother. “Does the brooch you are wearing do the same?”

Loki blinked a moment before his eyes fastened on his gift and understanding crossed his features. “Ah, no; mine will alert me if the ward in your brooch is triggered.” He shrugged. “I’ll need to
know when it needs to be recharged.”

He snorted. A polite way of saying that he’d come running to help, no doubt. Ah well; he could not blame his elder brother for feeling protective as he felt the same way. Unfortunately, he could not travel between realms without the assistance of Asgard as Loki could. “How are you faring, my sister-by-marriage?” he asked Kara who was dressed only in Asgardian garb with a fur-lined cloak flipped back over her shoulders.

“I’m fine; it’s actually not too cold in here for me to handle without a drain now.”

Now that she was fully Æsir, was what he did not say. It was true; the Æsir did have a much higher tolerance for cold than the Midgardians. “Hmm, do not forget to bundle up if you go outdoors.”

“I won’t; I’m not that overconfident that I’d waste my energy unnecessarily.”

Lady Pepper leaned forward a bit to look at Skrikja where she sat quietly eating at his side. “Skrikja, do you have plants that you use to make your dyes here? I’ve never seen a natural burgundy quite that deep before.”

His Intended managed a small smile. “It is mineral based,” she explained. “A very rare mineral is used which is why the color is reserved for royalty.”

“Oh, a sumptuary color, we call it.” The odd word didn’t translate directly through the all-speak. “Purple used to be reserved that way on Ear…Midgard until we discovered how to make artificial dyes. It must have been so much work to get it all done so quickly.”

Skrikja shrugged. “I wanted a worthy gift to give.”

Helblindi frowned. “You need give me nothing, your agreement to become my queen is the most worthy gift of all,” he insisted. All conversation in the room stopped. He glanced around and saw Kara nodding at him. Ah…this must be part of the problem; some of his people thought her unworthy. Turning back to Skrikja, he took her hand. “Your strength and courage alone make you worthy of the greatest among us,” he insisted in a raised voice. Despite Loki’s admonitions to not mention such in front of Kara he continued. “I consider your beauty an unexpected but much admired bonus, and your intelligence will make you a wise queen indeed.” Skrikja was staring at him, looking a bit astounded. “My greatest hope is that I prove worthy enough to win your love.”

“Well said, brother,” Loki told him in a whisper.

Skrikja’s cheeks flushed purple as their people began chattering in the background again. “You have my admiration already,” she said with a small smile. “I am pleased to be your chosen.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. “Then I shall work to earn your heart,” he promised.

… …

“That went well,” Loki commented as they closed the door to their chambers behind them. “Skrikja perked up quite a bit after Helblindi made his promise.”

“Of course she did. That’s all she needed; to know that he wants her for herself and not just to feel better about not stopping his brother’s wrongs sooner than he did.” Kara smirked and let her head drop back against him as he pressed close to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “And since he did it so publicly, maybe the jealous bitches will get off her case about why he chose her.”
“Perhaps; though their jealousy may now take more normal routes.”

“She’s tough; I think she can handle that.”

“Hmm, and you, my lady, would know tough.” Loki turned his attention to what he still insisted on calling her ‘sweet spot’. Not that she minded; it was a lot nicer than ‘erogenous zone’. He nibbled lightly on the tendon that led from behind her ear down to the inside of her collarbone and then made her shiver with a long languorous lick as he fondled her breasts. “Shall we retire, love?”

“Sounds like a wonderful…” she jumped as the door slammed open.

“Brother!” Helblindi called out enthusiastically. “Is it not a wonderful night?”

Loki sighed and slipped his hands back out from where they’d been exploring under her neckline. “It was about to be.” Kara tried not to snicker at his disgusted tone as she laced her bodice back up. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?” her husband continued as he pulled away from her.

“She kissed me,” Helblindi absolutely gushed. “Well, she returned my kiss, but it is much the same.”

“Wait.” Kara turned to stare at her brother-in-law. “You came bursting in here unannounced just to tell us your fiancé returned your goodnight kiss?” Oh this took the cake.

“Yes, is it not wonderful? She did not pull away and she did not push me away, Skrikja kissed me back!”

Oh my freaking God. What was he, a teenager? She looked up at Loki who was successfully fighting the smirk she could feel. “That is certainly progress,” Loki managed to say in an encouraging tone. Heh, he wasn’t the Norse god of Lies for nothing. “Now you simply need to continue your pursuit.”

“Yes, well…that is why I am here.”

“Okay, just how old are you?” Kara found herself snapping before she could think about it.

“I have seen seven-hundred cycles this name day,” Helblindi responded as a wave of offended pride ran through him.

She looked at Loki who gave a minute shake of his head. “I imagine you’ve never had to actively pursue a woman you desired,” he said diplomatically.

“I have not, no.”

Damn, poor guy sounded miserable. “Then I guess you’ve come to the right place. Loki’s an expert.”

“I did win you,” he agreed smugly.

“Excellent. What do I do next?” Helblindi asked.

Swallowing a groan Kara looked at the brothers. “Since this is way outside of my area of expertise, I’ll leave you to it and get some sleep. Good night.”
“I’ll wake you when…” Loki trailed off as she leveled a glare at him. “On second thought, I’ll do my best not to wake you when I come to bed.”

“Thank you, darling.”

… …

Amora shivered with cold behind her carefully wrought illusion. To any but the sorcery-trained observer she and her companion appeared to be Jötnar of the serving class. She strode confidently down the frozen halls, following the pull of power that had brought her here. Malekith had scried the presence of powerful wards and theorized that the Jötnar had managed to secure some type of artifact from Asgard during their recent trade negotiations. The dark bastard wanted it, of course, but discovered that the Jötnar had definitely secured Odin’s assistance in barring Malekith from their Realm, even through Yggdrasill’s branches. “How dare he treat me like an errand-girl,” she fumed quietly to the magically altered Svartálfar at her side. The oversized Álfar, a good foot taller than most of his kind, simply stared at her from behind his enchanted armor. He had no real loyalty to Malekith; but he was easily manipulated. Tell him that his actions would gain him revenge against Thor for a perceived past wrong and he would do literally anything.

Kurse grabbed her shoulder and steered her into a side corridor. She opened her mouth to berate him then held the rant as she felt a low level of energy behind them. He stepped back into an alcove and she squeezed in with him. A young Jötunn female, attended by older servants, was processing down the main hall. “Sorceress,” Kurse whispered. He wasn’t wrong. The girl had the blood for it, but it was, as of yet, untrained.

She waited until the entourage had disappeared into one of the chambers far down the hall before speaking. “I’ve felt no true artifact, just a few disparate though powerful wards; but that child might be a prize worth gaining. Can your armor withstand their ice?”

The Svartálfar’s eyes brightened with unholy glee. “Aye.”

… …

“The food was tasty, and surprisingly varied.” Pepper told him as they pulled off the thermal layer that they’d worn under their clothing. S.H.I.E.L.D. had one hell of a supplier; they’d been a bit chilly, but not actually cold in the banquet hall despite the fact that only the alcoholic liquids and those that were served in heated containers weren’t slushy from the ambient temperature. “Gymir said they have underground farming. Mostly root vegetables, but still, I was impressed.”

Even root vegetables needed sunlight or a reasonable substitute. “What do they use for lighting?”

“Some type of crystal imbued with magic. They have a few left over from when the sorcerer who was evidently Loki and Odin’s common ancestor designed the operation about fifteen thousand of our years ago, but they’re slowly fading; a great deal of the trade agreements hinged on getting new ones. They’re amazingly self-sufficient considering how limited their resources are.”

“I noticed that. I was talking to Slingard about it. He said that the crystals sorcerers use for holding power are abundant here but not so much in the other Realms. That’s going to be their big export.” He frowned as he moved closer to one of the small fires. “So, bed or bath?”

“The bath is fed from underground hot springs. Skrikja said they usually draw it and let it sit to cool down a little before they can use it. It might be perfect for us right away.”

“And get some of the chill off, hmm. Nope, fun first, then bath, then sleep. We’ll be nice and
warm from the hot springs.”

“Tony…”

“Aw, come on, Pepper; where’s your spirit of adventure? Don’t you want to set a record? We’d be the only humans ever to make love in each of the Allied Realms.”

“Not bragging rights I would make public and you’d better not either.”

“Spoilsport; I fully intended to make that boast to Big Bird.”

She gave him the look that meant she was considering the idea. “That’s fine. Only among the Avengers, though.”

“Cool deal. Get it?” A sigh was her only answer.

… …

Loki was making a concerted effort to be silent. He’d removed his clothing using magic and had crept into the bed after stoking the fires in the braziers, again, using magic. His care was all for naught. The moment he settled his weight onto the furs her eyes shot open. “I thought you’d never come to bed,” Kara murmured sleepily.

“Nor did I; Helblindi proved to be totally clueless about women. He seems to be so wrapped up in a dream of honor before anything that he’d truly not given much thought to it at all.”

The beautiful kaleidoscope eyes that he adored so thoroughly narrowed. “Please don’t tell me that he’s a virgin.”

He snickered. “No, he’s not quite as bad as Rogers. Gymir and Slingard have managed to induce him to participate in what he calls recklessness from time to time; but it has always been with females who are interested only in sex and not in relationships.”

“Thank God. I was afraid you were going to have to give him the birds and the bees talk.”

“Hmm, if I understand that phrase correctly, then no. Though I think that the art of seducing an emotionally innocent and vulnerable female while retaining her respect is a far more difficult subject to teach.”

“Is it really seduction when you’re marrying her?”

“It is when she’s suffered trauma through a physical relationship; even if the woman loves you, you must still seduce her into trusting you not to harm her.” He waited while she digested that statement. Finally her expression cleared.

“Oh, like you had to do with me, only I had to trust that I wouldn’t harm you.”

“Exactly, love.” He smiled as she reached out for him and settled into her embrace. “She’s not a virgin, obviously, but he needs to treat her as one. Though she may surprise him, I doubt it; her poor experience was far too recent.”

“True; I’d had fifteen years to get past it before I met you.”

“You, my darling, were magnificent, right from the start.”

“Uh huh.”
“I’m quite serious. You were responsive, uninhibited, passionate…perfect.”

Kara shrugged. “I loved you and I’d decided to trust you. I-I needed to have that from you…at the time I thought that’s all I would ever have and I wanted one wonderful memory.”

“I hope you have more than that now.”

“You know damn well I have more than that now; stop fishing for compliments.”

He decided to push the teasing mood. “Well, when my lovely wife is so stingy with them, what am I to do but to seek them out?”

“And people call me a brat.” She ran her thumb along his cheekbone and traced the edge of his ear. “You do realize that no one else would put up with you?”

While she was teasing in return, her statement hit home hard. “Yes, love. I’ve long realized it; that’s why you are such a miracle to me.”

Of course his amazing Kara sensed his change in mood. “Don’t. “You’re perfect for me and I’ll always love you, want you and need you exactly the way you are.” He managed a smile for her and the cheeky wench smirked at him. “Now, where were we before your brother so rudely interrupted us?”

… …

They would take the female, leaving traces of Asgardian magic behind for the Jötnar to find; the Frost giants would call on Heimdall in Asgard to complain and the All-Father would send Thor to investigate. Then he would finally have his revenge. He ignored the pain as his satisfied grin stretched the skin fused against the mask of his armor. Revenge would be sweet. He moved silently under cover of the illusion; the young female, barely his height, looked up from the beads she was carefully sorting. “I don’t know you,” she said in a mildly irritated voice. “Why are you here?”

He did not answer but continued to move to the girl’s side. Something alerted her that all was not as it seemed and she lifted the tray and flung it and its contents in his face. Snarling, he lunged forward and grabbed her shoulder to pull her up against him. His armor frosted over and he covered her mouth with his other gauntleted hand as she attempted to scream. While taking a step backwards dragging the struggling female, Kurse’s foot began to slide. The chit took immediate advantage, lifting both feet and bracing them against the nearest piece of furniture. She thrust out with her thigh muscles and sent him further off balance. “Bitch!” he hissed as his other foot lost traction and they both tumbled over backwards.

The double impact of first the ground against his back and then the weight of the female on his chest drove the breath from his lungs and she managed to scrabble partially free. “Helblindi!” she screamed. “Intruders, help…” he managed to cut her off in mid-yell as he regained his feet and his hold upon her. It was too late, she’d been heard. The sound of pounding feet echoed in the corridor. He dragged her to the back room and the secret path that the Enchantress had scried. It was time for a strategic retreat, hostage in hand.

… …

“You have got to be kidding me,” Kara muttered as the door to their chambers crashed open for the second time that night interrupting their love play before they’d quite reached their peak. “Oh, no; something’s seriously wrong,” she told him as her expression changed from irritation to worry.
He reluctantly pulled away from her and drew one of the furs over her nude form. “Sorry, love.”
Sitting up he magically called for his trousers and stared at his haggard half-brother. “What happened?”

“Skrikja, she’s gone. One of the servants heard her call out something about intruders, but by the time they arrived, she’d been taken.”

“Oh, hell.” Loki looked back at his lady’s comment; she was now frowning fiercely.

Though he knew that wasn’t what she meant, he couldn’t resist a retort. “On the contrary, I’m certain Hel had nothing to do with this.”

“Not the time for jokes, Loki,” she grumbled. “Now either get me dressed or get your brother out of here so I can dress my…” she broke off as her clothing appeared on her body. “Thank you.”

Throwing the fur off she half climbed and half rolled off of the piled furs. “I’ll go get Tony. Someone will need to guard Pepper.”

“We need only warn Tony then he can guard his wife on his own.”

Kara’s eyes were not settling on a focus. “We’re going to need him,” was her cryptic response as she headed for the door.

“I’ll assign a pair of trustworthy guards to Lady Pepper,” Helblindi offered and followed her out into the hall.

“Damnation.” Frigga had warned him that Kara might be developing foresight, many Æsir empaths did. If Kara thought that Iron Man would be needed, the apparent abduction was likely not a domestic matter. He called their armor and weapons to their bodies before following Helblindi down the hall.

… …

Tony sighed as the steaming water enveloped him. They’d had to wait about fifteen minutes after the tub had filled before the heat was tolerable; much less than the full hour and then some that Skrikja had described to Pepper. He didn’t think Loki had that kind of intolerance for hot water, he’d have to ask. Pepper was sitting in front of him, using him as a pillow. The hard surface of the arc reactor embedded in his chest didn’t seem to bother her. He lazily drew patterns on her breasts with his finger after dipping it in the soft clingy soap that sat in a small urn beside the tub. “Not quite as decadent as the baths in Asgard, but it’s not too shabby,” he mused.

“Are Asgard’s baths better than the one you installed in the Tower?”

“Oh yeah; I wasn’t able to duplicate them exactly. You’ll see; it’ll spoil you totally for anything else.”

“Mm. What do you think about getting dirty again after we’ve finished in here?” she asked.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“So, this is one Realm down…how many to go?”

He had to think about it. “Two down. They count Midgard as one of the Nine Realms. We’re kind of the keystone. Get Loki to show you how they connect, it’s pretty fascinating.”

“Okay, two down out of how many, then?”
“Huh. The Allied Realms include Asgard, Ljósálfheim, Jotunheim, Vanaheim and Midgard. So we’ve got two out of five so far. Technically Niflheim is allied, but no one alive can go there safely, so we don’t have to count them.”

“Doesn’t Helheim count as a, uh, Realm?”

“That’s technically the center of Niflheim. It’s more Hel’s seat of power in that Realm rather than a separate one. I think. Hogun and Fandral weren’t really clear on it. Obviously, they’re alive so they’ve never been there. Huh, Loki might know considering Hel’s his daughter.”

“Wait…if you add Muspelheim and Svartálfheim that only makes eight.”

“Uh, Nidavellir is the world of the Dökkálfar…uh, we’d call them dwarves. Well, damn. Loki didn’t say he was taking us there so I guess we won’t be doing it in all of the Allied Realms.”

“Tony, get out here!”

They looked at each other. “Kara? What the hell, kid?”

“Come on, it’s an emergency. Get dressed, get armored. A couple of guards will be here for Pepper in a minute.”

“Son of a bitch.”

… …

They hurried down the hall; well, hurried as fast as Tony could move in his armor, it wasn’t really made for walking. “Do we have any idea what we’re looking for?” he asked her.

“No. They’re not even sure if it’s someone external. I really think it is, and Loki agrees with me, but we can’t rule out some kind of dissidents here.”

“So why am I not protecting my wife?” She turned to stare at him…well, at his faceplate. That nagging feeling had told her he needed to be fully armored.

“Remember how sick I was at the ball before Loki was taken?”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah. We’re going to need you with us; I don’t know how and I don’t know why, but we’ll need you and you need to have your full new and nifty more or less freeze-proof armor on.” She spun and headed down Helblindi’s private corridor. Loki and the Jötunn king were standing near the door to Skríjka’s chambers, arguing. “Okay, would both of you please stop? We need to be on the same page here.” Helblindi frowned at her, apparently the all-speak hadn’t been helpful. “Sorry, colloquialism. We all need to approach this the same way.”

“I am not so vain or overconfident as to think I could not have enemies amongst my people,” her brother-in-law told her. “Why do you not believe one of my people is to blame?”

“Oh, I can answer that one,” Tony offered. “Frigga said that the empaths of Asgard almost always have foresight to some degree. Now that Kara is fully Æsir, she’s not seeing things the same way as a Seer like Frigga does, but she’s feeling them really strongly.” They all stared at him. “What? I noticed she was very antsy the day Loki was snatched and I asked Frigga about it.”

“Glad someone did,” she told Tony. “It never occurred to me; I’ve just always trusted my hunches.
But you’re right; they’ve gotten stronger and a lot more specific since Odin started the conversion process on me.” Loki was nodding thoughtfully. Helblindi just felt frustrated. His expression wasn’t giving away a thing. “So could it be Malekith?”

“No, he was barred from all of the Allied Realms,” Loki informed her.

“How about Amora?”

“She can walk the branches; you cannot bar her in the same manner.”

“Um, Loki? I don’t think Malekith had an artifact with him the last time we were here. He would have used it, don’t you think? Maybe he can walk the branches of Yggdrasil as well?”

“Bloody hell.” He glared at her smirk. “What?”

“That’s a very Earth-English, specifically British, expletive. It just sounds funny coming from you, even if your accent is kind of close to British.”

He sighed. “I spent a good bit of time there a century or so ago. I must have picked it up. Can we get back to our problem, love?”

“Sorry. Helblindi, I apologize. I guess the tension is getting to me,” she offered as his annoyance spiked.

“Your apology is accepted.”

“Hey, guys…Jarvis is picking up readings. One of them is Æsir and the other is definitely not. I mean, we’re getting an Æsir reading that doesn’t match either of you and a reading that isn’t Æsir or Jötnar…aaand, looks very similar to, but not exactly like those Svartálfar we fought on Asgard.”

“Malekith is a half-breed,” Loki said. “Would that account…”

“Nope; I have a reading of him from Asgard after you two got hitched. It’s definitely not him.”

“One of his people, maybe mixed with something else?” she guessed.

“Possibly.” Loki frowned. “Can you track them?”

“Thought you’d never ask; the Iron Bloodhound is on the job.”

“Iron what?” Helblindi asked.

… …

Skrikja had never been more furious in her life. Not even when Býleistr had insisted on taking his ‘rights’ with her innocence. Enchantress, the Æsir called herself. She had a name for her, but it was not nearly so complimentary. The woman had used some type of sorcery to bind her and force her to stop struggling and the armored man carried her flung over his shoulder. His armor frosted over, but he didn’t seem to freeze as he should; it had to be more sorcery. They carried her deep within the fortress; there was something significant about that, something on the edge of her memory, a tale her mother had told, but she could not recall it. Surely they meant to take her off-realm? If they remained here Helblindi would find them. Despair welled up and threatened to overwhelm her control. He’d kissed her. Not in the rough brutish manner that his brother had taken her lips with, but with a warm, gentle insistence. He had almost teased a response from her. The sorcerous
bindings did not prevent her flush. “Kurse, put her down here,” the woman ordered. She was dropped heavily to the floor of the farming level. “I’ll need to search for the entrance. I haven’t used this one before.”

“Should I go watch for Thor?” he asked in a rough, almost tortured voice.

The pale haired sorceress gave him a sharp look. “Yes, of course…you do that,” she almost purred. The condescending smirk she wore did not match her tone in the least. Was the man being manipulated? Prince Loki’s adoptive brother would have no reason to come here where he was still not readily welcome. If only she could speak, perhaps she could drive a wedge between the conspirators. “Fool,” the woman said softly as she held up her hands a thumb’s width from the wall and moved slowly along it.

Something was making her itch; not anything natural. This itch was under her skin. The sorcery used by the Enchantress had a certain feel to it, but it was sharper, almost painful. This, this itch, was far more subtle. Wait; Loki was a sorcerer. Her husband-to-be had told her that his half-brother was very powerful and was one of the most skilled of all sorcerers in the Nine Realms despite his relative youth. Perhaps he searched for her? She allowed her hope to rise and concentrated on the itch. If she gave it her full attention, mayhap he might notice? It was worth the effort. “Nnnh,” was all she managed to vocalize to express her frustration at being incapable of doing anything more to thwart her captors.

The Æsir’s head snapped around. “Well, more gifted than I thought. No matter, they can’t hear your pitiful mewling.” Her attention returned to the wall. “I will find that entry,” she muttered. Skrikja returned to concentrating on the itch and its likely source.

… … …

“The location is approximately one hundred meters below us, sir,” Jarvis told Tony. “And fifty meters…” the pause was actually noticeable, “at a two-o-clock position, relative to the direction you currently face.”

“What the fuck, J?”

“There is no magnetic north here, Tony,” Loki explained. “There is no point of reference save yourself that your AI can use to make directional calculations under its existing programming.”

“Oh boy. That’s not something I’d ever considered. We’ll have to fix that when we’re not otherwise occupied. So, down a football field and a half a football field that-a-way.”

“A what?” Helblindi asked.

“Never mind,” Loki told him as he fought a smile. His brother wouldn’t appreciate the humor. He, however, had learned to take amusement where he found it, even in the midst of crisis. Of course, it wasn’t his love that had been kidnapped. “What is deep below us, a quarter league or thereabouts?”

“The farming levels.”

There must be a path to Yggdrasil there. “That’s where they’ve taken her and likely have their escape planned. We must hurry, I can feel…something; not sorcery precisely, but definitely a reaction to my search.” He frowned. “It’s her, Skrikja. She…did you know she was from a line that has produced sorcerers?”

“Her family is an old one, that much I know, but the line has thinned greatly.”
“We’ll need to explore that; now hurry, she’s quite frightened.” The look on Helblindi’s face made Loki wish he’d kept that last bit to himself.

“Loki?” Kara asked softly. “Can’t you…you know.”

“No, I’ve not been there, nor do I have a picture of the area fixed in my mind. I could easily end up embedded in a wall.”

“Crap.”

He bit back another grin. “Indeed.” They took off at a run after his now frantic brother.

… …

Helblindi took the corner at full speed, Gymir barely ahead of him. He suddenly found himself flying backwards as his shield-brother’s bulk crashed into him. They sprawled on the floor and watched Loki all but dance past their tangled limbs. Loki’s lady was not so fortunate and tumbled over their prone forms. She did, however, manage to roll gracefully back to her feet. Stark came to a sliding halt just short of them. “Oh, this isn’t good,” his distorted voice said.

“You have a fine gift for understatement,” Gymir snarled as they watched Loki attempt to use his sorcery against the armor-clad figure that stood near a head taller than him. The greenish gold glow of his power seemed to dissipate as it struck the engraved metal.

“Kara?” he called.

“No go on the fire, trying something else,” she reported. The figure suddenly tensed up and then dropped to his knees. “Go,” she told her husband. “Amora’s just ahead, I can feel the bitch.”

Helblindi managed to disentangle himself from Gymir and they both followed Loki. Stark’s voice drifted after them. “He’s breaking out of it, sis, what the hell?”

“Can you grab him, Tony?”

Their voices faded as he turned another corner and saw Loki facing off against the woman who had attacked Kara the night she had been named goddess of Fire. Skrikja was lying on the floor against one of the walls, immobile. “She’s held by sorcery,” Loki told him when he stepped into his brother’s view. “Let her go, Amora, you don’t want her.”

“Do I not? A budding sorceress, if I cannot gain her loyalty and service, I have a working that will drain her power. Why would I not want her?”

Helblindi edged carefully to his Intended’s side. The Æsir sorceress shifted her position in order to keep both him and Loki in view. Gymir moved out to Loki’s right; now the woman had to split her attention three ways. “Stop moving,” she ordered. “I don’t need to be near her to take her life. It would be a shame to waste her potential, but I’ll destroy her just to deny you that resource.”

“No!” he screamed and launched himself at the sneering female. Her expression was startled and he’d grabbed hold of her, tumbling into and then, much to his shock, through the wall before she could react. He stared down at the now frozen woman and then around to take in his dark and unfamiliar surroundings. “This is not good.”

… …

“Fuck!” Tony yelled as the energy in his arc reactor began to plummet rapidly. All he’d done was
grab the big bastard as he lurched to his feet and headed for Kara. An explosion had rocked them and no matter how he tried, he couldn’t let go. It was as if the servos in the suit had frozen, locking him into place. “Kara, can you still hear me?” Jarvis was frenetically rerouting power; he needed a small amount, at least, just to keep the electromagnet functional and that fucking shrapnel away from his heart. “I can’t hear you,” he continued, hoping that maybe she could hear him without the speaker juiced. “I can’t let go and something about this guy is draining my power. That recharger that Frigga gave me in in the left leg compartment, I need it applied to the reactor, like yesterday.”

He thought he heard a murmuring that may or may not have been her voice. Shit, he hoped it was and that she was telling him she was taking care of it. Oh, fuck. Pepper. He couldn’t die like this; not on a frozen planet with his wife of barely three days waiting for him. “Apologies, sir,” Jarvis said, the AI’s voice slowing as the power ran down. “Am shut-...do...wn...cons...ve p...er.”

“Come on, Kara,” he begged. “I haven’t believed in the Christian’s god in decades, but you’re my honorary sister and I believe in you. Find the damn recharger, kid, please?” Pain wracked his chest as the electromagnet’s power faded and the shrapnel began to move. “Oh fuck, this can’t be it.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I admit it; I broke my promise and left you with a cliffhanger and it’s a doozy. The good news is that the next chapter with its resolution will be up within two days. Forgive me?
“Damnation!” Loki hissed as his half-brother and Amora disappeared onto the branches of Yggdrasill. He hurried after them and snarled as Gymir blocked his way.

“No,” his brother’s friend and councilor said. “Free Skrikja first. Helblindi froze the sorceress; he will await you patiently.”

“And what if Malekith was awaiting them?”

“Would you not want your own woman freed before help came for you, regardless of how in need of that help you were?”

Loki bit back a retort; Gymir was right. “Yes.” Moving to where the young woman lay bound by sorcery, he examined it carefully. “Apologies, my lady; but I must touch you and I fear it will hurt. There is no way around it without the sorcerer who cast the working removing it voluntarily. I think we can safely assume that Amora would do no such thing.” Skrikja managed to roll her eyes at him; amazing, really, considering the power of her bonds. “I’ll take that as agreement,” he said with a reluctant smile.

“Mmmnnsss,” she managed.

“Impressive; Amora was right, you do have power. We’ll talk about that later.” Shifting to Æsir form and dropping to his knees he searched for the congruence of the bonds; there were always two. Once they were located, he held his hands above them and allowed his own power to suffuse his palms. Brute magical force was, unfortunately, the only answer. “Try to relax,” he told her. Her muscles shifted minutely and he quickly pressed his hands against the points he’d identified. Skrikja’s scream filled the cavernous room as he fought to hold onto the form that best channeled his power.

… …

“Shit!” Kara pulled hard on Tony’s armored fingers; with her new Æsir strength they were moving, but far too slowly. She had to get him out of contact with the enemy’s apparently ensorcelled armor or all the recharging in the universe wasn’t going to do his arc reactor a damn bit of good. Feet pounded down the corridor behind her and she spared a glance. Slingard had arrived. “Just in time. Help me pull Tony off of this bozo. If we can’t get him loose, he’s going to die.”

“As you wish, princess,” the Jötunn agreed. “But you’d best let go or…”

“I’ll adjust my temperature, it’ll be fine. Just do it.” She continued to pry the stiff joints open while Slingard worked on Tony’s left hand. Finally the grip was loosened on both sides and they pulled the two armored figures apart. “Sit on that bastard,” she ordered and reached for the compartment she knew was in the armor covering Tony’s left thigh. Much to her relief it popped open after she
applied a reasonable amount of pressure and the device that Frigga had gifted to her honorary brother fell into her hand. “Okay, here’s the dilemma. Frigga designed this for the suit’s reactor, but before he shut down Jarvis told me that both the suit’s and Tony’s personal reactor were draining.”

“Will the suit’s reactor recharge Stark’s personal reactor?” Slingard asked as he slammed the enemy’s armored head into the wall repeatedly. She stared for a split second, distracted as the figure in the ensorcelled armor bounced off of the wall and tumbled down the hall. Slingard followed it around the corner.

“I don’t know, but I suspect Frigga did and she specifically said it was to recharge the suit. This had damn well better work,” she muttered as she held the gold covered end to the flat surface of the fading reactor in the chest plate of Tony’s armor. “Please, God, let it work.”

… …

Skrikja gasped for breath. As promised, it had hurt…worse than anything she’d ever experienced in her life. But she was free. Her voice hitched as she spoke to her king’s brother. “Please, find him.”

“You’re all right?” he asked.

“Yes, fine, please…”

“I will.” Loki stood and examined the wall into which Helblindi and that bitch had vanished. His pale and disproportionately, by their standards, long-fingered hands ran over the surface with far more speed and surety than those of the sorceress, and it was mere seconds before he stepped through.

Councilor Gymir, shield brother of husband-to-be, knelt beside her. “May I assist you in rising?” he asked. She nodded and took his offered hand. He placed his other hand under her bent arm and supported her as she rose, not letting go until she was steady. He frowned at the wall and then at the entrance to the corridor that led to the ramps used for accessing the upper levels. “Slingard should have arrived by now. Come with me, but stay back a bit. We must check on the others.”

“Why were there no guards with you?” she asked as she followed.

He grimaced. “Our king did not wish to tip our hand. He felt that the Svartálfar might hear the approach of too many of our people, and Prince Loki could only mask the energy of a few from the sorceress.”

So, it was not that she wasn’t important; it was for her safety. A smile grew in her heart. Her intended had given her the most desperate look when he’d seen her so foully bound. “I am glad for the care you have all taken for me,” she said.

Gymir frowned at her. “It is your due, my king holds you in highest honor.” She found herself biting her bottom lip. Honor was all well and good, but she’d hoped, oh, she was foolish. A smirk grew and eclipsed the man’s previous frown. “He would not allow anything that would further endanger the woman who holds his heart.”

“Oh. Truly?”

It took a moment before the man puzzled out what she meant. He sighed. “Honestly, I cannot get
him to shut up about the subject. It’s become irritating. We strive to handle business and all he can speak of is the glossiness of your hair or the curve of your cheek. It is unbecoming of a king. We forgive him only because we envy his good fortune. Now, hush. I hear movement ahead.”

… …

Loki slipped through onto the branches and took stock of his surroundings. Amora’s still frozen form lay where she and Helblindi had fallen through the entry. Of Helblindi there was no sign. Listening carefully, he heard grunting and scuffling further along the path. He shifted back to Jötunn form and knelt down to add to the ice encasing the sorceress. While he couldn’t use sorcery on the branches and the current layer of ice was too thick to kill her through, he could still ensure that he would not have an enemy sneaking up behind him. As the ice built he briefly wondered whether it alone would be enough to kill the woman. Heimdall had survived the Casket’s power, but Amora had not the gatekeeper’s strength. Loki decided he wouldn’t be at all dismayed if the bitch died. She’d caused enough havoc with her jealousies and intrigues to deserve whatever fate might bring her. “Good riddance, Amora,” he hissed. Leaving her behind, he headed toward the fading sounds.

“You picked the wrong victim,” he heard Helblindi grate.

“I have no idea of what you speak. I sent my agent after an artifact, not a person,” Malekith snarled.

“You sent her, you alone are responsible!” There was a crashing sound and Loki rounded the edge of the branch in time to see his brother throw the half-breed against the far surface of the branch. Malekith was on his feet in seconds and charging Helblindi with a spear that glowed with the tell-tale blue of tesseract energy. How many damned weapons had Thanos given away?

Almost without thought, he drew two daggers and flung them into Malekith’s chest with enough force to penetrate the dark armor whose customary enchantment also did not function on Yggdrasill’s branches. The half-breed staggered and stumbled to his knees, staring down at the hilts. “You,” he growled when he finally looked up.

“Yes, me.” Loki strolled forward and divested Malekith of his weapon, handing it to Helblindi and then retrieved his daggers, cleaning them on the Svartálfar leader’s tunic. “Yes, I’m still not dead. Yes, I’ve beaten you again. Thanos is gone, why do you continue to serve him?”

“Fool,” his enemy gasped. “There is a void where power was once held. Now many strive to fill it. One day that power will be held again and you will fall.”

“No!” Helblindi bellowed. Loki didn’t have a chance to even blink before his brother had lifted the Álfar and threw him from the branch they occupied.

“Hmm; I suppose that’s one way of dealing with him,” he mused. “Come, my brother. Your lady worries for you and I must see what mine has been up to.” Taking a firm hold on Helblindi’s arm, he led him carefully back to the spot that would return them to the farming level of Jötunheim. He hissed in annoyance when they discovered Amora was gone, leaving only a heap of crumbled ice behind.

… …

“HUUUNNNHHHHH!” The pain sliced through him as the shards began to move back in the opposite direction as his arc reactor’s power was restored.

“Power levels at one hundred and fifty percent and climbing in the armor’s reactor, sir,” Jarvis
reported. “Your personal reactor is restored to full functionality.”

“Unh,” was the best response he could manage. A snapping sound caught his attention and his face plate came off to reveal Kara’s worried expression.

“Tony? Oh, he’s still alive, thank God. Jarvis, can you get this armor off? I can’t do any healing through it.”

“Yes, your highness,” Jarvis replied and then repeated his report on the power levels for her benefit.

He lay there, just enjoying breathing, as his armor folded up and detached. Uh oh. He was only wearing his standard neoprene jumpsuit under it; that wasn’t going to keep him from freezing in these temperatures. “Oh, shit. Slingard, run back to his chambers, get his arctic wear. If you pass anyone in the meantime, send them with blankets or something. He’s going to end up with hypothermia otherwise.”

“Oh, my way.” Tony listened as the pounding of feet receded.

“Your highness?” That was a different voice, but he couldn’t, for the life of him…ha, for the life of him, figure out whose it was.

“Gymir, oh, Skrikja, are you ok…uh, all right? Wait, where’s Loki and Helblindi?”

“I am well. Prince Loki freed me from the bonds placed on me by the sorceress and then went through the wall to help my husband-to-be,” Skrikja answered. That had to be the longest sentence he’d heard the girl say, at least voluntarily.

“Through the…oh crap. It was Amora, and she got through to the branches?”

Tony blinked, his vision was finally clearing up, but damn was he cold. He could see Gymir and Skrikja standing over him. Kara was on her knees, hands held over the areas to either side of the reactor. “I do not think she went voluntarily,” Gymir offered. “Helblindi attacked her when she threatened to kill his Intended and they fell through.

That was bad news. Loki had told him a bit about ‘walking the branches’. If you weren’t careful and in total control of your movements, you could end up in the void, the place that had pretty much broken his half-crazy buddy’s mind. “Nnnhh,” he managed.

“Tony, stay still. If anyone can find him, Loki will.”

“Shit,” he said clearly. “Damn it’s cold.”

“I know. I’m trying to warm you up a bit, but I’m afraid to do too much. Jesus, Tony. You’ve got to do something about the arc reactor. There’s got to be a better way to handle that shrapnel.”

“Yeah, sure. Guess I got a couple of goddesses to thank. Frigga sure called it.”

“She usually does.” Kara sat back on her heels and tensed as running footfalls approached. “Oh, excellent, fur blankets. Over here, please. Gymir, can you help me lift him. I want some of those on the ground underneath and the rest on top.”

“I sent another for the arctic wear,” Slingard said as he headed back to the mystery Svartálfar in the magic armor.
“Wait; thought you were totally strong these days?” Tony asked as Gymir insulated his hands with one of the furs before lifting him from under his shoulders.

“I am, but I don’t want to take the chance of jarring your chest. You’ve got internal bleeding already. We’ve got to get you to Asgard; I don’t think—no offense to your healers, Gymir, that the locals have enough familiarity with human anatomy to handle this,” she said, as she lifted from about thigh level.

“None is taken, your highness. You are no doubt right.”

“He also wouldn’t survive a trip via the Bifrost,” a worried voice said from down the hall. Who the hell was worried about…oh.

“Loki! Oh thank God,” Kara said, jumping up and giving her husband a hug.

… …

“You’re welcome?” Loki replied.

Kara smacked his chest and Tony coughed out a half-laugh. “Stop it, hurts to laugh,” he complained.

“I’m certain,” he agreed as he dropped down on one knee. “Heimdall, I hope you can hear me through all of the rock, you’ve never made that terribly clear. We need a master healer as soon as one can be sent, please. Tony Stark is gravely injured.” He sighed and held up a hand that Kara used to get back on her knees beside him. “Helblindi…ah, never mind,” he said wryly as he looked up to see his half-brother with his arms full of his Intended. “Gymir, I need someone to go to the surface and make that identical request and then to head to the egress site to meet the healer.”

“It will be done, my prince.”

“Brother,” he called over his shoulder in a teasing voice as he used his magic to examine Stark’s injuries and the arc reactor. “I had thought you planned to wait until the two of you were wed.”

Helblindi glared at him. “I do her no dishonor.”

“Of course not; yet you work both of you up to a conclusion for which neither of you is quite ready. I do know a bit about such things.”

His half-brother’s cheeks flushed purple and the girl’s entire face matched them in hue. “I…understand,” he managed. “Skrikja, I…”

“I understand as well. Yes, we should wait, but know that I wait as impatiently as you.”

Loki grinned and hoped Helblindi had the sense to hide the absolute jubilation such a response had no doubt brought him. “That…pleases me greatly. I wish only your happiness.” Oh, good job. He’d learned quickly.

“Kara, can you feel the damage to this artery here?” he asked, directing his wife’s attention to the subclavian. “It can’t wait for Asgard’s healer. I want you to try and imagine it whole and project your healing energy.”

She frowned as she concentrated. “Okay, I feel it and the bleeding. I’m not sure about…”

“You do not need to be certain, just hold the picture in your mind and set your will to focusing the
energy on making that picture of a whole vessel the reality.”

“Okay, here goes.” Her eyes closed and she remained perfectly still for several moments.

He monitored her progress, and allowed himself a small smile as the bleeding slowed. “That’s it, love. Keep it up.”

“Running out of energy pretty fast; I’m not sure how much longer I can keep it up.”

“How much you can manage helps; you don’t have to complete it, you’ve already bought him time that he desperately needed.” Her nod was terse as she continued to concentrate. Bellowing down the hall caught everyone’s attention. “Ignore it, Kara. Hold to your task.” He looked up at Helblindi who was taking a report from a battered Slingard as troops rushed past them with an explanation that Gymir had sent them. “What’s happened?”

“Apparently your thawed-out sorceress returned to retrieve her minion; thankfully with little injury to Slingard. They are gone through that wall. Guards with orders to kill any who emerge are now standing by.”

Loki sighed. “I’d some small hope that she wouldn’t survive being frozen. Such a pity she recovered.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t kill her while you had the chance,” Kara remarked.

“I did not think I should take the time it would have required; I was far too concerned with Helblindi possibly becoming lost in the void to manage it. That’s not a mistake I’ll make again.”

Pepper paced. She was good at pacing, she’d done it often enough. Most people, when asked, would tell you that she was calm and collected and would have been shocked to see her pacing. And my God, she hated it. Shooting a look at the bed where one of the Asgardian healers worked on Tony she tried not to whimper. Hrútr was working quickly and he was ignoring all of them. “I just want to know if he has a chance,” she asked, hating how pitiful she sounded. Yes, she was a regular hate fest just now.

“Pepper.” She stopped short of walking into Loki’s bared blue chest. It was strange, he seemed so thin clothed but he was really very solid and muscular. The thinness might have been illusory because of his height and bone structure. God, her brain was all over the place. “All we’re doing here is ensuring he’s stable. Then I shall personally take him through the branches of Yggdrasil, directly to Lady Eir. You’ll follow with Kara and Hrútr over the Bifrost. By the time you arrive, Tony should be well on his way to being fully mended.”

“We should have just gone to Tahiti,” she muttered with a strangled sob. The blue paled to ivory as she stared through a veil of tears and Pepper felt hard arms wrap around her and hold her close. “I know, my friend. I am sorry. We will all do our best for Tony, you know that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I-we love the both of you, and…” he trailed off. “Having friends is…difficult.”

The impatient annoyance in his voice caught her attention. Wiping her eyes she forced herself to look at him. That expression was priceless. “You really do care, and deeply.”

“I said that I did,” he snapped as his arms tightened.
Putting on her best soothing voice and patting his back, she told him, “I know.”

… …

Kara was amazed that she remembered the way to the Healer’s Hall. They’d ridden the horses Heimdall had waiting for them full speed to the Valhöll. Pepper, even though it was her second trip to Asgard, was still staring around at everything once they’d gotten inside. “I think I was too preoccupied with the celebration to notice all of this before,” she said when she noticed Kara’s amused look.

“It’s okay. I still gawk in some areas of the Valhöll.” She stopped in front of the door to Eir’s private office. “We’ll get answers, if they have any yet, in here.” The goddess of Healing wasn’t there so Kara poked her head into the next set of rooms. Several healers, including Eir, were gathered around one bed. Loki was standing against a wall chewing on his thumbnail. His expression was calm if severe, but she could feel the worry even through her shields. She closed the door and turned back to her friend. “Okay, have a seat. I’ll send someone to get you some tea, well, their equivalent, anyway. Then I’m going to go see if I can help any.”

“But you’re exhausted. You almost fell over before Hrótr arrived and took over.”

“I’m fine. I just needed a chance to regenerate some energy. The trip here gave me that time. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything draining, that would cause more problems than it would be worth. Just try to relax, okay?”

Pepper gave her a doubtful look but subsided onto a soft visitor’s chair. Kara ducked back out of the room and almost ran head-on into Frigga. “Is Lady Pepper doing well?” her mother-in-law asked.

“She’s still a bit in shock.”

“Of course; I’ve ordered refreshments, why don’t you go check on your honorary brother and I’ll sit with his wife.”

“Okay.” She put out a hand to stop Frigga before she went into the office. “Thank you; you’re the only reason he’s made it this far.” Before she could say anything else Kara burst into tears and found herself enveloped in Frigga’s calming embrace. “I should have left him guarding Pepper,” she whispered.

“No, dear; if you’d done that we’d have lost either you or Helbindi, I saw it. You took the best path possible under the circumstances. I’ve already explained this to Loki. Do not allow him to take any blame for this either.”

“Can you tell me that Tony will be okay?”

Frigga’s laugh was soft, but reassuring. “Really, Kara; we wouldn’t have bothered curing his liver damage if we were expecting him to lose his life only a few months later. That would have been such a waste of effort and valuable resources.”

“True; you never cure a symptom without curing the underlying condition, so that makes sense. Okay, what can I do to help?”

“You can take charge of your husband and remove him from our sight,” Lady Eir called out. The goddess felt as irritated as she sounded. “His glowering is terribly distracting to my younger healers.”
“No problem. Come on, Loki. You heard Eir. Let’s go see your father.”

“Must we?”

“Only if you don’t want to go over what happened on the branches more than once.”

… …

Odin looked troubled, but then, so did his council. “I like this not,” he began. Loki found himself tensing up. “You, my son, did well and I’m sure King Helblindi did not realize the import of his actions. I don’t see how you could have prevented it.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding as Kara squeezed his hand under the table. “What we have to worry about is if he is somehow found and then makes his way back to the Nine Realms,” Haakun said.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “Malekith was never sane; time in the void will only worsen that condition. A more immediate concern is Amora. If she’d not still been all but frozen solid I would have ended it then and there; but magic cannot be wielded on Yggdrasil’s branches and my daggers could not have penetrated the ice to either her brain or meng mein. I’d be more comfortable with her escape if we knew whether she had access to any other tesseract-powered artifacts. Far too soon we’ll have too many to keep safe. It’s already stretched our resources for such rather thin.”

“Do you have a sense of how many such items the Titan had?” his father asked.

“I-no; I was surprised by this one. We’ve collected three that were in Malekith’s hands now and that’s two more than I would have suspected he had been given. Thanos acted as though sending just that one to Midgard with me was a great sacrifice.”

“That,” his elderly mentor said, “was because yours is by far the most powerful of the lot. Once the All-Father and I cleared the last two recovered from Malekith and Amora of the Titan’s taint, they had little overall value as other than a focus for an egress. I believe Malekith used the fact that the Cube is here in Asgard to link with it to recover Amora from the dungeons. I much doubt he could use his artifacts to go elsewhere.”

“Except near another egress and we had just created one in Central Park.”

“Exactly.” The Grand Vizier turned to Odin. “We shall need to look into destroying the lesser artifacts.”

“Agreed. Loki, I will not have you berate yourself for Amora’s survival. Your responsibility was to Helblindi, his Intended, and then to Kara and your guests. She shall not be difficult to deal with later.”

“I hope you are right.”

… …

“That went well,” Loki said as they headed back to the Hall of Healers.

“Yep, I didn’t even have anything to be pissed at Odin about; that’s a first,” she told him in as flippant a tone as she could manage.

Her husband frowned at her. “Kara…you are trying to distract me, hmm?”
“Is it working?”

“Perhaps; thank you.”

She moved into his path and caught him about the waist and hugged him tight. “It’s going to be fine, Loki. Frigga seems very upbeat about the whole fiasco, that’s got to mean it all worked out to the best case scenario that she saw.”

“True. I hate that we put Tony and Pepper in jeopardy, though.”

“Necessary, according to your mother; remember?”

“Yes, yes; that doesn’t mean I can’t still hate it.”

“True.” She tugged his head down for a gentle kiss. “I love that you care so much.”

“Humph; it’s embarrassing.”

“You can’t blame this one on me, you know. You blurted it out to Pepper all on your own; and you know she’s going to tell Tony.”

“I know it. They’re only mortal, but somehow they’re still important to me.”

“All humans have that potential.”

He sighed heavily. “Most in the Realms other than Midgard see mortals…humans as no better than semi-intelligent pets, at best. I still firmly believe that at one point, that was all that humans could be. But there’s an advantage humans have; unlike the rest of us in the Nine Realms, humans continue to evolve, to improve, and now they can and should be considered far more than they have in the past. We, the other races, have stagnated, sad to say.” She stared at him for a moment and he frowned at her. “What?”

“If Nick Fury heard you say that he’d keel over from massive heart failure.”

“Hmm; that might make it worth repeating.”

“Loki!” Damn man laughed as she smacked his chest.

… …

Damn, he hurt...and his chest itched. Reaching up to scratch the skin around the arc reactor, Tony’s eyes shot open as his fingers found only scar tissue. “What the fuck?”

“Easy, Tony; you’re okay.” He looked toward the voice and relaxed as Pepper smiled at him. “They’ve got the arc reactor packed up to take home with us so you can adapt it for direct use to power another suit of armor; you won’t need it in your chest anymore.”

“Damn, that’s…” he looked down. There were no bandages and the unfamiliar scars looked a few weeks old. “How long was I out?”

“A bit more than four days total. It took one of them to stabilize you enough to go after the shrapnel, another two days to remove it all and rebuild your ribcage and repair the nerve damage to your heart so that it doesn’t need a pacemaker, and you’ve spent the past day and a half recovering.” Tears were swimming in her blue-green eyes.

“Hey, what is this? Don’t cry, babe. Damn, I’m so sorry I made you worry.”
“We were all worried,” she told him. “Take a look at Loki’s fingers when you see him; he’s chewed every nail down to nothing.”

He snorted. “Now that’s funny. Huh, he told me that he couldn’t do anything about the shrapnel when I asked him.”

“Loki is many things, but he’s not the god of Healing,” a woman’s voice informed him dryly. Wait, he knew that voice.

“No, Lady Eir, he’s not. I take it he didn’t realize it was possible for you?”

The Æsir smiled. “There are also many things Loki does not know, though you’ll not get him to admit such.”

“No joke. Wow, it’s all gone. That’s totally amazing. It’s like a new lease on life.”

“Hmm. Yes, well…there is a price to pay for your healing here,” she said.

“Ooookay; lay it on me.” Pepper was smirking; wait, Pepper didn’t smirk.

“I’m afraid we’ve likely slowed your aging yet again.”

Seriously? “Uh, we don’t call that a price, that’s more what we’d call a bonus.” Pepper was biting her bottom lip. Uh oh. Pepper. “Um, by how much do you think?”

“Based on our observations, before we did this healing, your aging had slowed to seventy-five percent of the normal rate of your kind. This will likely slow it nearly as much again. From what Kara has told me, human males can generally expect to live between eighty-five and ninety-five years barring accident or severe illness.”

“That’s kind of generous, but okay.”

“You’ll easily live twice that.”

Shit. Pepper. “That’s…that’s not good.”

Eir’s golden blonde eyebrow rose. “No?”

“Well, it is, kind of, but…”

“Tony, it’ll be fine.” He closed his eyes as Pepper took his hand. “I’m okay with this, really.”

Shit. He’d been so focused on watching his friends stay young while he aged, he’d totally overlooked the fact that Pepper would have been right there with him. But now it wouldn’t be like that. Maybe sixty years from now she’d be gone and he’d…well, be late-middle age, maybe. “I’ll leave you two alone,” he heard Eir say quietly.

“I-I don’t want this, Pep,” he told her. “I don’t want to stay younger if you’re not younger with me.”

“We’ll manage, Tony. It’s just another…thing. We’ve gotten past lots of things.”

She was sitting down on the side of the bed and wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his neck. Her words were strong and brave, but he could feel hot tears on his skin. “Come on, Pep. Look, Bruce and Darcy are in the same boat. We’ll work on it; that’s two geniuses. Sure, maybe biology isn’t my field, but I could finance research and…ah, shit. We’ll figure something
out.” Pepper pulled back a little and nodded, she was putting on her brave, competent face again. Damn, he loved her. “I’ll love you always, no matter what, okay?”

“Okay. I-I’m all right now, it just hit me all at once.”

“Sure, I got that.” He gave her his best cocky smirk. “So, are you going to stick with me, no matter what?”

As he’d hoped, that got a laugh out of her. “I’ve made it this far, so yes, I will,” she agreed.

“Great.”

… …

Loki looked and felt stunned. It was kind of funny, but she knew better than to laugh at him. “You’re telling me that we’re going to be stuck with Stark for the duration of my sentence?” he said to his mother.

“I hardly think that ‘stuck’ is the appropriate word,” Frigga replied.

He sat back abruptly and waved the comment off. “Bah; the man is insufferable.”

Oh, now she had to protest. “So insufferable that you chewed your nails to the quick with worry over him?”

“Kara, really; I simply did not want either of us to be accused of causing his death.”

“Frigga, you need to see about getting another one of Loki’s titles taken away from him. If that’s the best lie he can manage, then someone else needs to be the god or goddess of that skill.”

Frigga began laughing as Loki nearly choked on his outrage. “Oh, son; you must admit, she’s right.”

“I must admit nothing,” he grumbled. “You have met this man; do you not agree he is difficult to deal with?”

“Loki, you have been most difficult to deal with for well over a thousand years, yet I still love you.”

He sighed and his expression finally softened. “I know.” There was a long pause as confusion ran through him. “I-it’s just that I’d finally accepted that I’d watch this man grow very old and die while we would remain there, in the Tower he built, and now that is not going to happen. There is far too much change in how things go on Midgard; it’s not easy to accept.”

“Aren’t you the one who told me that you’ve all stagnated and that how we change so much is an advantage?” she interjected.

“I told you that how humans evolve is an advantage; the speed at which circumstances change is an aggravation.”

“Ah, my mistake,”

“You’re forgiven.”

“Does he do this often?” she asked Frigga.
“Do what, dear?”

“Never mind; if I point out he’s being an ass he’ll get pissy and I’m not in the mood to deal with it.”

“Kara, I’m not…pissy, I’m…” he broke off with a huff. “I don’t know what I am. What are they going to do?”

Loki was seriously upset. He’d allowed a plaintive note to actually make it into his normally controlled voice. She wouldn’t pretend not to know what he meant; it was the same dilemma he’d faced with her before Odin had married them, it was the same dilemma Bruce and Darcy and Steve and Beth might face, it was the same dilemma Logan had already faced several times. “The only thing we can do; be there for them, help them to be strong. Listen when they need to talk. And before you tell me that’s not enough,” she said as he started to interrupt. “I know. That doesn’t seem like it’s enough but that’s all there is. You know we can’t intentionally extend anyone’s lifespan, and it’s not like any of them are likely to be successful in becoming Æsir even if circumstances warranted it. I’ve had that lecture from Frigga, Odin and Eir, and I’m sure you’ve heard it before.”

“I have,” he agreed, giving his mother the sour look this time. “While I understand the reasons why, it…” he trailed off, flustered.

“Sucks?”

“Yes, it sucks.”

… …

They’d spent the night restless, nestled in each other’s arms. Occasionally, they’d made love but more as a reassurance that they had each other and that they would not be facing such a thing as their friends did than as romantic love-play. Kara was finally dozing, eyes closed and long lashes fanned out on her creamy cheeks. He could spend the next several millennia looking at her thus and never tire of it. The sun had risen hours ago; it was time to leave their bed and face their friends. “Wake up, my love,” he said as he kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Mmmph. I feel like I just got to sleep.”

“You did. Nonetheless, we must rise. We’ll need to talk to Tony and Pepper and see how they wish to adjust their plans.”

“Oh. I guess the original schedule is totally out the window, huh?”

“Out the window, over the cliff and down in a ravine,” he agreed as he slid from the bed and encouraged her to do the same. “Bath, hmm?”

“Absolutely. And breakfast?”

“I’ll order some in for us; it will give us time to settle our minds in privacy.”

“Good thinking. Glad one of us is capable of it on so little sleep.”

“You’re simply not a, ah, morning individual?”

“Morning person, it’s called; but you were close.”
“Just so. Go ahead and relax in the bath, I’ll join you shortly.” Loki distractedly returned her kiss and then went to call a servant to request their meal. He accepted missives and read through them quickly as he returned to the bathing chamber. “Our meal should arrive within the hour. I told them not to hurry, we’ll have time to enjoy a good…” he broke off as he looked up to see his lovely wife sitting up on the far edge of the bath, feet spread wide on the bench, fingers stroking between her legs and a come-hither smile curving her lips. “Hmm, now that is an amazing sight and an excellent way to start our day,” he told her as he dropped the missives on the table and sent his robe to the wardrobe.

Stepping into the water he halted when she spoke. “Stay there,” she ordered. He folded his arms across his chest and waited to see what she was up to. “Sit down, relax, and watch.”

“Just watch?”

Kara lifted one shoulder in response. “Well, you can play with yourself if you’re so inclined, but meanwhile, you’re going to watch me.”

Oh. My. A slow smile grew as he made himself comfortable on the opposite bench. He could see, but not enough, and decided a bit of magical augmentation to his eyesight was in order; just temporarily, he was not going to get caught in the trap of depending on it once again and becoming vulnerable if his magic were suddenly blocked in some manner. Ah, yes; that was much better. Her slender fingers lazily caressed her clit which was in full view as she was using her other hand to spread her folds. His eyes narrowed as he felt a swift tightening in his groin. Staying on this side and only watching was going to be damn difficult. “You are a vixen,” he told her huskily.

“Among other things,” she agreed. Gods, she was taking it so slowly. He’d taught her to play roughly with herself to bring herself to readiness and a first orgasm swiftly, but she was not doing so. This would be the best kind of torture. Her index finger circled on and around the small nub almost hypnotically and he could not have looked away from the sight if he tried. His cock had gone from showing burgeoning interest to rock hard by the time she left off and pinched her clit sharply. “Unngh,” she moaned and he could see her fluids pooling at the entrance to her canal. “Bet you’d love a taste.”

“You’d win that bet.”

“Mmm.” Kara dipped her own finger inside and then raised the soaked and slippery digit to her mouth. Damnation, he’d taught her that as well. His mouth was dry as he watched her lick it clean and then suck on it hungrily. He lost his determination not to touch himself and took his now throbbing erection in his hand. “I was wondering how long you’d last,” she said with a slight laugh in her voice. The finger went back into her slick entrance and then was thrust in and out slowly, teasingly. Another finger joined it as he began stroking himself. “Can you imagine being inside me?” his Kara asked as she pumped her fingers in and out a bit faster. “The heat, the friction, the clinging wetness?”

Shuddering, he increased the speed of his masturbation to match hers. “You know that I can.” He winced at the hoarseness in his voice.

The naughty chit laughed. “Oh, you’ve got it bad,” she teased. Her fingers were pumping rapidly now and she was panting. He wondered why she didn’t increase her pleasure by playing with her breasts before realizing that it wasn’t about her pleasure at all. She kept her folds spread out, leaving every touch, every reaction in perfect view. “What would you do to me, if I gave you leave?” she wondered.

“Before or after I spanked your ripe bottom for teasing me so?” Another laugh rang out as she...
sweet Valhalla, she’d now gone to thrusting three fingers in and out of that dripping quim. Kara was rocking on the edge of the tub now, her moans drifted across the water’s surface. He groaned at the erotic sight. “Please, love. You need my cock in you. I’ll make you come so hard,” he promised.

“Later.” He continued to watch, fascinated by the way her fluids splashed out from the now frantic motion of her fingers, arching up and then dropping into the bathwater below.

“Let me come closer,” he found himself begging. “I won’t touch, just let me come sit beneath you.”

“You…swear…you…won’t…touch…until I say so?” she gasped.

“I swear it.” She nodded agreement and he moved across the bath and settled down on his knees before her, still pumping his fist around his straining staff. The close of view of that glistening quim all but undid him. He could feel the droplets of her sweet nectar raining down on his face and he licked up those that fell close enough to his lips. “So delicious, love.” She was watching him with narrowed eyes, her moans almost constant now; her fingers pounding into her canal. How she hadn’t come yet, he didn’t understand. Her gaze bored into his, pleading for something. His jaw dropped as comprehension dawned. This was all for **him**. “Come for me, Kara; come for me, now my sweet wife.”

Her shriek was music to his ears as her back arched and her come almost poured from her shaking form. “Loki,” she gasped. “Take me, now!”

He grinned and lunged up out of the water, grabbed her pliant body and pulled her down hard on his now painful erection. “Damnation, love!” He thrust up into her urgently his hands hard on her hips as she clasped her own wrists behind his neck. So perfect. All his. “Gods, Kara,” he hissed as his finish raced towards him. “What you do to me.”

Kara screamed and began to rock in his grasp as another orgasm shook her. “Yes, so-so good,” she managed before shrieking again as he slowed to slam her down and hold himself deep inside her several times as his ejaculation finally spilled within her. Finally he stilled, shuddering in reaction. She’d half collapsed against his chest and her breathing was ragged. “Love you,” his amazing wife whispered.

“As I love you.”

… ...

Tony glanced up from his soup as the door opened. “Hey, look who it is,” he said with a grin. “My two favorite citizens of Asgard.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “I would think Lady Eir should be your favorite, or perhaps Frigga.”

“Nah, they both tell me that without you two I’d have been toast despite anything they did. Besides, if my honorary sister and brother-in-law aren’t my favorite people they should be.”

“Hmm.”

“I guess you can’t be in too much pain,” Kara commented. “Not the way you’re talking with your hands. You dripped whatever that is on Pepper, you know.”

He looked at his hands. Sure enough, they were nowhere near the bowl. “Huh. Sorry, babe.”
She smiled. “I’m just glad you’re feeling well enough to fling soup all over the place,” his bride told him. “How did your meeting with Odin go?” she asked the others.

“Not bad, I wasn’t tempted to call him out on anything for a change.”

Loki snorted softly. “Yes, Kara was in shock for hours over that.”

“Good, good. So, when can I get out of this place?” he asked, gesturing with the spoon-free hand around the sick-room. “Not that everyone hasn’t been great, but hey, getting restless.”

“As soon as Lady Eir clears you for solid foods which could be as soon as tomorrow morning. So, as Kara put it, our original plans are out the window. Do you wish to make a short visit to any of the other Realms or should I take you back to Midgard? Either way I’ll be taking you through the branches while Kara and Pepper travel via the Bifröst. It will be a bit before that mode of travel is at all comfortable for you.”

“Ah, I kind of want to go home, but a little birdie told me that Sif is in Ljósálfheim visiting her potential in-laws.”

“A birdie?”

“He means Fandral,” Pepper supplied. “Everyone we know from Asgard, except for Sif, has stopped by to pay their respects and to try and keep the Nine Realms’ worst patient entertained. King Frey even made the trip from Vanaheim and Heimdall had someone else take his post for a bit so that he could visit.”

“And yes, everybody made sure I knew what a BFD it was for Heimdall to leave the bridge. How does that guy sleep?”

“He does not,” Loki answered. “Because he is all-seeing and all-hearing he cannot sleep. It is both his gift and his curse.”

“Wow. Guess I should lay off the jokes with him then.”

“No, he finds you amusing. Few dare make jokes with or about him. He holds you in high regard because of your fearlessness.”

“More like pitiful ignorance, but I’ll take it. Anyway, if it’s not too much trouble I’d kind of like to go see Sif dealing with Elénaril and company, especially with the pot all stirred over Tolthe’s actions. Should be fun.”

“You have the strangest idea of fun, Tony. But yes, we can go to Ljósálfheim. Nyvorlas will no doubt be grateful for someone to take the focus of his mother’s attention off of his and Sif’s budding relationship.”

“Aaaaand, why is it just still budding? Damn, I make decisions faster than that.” Kara snickered at his statement. “What?”

“Big brother, your decisions don’t have potential to affect you for thousands of years. Can you imagine how long you’d wait to decide on anything if it did.”

Huh. She had a point. “I’ll plead the fifth on that.” Loki gave him an odd look. “Never mind, we can explain it when we get back home, uh, my home.”

“Our home as well, at least for the next hundred plus years,” Loki reminded him.
“True.”

Loki was giving him and Pepper an unsettled look. “I-Frigga told us about your predicament. I…”

“Don’t, Lokes, just don’t. We’ll be okay. Don’t know how, but we’ll figure it out. We don’t need sympathy. Understanding if we get down about things at some point, but that’s it, got it?” The god nodded. “Cool. Hey, we have a new appreciation for everyone and their crap now. But we’re okay, we still love each other and we’re going to stick with it no matter how it all plays out.”

“We’ll be there, anytime either of you need to talk.”

“Figured you would be. Oh, yeah, let’s see those hands.” He smirked as Loki immediately placed both hands behind his back. “Come on, let’s see ‘em.” The god made a show of reluctantly holding his hands out for them to see. Tony frowned; they were perfectly manicured, guy manicure of course. No sign of any nail chewing - to the quick or otherwise. “Huh.”

Kara sighed. “Loki, drop the illusion.” That earned her the ‘Loki Patented Glare of Death’ as the look had been dubbed. He sighed and his hands glowed briefly.

“Son of a bitch.” The now illusion-free fingers were ragged. Not only had the nails been chewed down but the skin was a mess too.

“Happy now?” Loki said snidely.

“Yes, actually. You know, it goes both ways. We love you guys too.”
Hollow Trees

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The buildings all look like they’re carved from wood.”

“They are, Tony,” Loki responded with a slight smile as they waited outside of the hidden entrance from Yggdrasil for Kara and Pepper to reach them. The women were travelling via the Bifrost, something not possible for Tony during his recuperation.

His human friend stood with hands on hips staring up at what he likely considered an impossible structure. “So, why is it not collapsing under its own weight?”

The Queenshame, as it had been called since Elénaril took the throne some four thousand years ago, had spires and towers some twenty stories tall. “Look at the base of the buildings.”

“Son of…they’ve got roots. They carved a city out of trees?”

“Ancient petrified trees; they are harder than your iron and far more durable.”

“Damn. Uhhhh?”

“Magic, Tony. Remember? The Ljósálfar have strong nature magic; they can alter the composition of natural materials. Craftsmen lay their hands on a surface, make it pliable and then shape it as they wish before returning it to its natural composition.” Loki frowned as he searched for an applicable comparison. “Much like a sculptor shapes clay and then fires it to make it stable.”

As their wives arrived they also stared at the buildings in awe, but the slight furrowing of Pepper’s brow warned him that a more practical consideration than construction methods occupied her thoughts. “It is like Asgard with stairs everywhere to move between levels?” she asked.

“Yes, though the stairs blend in better with the architecture and are works of art in and of themselves.”

The human woman sighed. “Well, then I certainly won’t have to worry about working off the extra calories I took in this week. Wait, is that going to be okay for Tony so soon after heart surgery?”

Kara nodded. “I talked to Lady Eir; she thought it would be perfect for him. We won’t be going to the upper levels; I’m told they’re all forbidden to visitors. The public areas and guest quarters are all on the first five floors.”

“And the stairs have what I believe you call ‘low risers’, rather easy to climb. They are designed specifically for you to enjoy the journey rather than simply to move from one level to another. You’ll see what I mean later. You’ll find the interior far more fantastical than the exterior.”

Tony made a dismissive sound. “Those exteriors are going to be really hard to beat.”

… …

A servant glided into the sitting room, spoke in the musical private language of her hosts that was not affected by the All-Speak and then departed. Sif frowned at Nyvorlas. “Loki and his guests have arrived,” he told her. “We should likely go meet them.”
From his expression, he didn’t seem too enthusiastic about the idea. “You’re not pleased by their visit?”

Definitely a sour expression. “Trouble follows her; I’ve mentioned such before.”

“Trouble, as you call it, was already in Asgard when Kara first arrived there; she’s partly responsible for putting an end to it. Býleistr was responsible for the trouble in Jötunheim; again, she helped put an end to that. She can hardly be blamed for being present on Midgard during their troubles, the woman was born there.”

“I do not argue the point. I simply find it best to stay as far from what you call ‘Children of Destiny’ as practical.”

“Is that why your friendship with Loki faded?” His eyes narrowed at the question. “I know why mine did; his prank cost me something I valued greatly. Did he do aught to you that would have cost him your regard?” He didn’t answer, choosing instead to stare out of the narrow window in the tower room. “Or is it that you are simply a coward?”

“I walked into the thick of battle with the Mad Titan with no great skill in close combat, my lady,” he snapped. “I am no coward.”

And he’d done it solely to protect her after her own headstrong rush into a confrontation she had no hope of winning. “I know. Then why?”

He shrugged and stared out the window for a bit more. “Jealousy, I suppose. Oh, not over his position in Asgard,” he clarified at her surprised expression. “He was wildly popular amongst our people. They appreciated his wit and his chicanery, not to mention his sorcery. The only ones who were not vastly amused at his prank on Tolthe were Tolthe himself and my mother.” He sighed. “I was already overlooked as the second youngest child of a wildly prolific queen, the last thing I wanted was a close friend who garnered all of the attention that I could not.”

“So will you allow our involvement to fade should I receive more attention than you do?” she snapped.

“No. I’m no longer that immature youth. I have no problem with Loki.”

Sif laughed until she noticed his glare. “Oh, please. Loki is far more a Child of Destiny than Kara could ever be. The outcome of Ragnarök itself hinges on his actions. Why have you problems with Kara but not with Loki? It makes no sense.”

“I understand Loki and what motivates him; I do not understand his woman.”

Frowning, Sif considered that. “Understanding her isn’t that difficult. Despite or perhaps because of her beginnings, she is motivated firstly by a sense of justice, then by love. She is not a person of ambition or deceit. Her sense of justice is so strong as to be unshakable. She stood up to the All-Father himself when she felt him to be in the wrong.” She eyed her suitor’s expression and folded her arms across her chest. “I sincerely hope that disgust is with your own behavior. Neither Kara or I deserve it.”

His mien changed to shock and he dropped to his knees before her. “It is, my lady. I-I am sorry if it seemed otherwise. I-perhaps I am jealous yet again? But this time, I seem to be jealous of the attention his lady receives from my old friend. That’s…it’s foolish, I know.”

“Fairly so. You are the one who repudiated the friendship; you cannot expect him to put you, the one who walked out on him, ahead of the woman who has given him everything.” She eyed him
with annoyance. “I expect you to apologize…to both of them.”

She met his shocked look with a stern frown. If she and her friends had learned to apologize for their treatment of Loki, then his old friend could do so as well. “As you wish.”

… …

Loki had told her a bit of what to expect within Queenshame, but she was still awed. The main spiral staircase that circled the entirety of the palace’s central spire not only passed different levels of living, working and socializing space, but had an ongoing gallery of artistic works set into the walls. On each floor the staircase opened up into a seating area whose focus was a series of narrow open windows that Loki informed her were guarded by layered wards; one that blocked projectiles, another that blocked noxious gasses and yet another that blocked energy, including spellcraft. He, of course, had studied the wards extensively and she was reasonably certain that he could get past them if necessary. Their guide went on about how impregnable the structure was and didn’t seem to notice Loki’s smug, condescending grin. “Behave yourself,” she whispered.

“How don’t I always?” His response earned him an incredulous snort.

“Wow, would you look at that,” Tony breathed as a sizeable intricate hanging sculpture of flowing lines and mingled metals came into view. “That’s positively aerodynamic. Can’t you just imagine it flying through the air?”

Loki’s lips curved up into a smile that matched the slight spike of pride she felt from him. “It is indeed meant for flight, Tony. What else can you see in it?” Their guide halted, seemingly content to allow them to stop and admire the display.

“How…its not meant to carry anything significant, at least nothing of bulk or weight; that would throw the whole thing off balance.” Her honorary brother pursed his lips and stared at the piece for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. “But…oh, wow. That sucker is hollow; it’s armor, isn’t it? How do you put it on and what makes it fly?”

“Oh, come now, Tony. Think about it.”

The self-proclaimed genius stared at her husband. “Oh, shit; magic.”

“No to the fecal matter, yes to the magic.”

“Funny. You knew what I meant. So why is it on display, is it a prototype or something?”

“No, the magic to wear or power it is an art that was lost. The Ljósálfar haven’t had anyone able to use it since well before I was born. It is still an incredible piece of work, though.”

“That’s like putting the Mark XVI on display at the Met with an inactive reactor and no one knowing how to fix it,” Tony muttered.

“Yes, but imagine the Mark XVI being built to be used by someone like me.”

Kara almost bit her lip to hold in a laugh; the absolutely appalled expression on Tony’s face was priceless. “Would it do more than enable the sorcerer to fly?”

“It would protect his body, thus freeing his energy from both the concerns of keeping himself in the air and shielding against incoming attacks and enabling him to focus all of his concentration on his objective. Why do you think we went to all of that trouble to free up those flying sleds when we faced the Titan? While I can shield and shift…teleport, you’d call it, and even hover if I must; it
takes up too much time and energy to constantly direct it and does not leave much left over for
attack. This armor holds the enchantment to do it for the wearer; the problem is having the power
to activate it.”

... ... 

Tony frowned at the positively covetous look on Loki’s face and wondered if his not always
completely sane buddy had the juice to power this sucker. He eyed the artistically designed armor
and the god; yep, he was about the right build for it. Damn, that was a scary thought; or it would
have been if Loki wasn’t firmly on their side. No, no, it was still a terrifying thought. He imagined
Loki with his full magic and wearing something that gave him the protection and mobility of the
Iron Man armor; probably more mobility if his knowledge of aerodynamics was serving him at all
well. That kind of power would be one hell of a temptation for the god of Mischief and Chaos. He
grabbed Loki’s arm and steered him away from their guide. “Taz, you’ve got the power, don’t
you,” he whispered so softly that he could barely hear himself.

“Whatever do you mean Anthony?” Loki asked at a normal volume after tracing a design in the air.

“Did you just block everyone from hearing us?”

“Make it quick, I can’t keep it up long or it will be remarked upon.”

“Dude, don’t steal that thing while we’re here.”

Loki blinked wide green eyes at him. “I have no intentions of stealing it.”

“Hey, don’t bullshit the bullshit artist; I know avarice when I see it.”

The god’s expression became serious. “Tony, I won’t steal the damn thing; first, I would need to
use sorcery to do so, that would be a violation that would be punished by the binding of my magic,
possibly permanently. Second, it would destroy relations between Ljósálfheim and Asgard and that,
again, would be severely punished, likely with lifetime imprisonment. Third, it would be far
simpler to convince Queen Elénaril to present it to me as a wedding present and partial recompense
for Tolthe’s actions.”

“Son of a bitch.”

Loki’s smirk returned in full force and he traced a new pattern, pretty much the opposite of the
other one if he was remembering correctly, in the air. “No, Tony; I don’t think you could replicate
that design for your armor. Remember, the Ljósálfar can sculpt it by hand using their nature magic;
you would not be able to duplicate the feat using your technology, despite the metalworking
knowledge granted you by the All-Father.”

Tony had never been slow on the uptake. “Yeah, well, a guy’s gotta dream big.”

“Exactly.” Loki gave the armor an almost contemplative look. “It is lovely, though. If you should
somehow find yourself able to build a similar armor, I’d love to have a set.”

... ... 

Nyvorlas stood as the two couples were escorted into the small receiving room. The mortals
seemed a bit out of breath. Oddly enough, the gods also looked tired, though not from the climb.
His eyes stopped as he noticed Tony Stark rubbing his chest. For the first time since he’d met the
man, there was no subtle blue glow showing through the fabric of his tunic. “What happened?” he
asked.
Loki’s eyebrows shot up. “Did mother’s letter not explain the delay in our visit?”

“She said that there was trouble in Jötunheim and that the Ma…Iron Man suffered injuries. Obviously she understated.”

“Frigga’s good at that,” Kara muttered.

“Indeed,” Loki agreed. “Tony nearly died; but in doing so saved Helblindi and Kara. In thanks, the healers of Asgard treated the old injuries that made it necessary for him to have that device in his chest. The healing process was exhaustive; he needs to rebuild his strength but didn’t want to miss out on the rare chance to see the beauty of your Realm.”

He narrowed his eyes. Why was Loki pulling the ingratiating…oh. “We are honored by his visit,” Elénaril said as she swept into the room. Loki must have seen mother approaching. “How are you feeling Mr. Stark?” she asked.

“Oh, just peachy,” he began. “Still tiring a little easy, but I wouldn’t have wanted to miss all of this,” he said, waving a hand around to encompass his surroundings. “The only place you see anything remotely like your architecture on Midgard is in the imaginings of our most gifted artists.”

His mother’s face lit up at the implied praise. Stark’s tongue was nearly as glib as Loki’s, if a bit cruder. “Have you been enjoying the work of our artists?” she asked.

“Definitely. That body armor was amazing. Because of my interest in armored flight, it absolutely fascinated me; it’s a crying shame no one can use it.”

“Yes, none have been born among my people who possess that type of sorcery in several generations. I’m afraid the ability has wholly died out.”

“It is most beautiful,” Loki said wistfully. What in the Nine was he up to? “Neither the craftsmen of Asgard or those of Drakkálfar could manage such.” Now even Sif was staring at the silver-tongue. His mother preened. “Of course, much of your art is memorable.”

“I am pleased you find it so,” she told him with a smile filled with pride. She turned to the visiting women. “And you, Lady Pepper, are you enjoying the sights?”

“Oh, absolutely.” The woman looked startled; probably surprised that she had been addressed rather than the more noticeable goddess. Why had she been? Elénaril’s mouth tightened as her gaze passed over Kara and moved back to Loki. That wasn’t good. What was worse, Loki’s wife had noticed.

“I can understand why you’re not thrilled to have me here,” she said quietly. “It’s wrong to hold Tolthe’s actions and fate against me, but I understand it. Loki, maybe I should go back to Asgard and wait for you there?”

Loki’s eyes narrowed as he looked at the now embarrassed queen. “Is this true? Do you add insult to injury by blaming my lady for your consort’s perfidy?”

“No, of course not,” Elénaril claimed, thoroughly flustered.

“I should hope not. As it stands, I have every right to demand recompense for his actions from your Realm and more specifically, from you. Or are you not responsible for the behavior of your people when you take them to other Realms?” Loki’s tone was now as icy as the land of his birth. Nyvorlas shifted position to watch in fascination. Obviously his mother was being played, but he couldn’t decide if Kara was part of it, or if she had innocently given Loki the opening he needed to
change his tack. Sif’s jaw was slightly slack. He nudged her and gave her a slight smile. That lovely strong chin firmed immediately and she moved almost imperceptibly closer.

“Yes, you do,” Elénéral breathed, her expression now quite worried. Kara looked concerned as well; it seemed she was innocent in whatever Loki’s scheme might be. Tony Stark was another story. He could see that the human was studiously inspecting the trim on the Asgardian garb he wore, no doubt in an attempt to avoid giving the game away.

Loki shrugged carelessly. “It matters not; as rich as your Realm is, it has little to offer that I could not easily purchase or create for myself. I enjoyed my visits when I was young; I will not sully those memories with those of Tolthe’s treachery.”

It did matter; it was a debt of honor and Loki damned well knew it. Nyvorlas frowned as he ran the entire conversation through his head. What did his old friend want…oh. Hmm, did he really want Loki to have it? Eh, it was of no use to his people and Loki had saved them all from the Mad Titan. He’d also facilitated his relationship with Sif. “Mother?” he began, schooling his voice to diffidence. “Prince Loki will wed his lady according to Midgard’s customs in a few short months. Perhaps a wedding gift of great value might serve two purposes.” Loki’s green gaze caught his sharply and he gave him as innocent a look as he could manage.

“Oh, that is a splendid idea!” He was glad that Edansyr was a great deal brighter than their mother and was starting to take over more of the crown’s duties in preparation for Elénéaril’s planned stepping down in a century hence. Gift giving, however, was still solely their mother’s province. “Oh but…ah, I know.” She beckoned her adjunct to her and spoke quietly to him in the high tongue. He bit back a smile. His mother had fallen right in with Loki’s manipulation. He met his friend’s eyes and nodded slightly.

“I’m certain that whatever you decide will be most fitting,” Loki said with a slight yet respectful bow.

… …

“What did you do?” Kara asked her husband once they’d closed the door to the hall behind them.

“That was classic; do you know if she’s going to give you what you wanted?” Tony wondered.

“Wait, you were in on it too?”

“You both were, love,” Loki told her. “Though Tony was more aware of the fact. Yes, Tony. Nyvorlas is quite quick on the uptake and discreet as well. He signaled me that we were successful.”

“I wonder if your leather will make it less aerodynamic. Hey, you won’t be able to wear the horns of doom with it.”

“With what?” she demanded. Pepper felt as exasperated as she did though she held her annoyance to a look.

“That armor on the stairs,” Tony told them when Loki failed to respond.

“I thought it wasn’t…oh.” Kara frowned at her husband. “You said the Ljósálfar don’t have anyone that could use it; you never said that you couldn’t use it.”

He shrugged. “Entirely truthful.”
“He’d have to be,” Tony agreed. “Keebler mentioned that his people are really good at spotting
lies. Not so hot at picking up on illusions if they’re high-powered enough, but lies aren’t all that
much of a problem for them.”

“Besides which, misdirection is far more enjoyable than an outright lie.”

Pepper was smiling and shaking her head. “That was very smooth,” she said. “I don’t think the
queen has so much as an inkling of what you pulled.”

“I should hope not,” Loki said with an affronted look. “She never picked up on Tolthe’s duplicity.
I’d be highly embarrassed if she could see through me while being oblivious to his crude efforts.”

“Soooly?” her honorary brother prompted.

Loki frowned at him. “What?”

“No horns.”

The frown deepened. “That is formal armor; it’s not actually intended for combat. The only reason
I use it is for psychological effect.”

“Oh, come on. The anti-Claus uses the same helm for everything and so does your dad.”

“It’s dramatic; the Æsir enjoy drama.”

“Says the half-Æsir drama queen.”

Loki’s eyebrows lifted and he glared down at Tony. “It’s a saying, hon,” she interrupted hurriedly.
“Drama queen is applied to both men and women back home. It's used to describe anyone who
enjoys employing theatrics in a non-entertainment capacity.”

“Yeah, what Kara said.”

“Pfft. You see, love? He is insufferable.”

“Pot meet kettle,” she murmured as Pepper totally cracked up.

… …

Unlike the other men in his adoptive family, Loki actually enjoyed the many of the dishes popular
amongst the Ljósálfar. It was another difference that had always made him stand out. The cuisine
was light on red meats and included generous portions of fruits and vegetables all enhanced by light
and flavorful sauces. Entrees that featured fish or fowl were more flesh-heavy than those with other
meats. Pepper was eating her meal with great evidence of enjoyment. Tony and Kara, however,
were picking a bit; odd since they both enjoyed most Asian dishes which had distinct similarities.
“What’s wrong, love?”

“Huh?” She gave him a quizzical look until he glanced down at her plate. "Oh, I don’t recognize
some of these vegetables and I’m allergic to mushrooms and olives so I’m kind of afraid to try
them.”

He sighed. “Darling, have you tried eating mushrooms or olives since you became Æsir? Your
entire system changed, it’s highly doubtful that any food sensitivities remain.”

“No one bothered to tell me that and I wouldn’t have tried eating them because I never cared much
for them even before they were identified as the reason I kept getting sick when I ate certain
dishes.”

“Ah. Well, you can safely try anything. If you don’t care for it, then you can put it aside. Does Tony have such allergies?”

“I don’t think so; he’s picky about certain foods, though. Pepper is allergic to strawberries, but I don’t see any…” she broke off and watched as he reached out to grab Pepper’s hand before she reached her mouth with a forkful of food from a new dish that had been placed before her.

“Those are highly similar to strawberries in all but color,” he told the woman quietly.

She paled making her freckles stand out. “Oh, thank you.”

“Thank Kara, she just warned me.” He turned back to his wife. “Food allergies never occurred to me; they’re all but unknown in Asgard. I’ll remember to ask before I take anyone else anywhere in Realms other than Midgard.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

“Is something the matter with the musk fruit?” Elénaril asked as Pepper set the offending dish aside.

Loki jumped in before the mortal…human could answer. “I’d forgotten to warn them about foods similar to ones that they have health issues with on Midgard, my apologies, your majesty. Musk fruit is distressing similar to a fruit called strawberry on Midgard and is likely to make Lady Pepper deadly ill.”

“Ah, are there any other issues we should be aware of?” she asked politely while signaling a servant to remove the plate.


He’d ask later, Loki decided. “I am familiar with them and can assure you that nothing grown in Ljósálfheim is remotely similar. Vanaheim, however, has a dish called ‘grønne lim’ that you should avoid.”

Elénaril’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “We would not serve that here, nor anything of that fruit. You enjoy fish, yes?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Then try the hákarl, it is a delicacy.”

Tony looked at the dried cubes of fish that were drenched in a thin liquid and gave him a questioning look. “I think not,” Loki advised. “The taste is too strong for human palates, I’m afraid,” he directed to Elénaril.

“Hey, strong isn’t…”

“It’s fermented shark, Tony, and has a high content of what you would call ammonia.”

“Oh. Good call. It’s definitely not suitable for human consumption.”

The Ljósálfar Queen was pouting slightly now. “I’m certain everything else is quite suitable and will be found delicious, at least so far as foodstuffs are concerned,” Loki assured her. “I know that
my mother’s letter advised you not to serve them your fermented beverages.”

“She did. The juices being poured are fresh and none are from the musk fruit, so even Lady Pepper may drink them in safety.”

“Excellent, my thanks,” he replied. Kara was still picking at her meal, but at least she was trying everything now. He’d have to reconsider taking his teammates on journeys to the other Realms. The care and feeding of humans was the stuff of nightmares.

… …

Elénaril smiled benignly at her guests. Despite the problems with the meal—mortals had such delicate health, apparently; the feast had gone well. Her younger son and his warrior-maiden had chatted companionably with the visitors and had led conversations that included the select group of courtiers she’d invited to join them. The Æsir wasn’t so unsuitable as she’d first thought when Nyvorlas had told her of his decision to woo the woman. “Prince Loki,” she said, turning to the only one among them with family ties to three of the Nine Realms’ royal houses. “What would Asgard, Vanaheim and Jötunheim think about a marriage between your warrior goddess and my younger son?” Silence blanketed the room.

“Mother, such has not yet been discussed,” Nyvorlas insisted in a quelling tone.

“Perhaps it should be, the way you dote upon the girl.”

“Personally, I think it a splendid idea,” Loki managed to interject. “They’re both so strong-willed that their inevitable disagreements would provide endless entertainment.”

“Oh, surely she’d give ground to a husband; that is the role of a wife.”

“You said that in front of the wrong group of women,” the human male muttered.

“I give ground to none who are in the wrong,” Sif stated hotly.

“But…”

“I’m afraid I’d have to agree with Sif,” Loki’s princess said, though far more gently. “I take it that your belief in this is why you’ve always taken consorts but never remarried?”

She stared at the fire-haired Æsir. “What are you saying?”

“Were you afraid that marrying again would cause you to be less independent as a monarch?”

“I-well…”

“It shouldn’t; not unless your laws need a serious revamping. Of course if you have…”

“Kara, you are no longer a psychologist, please stop,” Loki asked.

The woman’s mouth snapped shut and she stared at her husband for a moment. “You’re right,” she finally said and then looked back to her. “I’m sorry, I was out of line. But as you see, Loki asked, he did not tell me what to do, and because he is right, I’ll do as he asks. I don’t give ground, I have a reasonable discussion and the person who is wrong agrees to correct his or her actions.”

The ebony-haired prince leaned his head on one hand and stared at his wife. “My love, that wasn’t stopping.”
“Oh.” Her face flushed. “I’m sorry, shutting up now.”

Before Eléñaril could comment, her chatelaine came up to whisper in her ear. “Oh, very well,” she told the man. “I am reminded that our evening’s entertainment is awaiting us. Shall we all adjourn to the theatre?”

… …

The distressingly tedious entertainment was finally over and Nyvorlas drew Sif with him to follow the visitors into their common sitting room. “Thank you both for distracting my mother,” he said to Loki and Kara once the door had closed behind them. “That was skillfully done.”

Kara grinned. “You’re welcome. I’m just glad I picked up on what Loki wanted well enough. He couldn’t drop his shields too completely or she would have felt it.”

“How did you manage that, love? I was glad of it, but wondered,” Loki wanted to know.

“You asked instead of ordered…and without being prompted or reminded, in the middle of a society that wouldn’t expect you to ask. I was, um…”

“Shocked?”

“Curious.”

“Oh, I’m certain. Eventually I’ll remember to ask all of the time.”

He stared at the couple. “The two of you confound me.”

“In what way?” Loki asked him.

“You argue hard and often, yet you seem so…connected.”

“Do we argue often, Loki?” Kara asked.

“I hadn’t noticed such. Nyvorlas, I know that we disagree often, but our arguments are rare. We’re very different people, so disagreements should be expected.”

Sif was staring at them. “Wait; that was planned?” she asked.

Loki grinned at her. “It was; we did not wish our visit ruined by having to smuggle you back to Asgard after you’d inserted Eléñaril’s head up her backside for interfering in your courtship.”

“Humph. I’d be limited to such; they won’t allow me to carry my sword.”

“That is why sorcery should be a coveted ability,” he told her, allowing a sword to appear and then disappear from his hands.

“Or perhaps why one should be wooed by a sorcerer,” she muttered.

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “You should have thought of that several centuries ago.”

“Ahem. Good thing she didn’t or I’d have to be hurting her,” Kara told them.

Sif nudged the other woman. “It would never have happened; I’ve always been partial to blondes.”

Pepper smirked. “I thought Kara handled it beautifully. Queen Eléñaril looked as though her world
was crashing down around her. Forgive me, Nyvorlas, but is your society really that, uh, hidebound?”

He sighed. “I’m afraid so. For all of the political power women wield, within their marriages they are treated as the lesser half. I do not agree with this,” he hastily added as Sif’s brows drew together. “A strong and capable woman should be treated as such in all aspects of life.”

“Nice save,” Stark told him. “Hell, everyone knows I’d be a mess without Pepper.” The human eyed Loki who had remained silent. “Here’s where you’re supposed to say something similar about Kara, bud.”

Loki huffed impatiently. “It’s not similar at all.” Nyvorlas held his breath waiting for the Princess to explode. Much to his surprise, the woman slipped an arm about her husband’s waist and rubbed her cheek on his shoulder. Loki smiled down at her. “I would be dead were it not for Kara,” Loki concluded.

Stark chuckled. “Even better save.”

Apologies weren’t something he did well, but Sif was looking at him expectantly. “I-I hope that Sif and I achieve a relationship as close as yours is,” he said to Loki and Kara. “Your obvious love and respect for each other is a glad sight and I am happy for both of you.” That had best be good enough; he didn’t think he could manage more. He glanced at Sif. Ah, good, she looked pleased.

Kara was smiling as well. “I think you will.”

“I need to ask a favor of you,” Loki asked Nyvorlas. “Though in actuality, it would be doing yourself a favor.”

“And what would accomplish such?”

“Kara and I must return to Jötunheim in the morning for Helblindi’s wedding and I am loath to drag Tony through Yggdrasil’s branches so soon after his injuries were healed. Nor do I wish to subject Pepper to yet another trip through the Bifrost. I hoped perhaps you and Sif could amuse them with a tour of your Realm for the next two days. They really should see more of Ljósálfheim than Queenshame and perhaps even more of that than the Palace Spire.”

“And if Sif and I are busy playing host and hostess we will not be subjected to my mother’s continued probing into the progress of our relationship; an excellent notion, indeed. Sif, what say you?”

She shrugged. “I have no objections. Honestly, I was getting a bit restless.”

“Then it is settled, my friend. Sif and I shall take your honorary brother by marriage and his wife on a tour of the Realm while you do your duty to your brother.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is short and pretty fluffy, and just moving the plot along. We’ll come back to Sif and Nyvorlas later, I promise.
I have no freaking clue where the idea for the Ljósálfar armor came from. I was just intending to have them admire an intricate sculpture. Suddenly, the armor was born and Loki wanted it; badly. Naughty Loki taking over my story again! The dish called ‘grønne lim’ is made up. It means ‘green paste’ in Norwegian which is my opinion of avocados. ‘Hákarl’ is not made up, though it’s usually served plain. It is fermented shark and is found in Iceland and other Nordic countries. Gordon Ramsey spat it out when he was served some and Anthony Bourdain described it as the single worst, most disgusting and terrible tasting thing he’d ever eaten. Even Andrew Zimmern couldn’t say anything nice about it. On to Jötunheim for frosty wedding bells!
Once More into the Breach, Dear Friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“She was fine for a day then she withdrew again,” Helblindi told them when he came to greet them in their rooms. “I do not understand; are all females so contradictory, brother?”

Kara remembered to look away before rolling her eyes. “No, only the most intriguing of them,” her husband replied. “Boring women are hardly worthwhile having.”

She looked back in time to see her brother-in-law smirk at her before he responded. “I see you practice what you say, Loki.”

“Yes, my lady is many things, but she is never boring. So you’ve made no progress on romancing your Intended then?”

“Skrikja keeps to her chambers except for the public evening meal. I attempted to visit her there and was rebuffed.”

Loki frowned thoughtfully. “And there were no arguments? Nothing that could have upset her was witnessed by anyone?”

“Not that anyone is willing to speak of.” Helblindi’s sigh sounded like nails scratching on a chalkboard. Funny how Æsir hearing just made that sound even more irritating.

Neither man spoke for a moment and when she glanced up from unpacking she saw them both eyeing her expectantly. “If you’re waiting for me to volunteer to talk to her you’ve got a long wait coming. I think I exhausted my ‘indulge the king’s sister-by-marriage’ courtesy last time. Loki needs to talk to her; he wanted to anyway because of the power she seems to have.”

“True. I can approach her with that intent, she will be less suspicious and perhaps more open.”

“Then it is settled, brother; you will find out what bothers my Intended.”

Loki sighed and Kara turned away as she smothered a laugh. “I will certainly try.”

… …

Loki had no problem gaining admittance to Skrikja’s quarters. The girl was grateful to him, even if his rescue had caused her an inordinate amount of pain. She was also curious as to what in her bloodline gave her the potential for sorcery. “Do you know your genealogy?” he asked after the courtesies had been exchanged.

She shrugged. “I know my mother’s name and her mother’s name. All before that was lost in the Great War.” The war that resulted in the Jötnar being trapped in Jötunheim by Odin, she meant; at the end of which Odin had found an abandoned half-Jötunn infant and had taken him home. The population had been fairly decimated. If the Jötnar didn’t breed relatively prolifically, it could have destroyed them as a people.

“You have no knowledge of your father’s line?” he wondered.

“Oh, yes. It is just that my father’s line is not important.”
“Why not?”

The girl shrugged again, her expression uncomfortable. “He…he was not mated to my mother. His family is not noble and her sire would not accept him for her.”

Ah. The girl was a bastard; yet another reason for her to feel unworthy of Helblindi. A foolish reason, but a reason nonetheless. “That is nothing to feel shame for,” he told her gently. “My sire Laufey was mated to my mother rather than Helblindi’s mother, yet he is king.”

“You are the legitimate son?” she asked.

“Yes, Queen Fárbauti was my mother.”

“Then we are distant cousins. My grandmother’s half-sister was taken by Laufey in marriage.”

Loki was stunned. Bera had become pregnant again after she came to Jötunheim? “Was your great-grandmother named Bera?”

“Birla, she was called.”

Sweet Yggdrasil; Birla was the accepted diminutive of Bera. This child was also descended from Bölþorn! “That explains much. Birla was called Bera when she was born in Asgard. She was the granddaughter of Bölþorn, the last great Jötunn sorcerer and was the mother of my mother, Queen Fárbauti. Tis no wonder your blood is so strong.” He thought about the ramifications for a few moments while his young cousin nervously worked the shuttle on the loom she was using to weave more of the burgundy cloth she’d given Helblindi as a name-day gift. “You are not only my cousin, but also Odin’s. That means you are of royal blood, not simply noble blood. Your marriage to my brother will further cement the new bonds of friendship and kinship between Asgard and Jötunheim. Helblindi is fortunate indeed that the woman he so desires is also a great political asset though he knew it not…and cared not, for that matter.”

She was staring at him now, her mouth open in surprise or possibly it was wonder. Kara would know the difference. “I am an asset, not a burden?” she asked.

“By the…damnation, girl, who has told you that you’d be a burden?” Loki was certain she hadn’t come up with the idea herself. His young cousin’s expression told him she’d be in tears if Jötunn had any; they did not, though their skin overall did tend to dampen when they were upset. He’d learned that when Tony had almost died here five days ago; his leather trousers had stuck to his own damp skin. Gathering a shaking Skrikja in his arms he rubbed her back soothingly. “Now tell me, cousin; who said such a thing?” he asked in as gentle a tone as he could manage considering his annoyance.

Skrikja shrugged. “One of the wise-women; I went to them with a friend. It is traditional to bespeak them before a formal mating to ask their advice and if they foresee your union to be blessed with offspring.”

Interfering bitches; Loki had small use for the so-called ‘wise-women’ of any realm, or ‘wise-men’ for that matter. They were generally simply old and opinionated and more often wrong than right. “What was this woman’s name?” he persisted.

“I do not know. Once they retire to the enclave they do not use names. They are simply addressed as ‘Venerable’.”

Wonderful. Not only was this woman old, she was likely widowed or never married and had no surviving family and was therefore no doubt embittered. “This Venerable was wrong,” he said.
bluntly. “You are no burden to my brother; you are a treasure beyond compare, not just to him but to all of Jötunheim.” Skrikja was staring at her weaving now, her expression troubled. “My lady, please know that my brother despairs of pleasing you. He truly wishes your happiness. Would you put him out of my misery and tell him truly if you care for him? That is what he most wishes to know, if his regard for you is still returned.”

The girl giggled. “Your misery?”

He gave an exaggerated sigh to play it up and further brighten her mood. “Indeed. If he bursts into my chambers one more time looking for consolation or advice when my lady is expecting me to be giving her my undivided attention and affection I shall need to find another bed to sleep in…alone.”

This time she laughed outright and loudly. “Oh, we mustn’t have that. Princess Kara was kind to me.” The giggles returned. “Very well. Shall I send for my betrothed? I’m afraid you must need stay while I speak with him, it is too close to the ceremony date for us to be alone.” Skrikja frowned. “Prince Loki? As my cousin and my closest living male relative, will you stand for my family at the ceremony? I had no one to do so and the lack was weighing heavily upon me.”

“I would be honored.”

… …

“So?” Kara asked when he was finally able to return to her hours later. He looked frazzled but she could feel that he was relieved.

“Success. Oh, and I have more family.”

“You’re…oh; of course you’re not kidding. How is she related?”

“Apparently Bera had a child by a Jötunn after my mother was born. Skrikja’s grandmother was Fárbauti’s half-sister.”

“Heh. More ties to Jötunheim for the All-Father. And what about your second reason for visiting our future sister-in-law? Why was she pulling back this time?”

“Some supposed wise-woman told her that she would be no more than a burden to my brother regardless of whether or not Helblindi desired her because her father’s family was not noble and she is illegitimate.”

“Humph, neither was Helblindi’s mother and so was Helblindi.”

“As I pointed out to her. End result, she now realizes she is a great treasure and asset to my brother, and they have spoken and…’kissed and made up’, I believe you would say. I have both their promises that they will not interrupt the rest of our night for anything less than an attack on them or us.” He dropped down onto the pile of furs that constituted their bed, pulled off his boots and flopped back on it. “I am exhausted.”

She sat down beside him and gently stroked the still blue cheek that was lined with strain. “Poor baby,” she cooed and gave him a soothing kiss. Kara grinned as he grimaced at her too-sweet tone. “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

Blood red eyes opened as he frowned at her. She loved that he was no longer self-conscious about his Jötunn form. It hadn’t even occurred to him to shift back when he’d returned to her. “Possibly; though it could not have been recently enough as I cannot recall when it was.”
“Ha. It was this morning.”

“As I thought. Not nearly recently enough.” Loki’s eyes had drifted closed and a smile was tugging at one corner of his mouth.

“How certain are you we’re not going to get company tonight?”

“Unless the fortress is attacked and if that happens I shall be peeved beyond all measure. You would be most welcome to blow up any miscreant who dares disturb us with such an attack.”

“Good.” Another thing she appreciated was that when they were here, he affected the local habit of not wearing much in the way of clothing. Though he didn’t go so far as Helblindi and wear only a chiton and the odd nether-regions wrapping that she thought of as a ‘family jewels sling’, he did forego wearing his usual shirt, leather duster, vambraces and other armor pieces. Since he’d already pulled off his boots that meant he was only wearing those lovely, formfitting silk-lined leather pants…and diva that he was, he usually went commando under them. Yum. Kara smirked as she tugged at the laces that held the leather closed. Loki had refused to ‘update’ his outfits with zippers. He found them annoying. While he didn’t open his eyes or move, his smile grew…and he still didn’t shift back to his Æsir form. “Excellent,” she murmured when the laces gave way and his bare and already burgeoning cock became visible beyond the modesty panel.

“So I’m told,” Loki said with a definite smirk. Kara rolled her eyes, it was a reflexive response; she knew he couldn’t see it. “Are you simply going to look at it all night or were you actually planning on doing something?”

“Just for that I should go to sleep.”

One slightly glowing eye opened. “You wouldn’t.”

She shrugged. “You did say you were exhausted.”

The other eye opened as well. “This is why you should be on top, not abstain altogether.”

“Humph.” The crinkling at the corners of his eyes when he smiled was more noticeable in his Jötunn form, she noted distractedly as she slipped her hand between the silk linking and the silky chill of his blue flesh. Tugging gently, Kara guided the thick staff out and coaxed it into full hardness; it didn’t take much. Then she took hold of the waist of the pants and tugged them down over his narrow hips and muscled thighs. It always made her laugh when people described him as ‘thin’ or some similar word. Loki was built solidly, like a marble sculpture, all hard angular lines. The only place his bone structure was obvious was in his face, jaw and, of course, the clavicle. Everything else was sleekly covered by lean, hard muscle. “Have I mentioned how much I love your body?” she asked.

“Yes, but again, not recently enough.”

“Have I ever complained about how needy you are?”

That made him chuckle. “No, you have not; though I’m quite certain you’ve oft been tempted to do so.” He reached out to trail cold fingertips along her cheek. “Thank you, darling Kara, for indulging my need for reassurance. Your love…I couldn’t do without it, you know.”

Wow, that had gotten way too serious. “Do you know what I couldn’t do without?” she asked as she tossed the remainder of their clothing on the chair that sat next to the bed. “Besides your love, I mean.”
His smile had returned, full force. God, he was so damn beautiful when he smiled. “What is that?”

“This.” She swung a leg over his prone form and moved into a squat as she guided his thick staff to her entrance. He hissed and she groaned as she forced herself down hard and fast. The sudden shock of freezing cold within her was almost painful for the moment it took for her mutation to compensate. Hmm, why had her mutation not ‘healed’ when she became Æsir? “Stop thinking,” she muttered to herself.

“What?”

“My mind is going off on stupid tangents, I was telling it to shut up and enjoy.”

“Good advice. You should be a mind healer.” He gasped as she slammed the palms of her hands against his stomach. “So much for an attempt at levity. Damn, love; you’ve gotten strong.”

She’d had some long discussions about sex with Natasha while Loki had met with various ambassadors and other political representatives and decided this would be the perfect time to see if she had pelvic control like Nat had described. “Have I?” she asked as she bore down hard and he gasped again.

“Bloody hell, woman!” Loki stared at her in shock, his eyes now glowing brightly. “Do that again,” he demanded.

“Oh, you liked that?”

“Like is an understatement. Again…please,” he added grudgingly.

“Maybe later.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Romanov.”

“Don’t diss Natasha, she’s the one that told me to try this,” she informed him as she squeezed tightly once more.

He groaned and clutched her calves, his head thrown back. “I’ll have to thank her,” he managed. Kara relaxed atop him and waited. His eyes shot open again and he frowned up at her. “Well?” She lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head to the side. “Damnation, woman; are you going to ride me or not?”

Her laughter spilled out and she leaned forward to kiss him before obliging. She did a quick check of her energy; it was still very high, so she wouldn’t have to rush their lovemaking. Being Æsir was doing wonders for her energy’s base strength and control. Just taking the time to enjoy her husband in this form was a treat she’d been looking forward to. Shivering, she paced her movements, the long sliding pull of his cock inside of her as she pushed up with her thigh and calf muscles alternating with a hard thrust down to almost slam against him. Loki’s eyes widened at the first hard impact and his mouth dropped open slightly when she repeated it. “You did tell me to ride,” she told him.

“Very strong, darling; I love it,” he hissed out as she slammed down on him for the third time. “Don’t hurt yourself.” She tried tightening and pulling up at the same time. Her muscles fought each other making both actions much more difficult than either alone but his moan and enraptured expression made it worth it. “How in the Nine did she teach you this?” he gasped. “More importantly, gnnnnhhh,” he groaned as she slammed down again. “On whom?”

“No one; I’m just a very good listener. You’re my test subject.”
“Damnation. If she tells you more things like this, feel free to ahhhhhh!” he yelled as she managed the simultaneous pull up and pelvic tightening much better this time. “Gods, Kara; you’re going to make this a very short ride if you keep that up.”

“Can’t have that…not yet, anyway.” She settled into a less intense rhythm, lifting and dropping, enjoying the sensation of the hard cool cock that filled her heat and the light ridges that rubbed inside her canal. “You feel so perfect,” she sighed and then moaned as shivers ran up her spine.

Natasha Romanov definitely deserved a gift…something unique and special. Damn, he’d think about it later. Kara was riding him far more gently now, it annoyed him that he’d had to call for her to tone down the activity. Gods knew he was far more used to the need to be concerned for her. Not that her exuberance would harm him; but the loss of control he was spiraling into would have been mortifying. Kara was the perfect one. The flames from the braziers cast a flickering glow on her creamy skin and between the dancing light and her movements the fiery strands of her hair seemed alive. The contrast of her cream and fire against the cold azure of his... “Why did you not say something?”

Her rhythm faltered and her eyes focused. She leaned down against his chest. “Damn it, Loki. Something totally earthshattering better have happened; that was feeling seriously fantastic.” She gasped as he lifted her from his body and set her down on the bed. “Loki? What’s wrong?”

“You were about to drain yourself and end up passing out,” he told her angrily. Kara gave him a look she usually reserved for Tony when the man would come up with some truly foolish or outrageous idea. “Don’t give me that look; do you have any idea how badly I feel when that happens? I won’t have you wearing yourself out just to please me.”

Now the damn chit was rolling her eyes at him. “Loki, do you realize you just told me what I could and could not do again?”

“What? I did no such thing.”

She sighed. “Yes, you did. You told me that I wasn’t allowed to continue to make love with you while you were in your Jötunn form. If you were concerned, why didn’t you just ask me how my energy was, hmm?” His jaw dropped involuntarily. “But no, you had to decide, again, what was best for me and deprive me of what promised to be an absolutely stupendous orgasm. Thank you oh so damn much for treating me like an incompetent child.” She flung herself off the side of the bed, grabbed her clothing from the chair and stalked off toward the bathing chamber. “Idiot,” she snapped as she slammed the door closed behind her.

Loki let his head fall back on the bed. “I am an idiot,” he agreed quietly. Deciding that if he shifted forms now he’d have to stop and dress, he simply hurried after her. The door seemed to be stuck…no, wait, it was actively resisting? “Kara, stop holding the door…ah, please,” he added, realizing he was giving her another order.

“Fine,” she shot back.

He grasped the handle and then hissed in pain; it was scorching hot. “What did you just do?” he demanded.

“There’s no lock so I made one.”

Grabbing a blanket he tried the handle again. It wouldn’t budge. The damned woman had fused the
workings. “Kara, first you accuse me of treating you like a child, then you behave like one. Is it any wonder that I’m confused?”

“Oh, fuck you, Loki. Don’t you dare put this on me; you are the one who continuously pulls the same crap and I’m damn tired of it.” He stared at the door as she paused. “How many times are you going to tell me you’re sorry, that you didn’t mean to do it, and then go and do it all over again? Grow the fuck up or I’m moving out of the tower. You don’t need me there anymore and the Avengers can monitor your use of magic for Asgard.”

Did she…? Was she threatening to leave him? “You—you wouldn’t,” he said confidently, leaning his back against the door. He heard a door close on the other end of the bathing chamber. “Kara?” There was no response and he could no longer hear her in the other room. “Please,” he whispered as he slid down the surface and landed on the floor.

… …

“Princess?” a harsh voice ground out as Kara strode down the corridor. She spared Gymir a glance and kept on walking. “What’s happened?” he asked.

She stopped and frowned up at him. “I need to return to Asgard,” she told him. “I’ll need an escort to the Bifröst egress.”

His eyebrows drew in to his blade of a nose almost comically. “I do not understand,” he told her. “What has happened?”

It was none of his damn business. “Are you going to provide an escort or would you prefer to explain to your shield brother why I’m wandering outside of the fortress alone?” She hoped he’d cave on that. While she’d be able to find the egress on her own from the feel of the energy, finding her way back here if Heimdall refused to activate the bridge would be problematic if falling snow filled in the path she made.

“As you wish, your highness,” he half-sighed. She turned and headed for the main doors. “Wait, do you not need your arctic clothing?” Gymir reached out toward her and recoiled as she let heat flare around her. “What have we done to anger you so?” he asked.

“Nothing; your hospitality has been impeccable. It’s my traveling companion I have issues with.” And that, she thought, was an understatement.

… …

He made a brief stop to alert Slingard of the Princess’s departure. Slingard would notify the king and Helblindi would need to deal with his half-brother. Following in the goddess’s wake Gymir noted that the snow and ice was melting as she passed over it. He only hoped that the Asgardian Gatekeeper would get her safely out of Jötunheim before she fully unleashed her anger. She reached the egress before him. “Heimdall!” she called out. “I need to return to Asgard before I cause a problem here that the All-Father does not want.”

“Princess, what shall I tell my liege?” he asked as they waited.

A tell-tale shimmering began in the air around her. “Tell Helblindi that his brother is an ass.”

Gymir snorted. “My shield brother thinks Loki can do no wrong.” The rippling of light blue energy threaded with ribbons of rainbow colors increased violently and then the woman was gone. “I shall tell him no such thing lest I court his anger.” He trudged back to the fortress shaking his head.
Helbindi and Slingard awaited him in the main entry hall. “Where has my sister-by-marriage gone?” his king asked.

“Back to Asgard; I believe it to be a personal disagreement between her and her husband,” he offered cautiously. “She seemed…angered.”

His shield brother gave him a brooding look. “There are footprints in the stone,” he muttered.

Surprised, Gymir looked down at the hewn rock flooring. They were not true footprints such as those one would see in the snow after a person’s passage, but rather a melting surrounding the area where a small foot might have trod, presumably from the intense heat the woman was emitting in her anger. “Perhaps it is best she chose to leave.”

“Perhaps?” Helbindi snorted. “Perhaps I should go determine what my brother has done that angered her so; she has not shown such lack of control before.”

“I do not envy you that task.”

… …

Heimdall frowned down at her when she exited the observatory. “You may not cross the bridge into the city until you calm down.”

Her jaw dropped for a moment and then she nodded. “Early warning system is up, huh?”

“I do not…”

“My eyes have changed to gold on silver?”

“Ah: yes, Princess, they have.”

Kara nodded again. “Mind if I pace a bit?” Heimdall silently gestured to the area of the bridge near the observatory. Folding her arms across her stomach she walked back and forth, trying to calm down. She didn’t understand why she was so damn upset this time. Sure, Loki’s bad habit had interrupted truly stupendous lovemaking, but that wasn’t the be-all end-all of their relationship. Somehow, this time his telling her instead of asking had totally infuriated her instead of just annoying her. She loved the damn man and she’d accepted that he wasn’t going to learn not to do it any time soon. Being this angry didn’t make sense. “Something is really wrong about this,” she told the Gatekeeper. “I shouldn’t be this damned upset.”

Eyeing her cautiously he nodded agreement. “Perhaps you should speak with Lady Eir?”

“Yes. Is the Grand Vizier here or is he on Midgard?”

“On Midgard with Lady Jane. Do you suspect sorcery?”

“I don’t know what I suspect. I just want to cover all the bases…uh, make sure nothing is overlooked,” she clarified as uncertainty flashed through him.

Heimdall nodded again. “Her majesty should at least be able to tell if sorcery is involved and she can summon a member of the Guild if she suspects such.”

“Great.” Taking a deep breath she held it and then let it out slowly. She felt a lot more centered. “Am I good to go?”

He peered into her eyes, and who knows, maybe he saw deeper than the surface. “Yes, your
Helblindi opened the door to his brother’s chambers cautiously. Loki had threatened him with impotency if he was interrupted this night. Obviously he wouldn’t be interrupting him and his lady, but if Kara was so upset that she’d felt the need to leave, Loki might be beyond reasoning with. “Brother?” There was no response and that worried him greatly. Had the woman lost control before leaving? No, he smelled nothing burning other than the fuel in the braziers. Peering around the door he spotted Loki sitting on the floor with his back against the door to the bathing chamber, leaning on his bent knees, face buried in his hands. “What happened between you and your lady?” he asked.

Loki shook his head slightly. “I’m not really certain.” His face lifted and he frowned. “That’s not quite true; I know I precipitated it but it got totally out of hand very quickly. That perplexes me. We both have tempers but neither of us is nearly that volatile.” Helblindi decided that his half-brother’s expression looked lost. “Where is she?” Loki finally asked.

“Back in Asgard, most likely.”

“What?”

He shrugged at Loki’s exclamation. “She asked your Gatekeeper for passage back to Asgard. I assume she’ll await you there.”

“No, that’s…that’s wrong. She always gives me a chance to apologize, to explain. There’s something…it’s just wrong.”

“Hmm. Her anger was so great that her passage melted the rock in the entryway.”

Loki’s expression mirrored the shock he had felt when he’d first seen the damage. “That is not like her.” He frowned and stood, shifting to his Æsir form as he paced slowly through the room, one hand outstretched. “What in the Nine?” Loki spun and stared at him. “There’s a residue of sorcery here and it is not mine.”

“You’ve said my Intended has the blood for sorcery.”

“Yes, but not the training. This is something subtle, cast by a sorcerer or sorceress of great experience.”

Helblindi felt his gut clench. “Has Amora found her way back here then?”

Loki frowned, his expression considering. “No, the magic does not…ah, taste of her, or of Malekith.” The frown deepened. “Yet somehow it is still familiar. Hmm. You rather suddenly had issues with Skrikja, correct?”

“Yes, it was sudden and fully unexpected.”

“Did you find yourself becoming angry or having another unexpected emotional response to anyone else thereafter?”

He’d argued hotly with his shield brothers, over sheer nonsense, several times since Skrikja’s unexplained withdrawal. The servants had also managed to annoy him greatly, though he had to admit they’d done nothing out of the ordinary. “I have,” he agreed, not at all liking where this was going.
“So that makes four of us with unusual reactions to emotional stimuli. Anyone else?”

“I do not know; why is that important?”

“If it is due to sorcery, we need to know how it is triggered in order to fight it. I’m finding myself growing highly impatient with you right now, I’m controlling my temper only because I know I’m being forced to the reaction. Skrikja was not becoming angry, but she teetered between despair and giddiness when I spoke with her; I think perhaps that was because she is not one to anger easily.”

“True. I have not noticed any others with unusual reactions; I shall ask Slingard and Gymir if they have any reports of such.”

Loki nodded. “Good. If they have, ask if they know who the people involved had interactions with. We’re looking to see if they had such with the four of us.” Loki frowned and his expression became thoughtful. “Particularly if those interactions involved physical contact; Skrikja was so upset that I held her…don’t glare at me, she is my cousin and I am a devotedly married man. Kara and I were, of course, in close physical contact.”

“You and I have not touched.”

“No, but we’ve both touched Skrikja…son of a bitch.”

Helblindi stared at the strange expletive. It sounded…ah, yes. It was something Stark said frequently. “Something occurs?”

“Yes. Did you perchance touch Skrikja soon after she returned from her visit to the wise-women?”

“I did, once. Then she pulled away from me and fled to her chambers.”

“And did your anger issues begin after that?”

By the Nine…his brother was on to something indeed. “One of the Venerable Ones is a sorceress,” he breathed.

“Or someone who attends them. I much doubt it is one of Skrikja’s friends or we would have had these issues sooner.”

…

Kara rode Loki’s black stallion to the Observatory. Her mother-in-law had confirmed sorcery was involved and the senior guild sorceress who had been summoned was able, barely, to dismiss what she called a ‘taint’. The hooves of Fandral and Hogun’s geldings pounded close behind her. Odin had decided that she and Loki would need physical backup so that Loki could concentrate on the sorcerer or sorceress who was causing problems for his brother. Heimdall’s eyebrows disappeared under the edge of his helm as she slid off of the huge horse. “Svartlyn allowed you to ride him,” he said incredulously.

She couldn’t help but smirk. “Sure, after he tried to throw me a few times. I had to calm him down a notch with a projection.”

Fandral threw himself off of his gelding. “Twas an amazing sight,” he offered. “The beast sniffed her and allowed her to mount, but refused to move without his master. When she insisted, he bucked and thrashed like a wild thing, the lady clinging precariously…”

“Fandral, that’s enough. We don’t have time for a saga.” She handed her reins off to the stableman
who had finally caught up to them. “Loki’s temper is bad enough when he has control of it; with this sorcery affecting him, who knows what kind of chaos he’ll get into.”

Hogun shuddered as he dismounted and handed over his gelding’s reins. “Agreed; haste is needed.”

“Good fortune to all of you,” Heimdall offered as he inserted his sword into the Bifröst’s controls.

They were deposited at the Jötunheim egress where an unusual number of guards were stationed. “Oh crap. What’s happened?” she asked the most senior of them, an unusually tall giant who wore a copper torque of rank. Kara was glad she’d asked Helblindi the ranking system and how the different ranks were identified. Helblindi wore gold, Loki, as his heir, wore silver, Gymir and Slingard had bronze torques and the senior guard members – the equivalent of officers on Midgard, wore copper. Seemed simplistic to her, but hey, it worked for them.

“Your highness,” the officer said with a slight bow. “Our king bid us to await your return and to prevent anyone from leaving our realm.” He frowned at her with narrowed eyes. “Have you recovered your temper, Princess?”

“Ha, sounds like Loki figured out what was going on. Yes, an Æsir sorceress was able to cleanse me of the taint. I take it they haven’t figured out who did this to us?”

“Correct.” The senior guard gestured to the path back to the fortress. “I will send a guide with you; we must remain here lest the miscreant try to use the Bifröst to escape.”

Skrikja shook with anger. A sorceress had done this to her; one of her own kind wanted her to lose Helblindi’s love. Worse, this sorceress was pretending to be one of their honored Venerable Ones, women who were looked up to for their courage and wisdom. “Cousin, calm down,” Prince Loki advised. “Every emotion you feel is magnified by the sorcery; giving in to it may cause you to act unwisely and even to endanger yourself. I know it is difficult, but you must be calm.”

She looked between him and her king. Helblindi’s expression was worried and he reached out for her only to have his brother bat his hand aside. “Do not…” her husband-to-be began.

“Until we can break the sorcery, we do not touch anyone skin to skin,” Loki told him. “We’ve isolated that as the means of spreading the curse of it. If you feel you must hold your Intended, your skin or hers must be covered.”

Helblindi sighed. “I had forgotten in my concern for her.” Skrikja perked up. Even with this problem, he was so intent on comforting her he overlooked his brother’s warnings.

“I am fine,” she told him. “We-we will deal with this and all will be well.”

“That’s the attitude; good for you.” Skrikja grinned as her cousin’s wife strode into her chambers followed by two of the Æsir warriors that had accompanied them on their first trip some months ago. “I guess you don’t need my news from Asgard,” Kara said to her husband.

“Do they know of a way to overcome the sorcery?” he asked.

“Ah, then it wasn’t a wasted trip.” She held up a rolled parchment. “For you from Lady Ragna; she seemed to believe it will be a lot easier for you to counter than it was for her. By the way, sorcery or no, you still owe me an apology.”
The corner of Loki’s mouth curled up in a half smile. “And you shall receive it as soon as it is safe for me to touch you. I’ve learned that the sorcery is communicated through exchange of bodily fluids.”

Skrikja frowned. He hadn’t mentioned that before; only that touch was involved. Her cousin-by-marriage was frowning as well. “But we had no such exchange,” she interjected before the goddess could speak.

“We did. Jötnar skin moistens when they are upset. When I comforted you as you sorrowed over your mistaken belief that you were a burden to my brother, your skin was damp.”

“I’d never noticed that,” Kara mused. “But then, the only time I’ve seen you upset in that form you were in the bath with me as I was going through the DNA change.” She shrugged. “Even if we weren’t already wet I wasn’t exactly in any condition to notice something that subtle.”

“I did not know it until I discussed this problem with Helblindi and his shield brothers. There is much about my other half that I do not know.” He unrolled the parchment and scanned it quickly. “Really? That…damnation, I thought her dead.”

“Who?” Helblindi asked.

“Ah…” Loki paused and looked at his wife. “This sorcery has the signature sourcing of a Jötunn sorceress and shape shifter named Angrboða. She had been in Asgard posing as an Æsir and then dwelt in Svartálfheim for several centuries before returning to Asgard…”

“Hel’s mother?” Kara spat out. “She’s behind this crap?”

“So it seems.”

“I do not understand,” Skrikja ventured. “You told me that the last great Jötunn sorcerer was our ancestor, Bólþorn.”

“He was. Angrboða isn’t a great sorceress. Experienced, yes; great, no; I’ll have no difficulty breaking this taint she’s created and barring us from being infected by it again.”

… …

Kara groaned quietly. “Will you need to talk to Hel before you do something about her mother?”

“No. We’ve discussed Angrboða before. Hel agreed…no, insisted that should her mother attack me or mine that I should use whatever force is necessary to permanently neutralize her.”

“Will that apply if I have to do it? Angrboða knows your magic, or at least the potential you had when you knew her; she might be prepared to defend herself from you. I really don’t want to piss off your goddess of the Dead if I have to kill Mommy Dearest.”

“Our goddess of the Dead, Kara. And yes, the same would apply. She told me any means, even if I had to use Thor or Odin to accomplish the task. Hel warned her mother to leave me and mine alone; she also told her to never end up in her Realm lest she demonstrate to her how miserable it is to be controlled.”

“Oooh, definitely a Mommy Dearest relationship. Good.” She frowned thoughtfully. “Wait a minute; if Angrboða dies over this, doesn’t she get a one-way trip to Niflheim for Hel’s judgment since it wouldn’t be a result of honorable combat on her part?”
Loki’s grin was decidedly nasty. “It does indeed, my love.”

“Well, all-righty then.”

… …

The hair on the back of Hogun’s neck was raised. It was only partially because their group was followed by two pair of Jötnar warriors. No, much of his edginess could be attributed to the need to deal with this particular sorceress. Loki hadn’t been the only Asgardian she’d fooled with her borrowed form. On Asgard she’d appeared to be a tall Æsir female with mysterious silvery eyes and golden blonde tresses that had rivaled the color of Sif’s before Loki’s misbegotten prank. They’d seen her only once in her Jötunn form; far taller, raven-haired, covered with the raised ridges that denoted clan, and…blue. The giantess had returned to Asgard to foist her daughter off on Odin, demanding a treasure in return for giving him his son’s daughter. The entire court had been horrified. There was no denying the young girl was Loki’s get, she favored her father strongly. Loki had been the most horrified of all of them. All of them other than himself. He’d allowed the woman to seduce him as well; it was only good fortune or perhaps her plan that his seed hadn’t taken root in her. He prayed that Angrboða would either not recognize him or would not acknowledge their dalliance. The last thing he needed was to damage the peace he’d made with Thor’s brother. “What are our orders if she resists?” he asked Loki.

“Keep my brother and his Intended safe,” his prince responded. “Leave dealing with Angrboða to me or to Kara. With all due respect for your skills; no one else of this group could handle her. That said, if we are down, do your best to end her. She must not be allowed to continue spreading discord.” Hogun grunted agreement. He didn’t like the idea of bringing Helblindi’s lady with them, but the explanation that Jötunn society expected their queen to be able to stand against those who would attack her made it clear that they had little choice in the matter.

“How gifted is she at sorcery, Loki?” Fandral asked.

“Not as powerful as Amora, but certainly strong enough to harm any of us were we not protected. Stay within the shielding I’ve constructed. Outside of it, her power can kill you.”

Hogun nodded. When Kara had emerged from the Intended’s chambers with Loki and the Jötnar, Loki had cast shielding that would protect them so long as they stayed either behind him or within a few strides of each side. King Helblindi had grumbled, but had finally agreed to allow his half-brother and Kara to take point. Fandral was also chafing under the restriction, but Hogun didn’t mind nearly as much as his flamboyant comrade. There would either be fighting for them or not; either way, there was much honor in protecting the All-Father’s newly discovered kin. He checked to see that all of his flesh was covered on his arms and tugged his gloves up more firmly. If he had to pull one of the Jötnar out of danger he’d rather not be in pain from frostbite while further defending them. “Stay between your guards, Lady,” he told the king’s Intended. The barely of marriageable age girl, who was still a shade taller than Loki, nodded.

“I don’t suppose I could just fry her once she’s been identified?” Kara asked, sounding hopeful.

Loki frowned at her. “You’ve become bloodthirsty, my lady.”

“No, I’ve become thoroughly pissed that people can’t just let the universe go on and let other people be happy. If they spent half the time looking after their own lives that they spend making other people miserable, they’d be too busy being happy to hurt anyone else.”

Her husband opened his mouth to respond then apparently thought better of it. “Hmm,” he finally returned. “I can’t find fault with that logic; it certainly was true for me. Regardless, love; do not,
ah, fry Angrboða unless she attacks and I cannot stop her.”

“Fine; I was only kidding anyway…sort of.”

“I’m certain,” Loki said and Hogun had to snort at the prince’s wry tone.

… …

Okay, so maybe she hadn’t been kidding. Kara tried not to sigh as they approached the enclave that housed the ‘Venerable Ones’. At this point she just wanted to go home, snuggle with her husband and get ready for her real wedding. Well, real to her, anyway. Oh, and check on Natasha; she really needed to start paying attention to how her friend was handling pregnancy if she was going to do the baby thing with Loki anytime soon. Nat was due in maybe two months. Rubbing her abdomen reflexively Kara frowned at its flatness. She still hadn’t caught up to her changed metabolism though it seemed she was constantly eating. Pregnancy meant eating for two and she didn’t see how she could possibly eat enough to support herself and a baby. Babies…oh boy, she wasn’t certain she was ready for that. “Kara?” Loki’s concerned voice jerked her out of her thoughts. “What’s wrong?”

Oh boy. “Nothing; it’s just my thoughts wandering, sorry.”

His sigh was pained. “Pay attention, love; this isn’t going to be a walk in the park.”

“I don’t know; the last time we took a walk in the park it was full of Chitauri and a Mad Titan. This should be easy in comparison.”

“True, but no complacency; I won’t risk you being hurt.”

“Right; I’m paying full attention now.” And she was. She was paying full attention as someone inside the dwelling ran deeper inside, the alarm they felt shrieking through them. “Shit, someone’s run off to warn her; I bet they know exactly who she is.”

“Brother, send your men to cover any exits.” Helblindi nodded at Loki’s terse order and dispatched the four guards that accompanied them. Slingard and Gymir closed ranks behind Skrikja while Helblindi moved in front of her. Fandral and Hogun kept their positions guarding Loki’s brother and cousin. “Kara, can you pick up anyone else’s emotions?”

“Yep, someone is very pleased with herself; viciously smug about it, too.”

“Can you target her from here?”

“Not accurately, no. If I try and get someone else in the area, it might clue her in to try and shield against empathic projections, so we probably shouldn’t chance it. There are too many people in there to successfully affect all of them, even with the increase we’ve seen on my power.”

“Understood. She’ll know that I’m here and much of my capabilities, so why don’t I try a sedation working? It won’t matter so much if it fails, we’ll simply know that she’s extended protection to those around her.”

A sedation working? That was the first time she’d heard him mention something like that. “Um, does that mean that you’re going to try and knock them out with magic?”

“Exactly. Now hush while I concentrate.”

Kara waited as he shifted to his Æsir form; for some reason he was far more comfortable using
magic that way even though a lot of his power came from his Jötunn great-great-grandfather Bölporn. Maybe because that was the form he was stuck in when he’d been studying it? She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Why was her mind wandering so damn much? “Loki? Could Angrboða be doing something to distract thoughts?”

His now green eyes narrowed. “She could, indeed. Your thoughts are wandering despite attempts to concentrate?”

“They’re all over the place.”

Loki frowned and held up one hand, and his head tilted to the side as he focused. “No, love; she’s done nothing of the sort, this is on you.”

“Damn.” Frowning, she waited as he began casting his own magic.

… …

Kara’s scattered thoughts were giving him pause. There was no sign of any magic being responsible and she was usually terribly focused. He’d have to look into it further when they had time. For now, he’d just need to keep a closer eye on her. Flashing a quick hand signal to Hogun and Fandral to watch over his wife, Loki began casting his sedation working. The green-tinged haze grew around his outstretched hands and then flowed into the dwelling, becoming invisible as it left his presence. He listened carefully for the telltale thuds that would indicate the residents had succumbed to the casting and had lost consciousness but heard nothing. “Damnation; Kara, has there been any change in the number of active minds in there?”

She frowned. “Yes, but only a few less…maybe three less; I’m feeling eight unique sets of emotions. One is the smugness that has got to be Angrboða. There are three more that feel like they are in on the whole thing; they have a kind of nervous but satisfied feel to them. The other four are scared to death but totally intimidated by the others.”

“They are likely servants,” Helblindi noted. “She may use them as pawns.”

“You play chess?” Kara asked, sounding surprised.

“What is chess?”

“It’s a Midgardian game of strategy, brother,” Loki told him. “Kara, the concept of pawns and the name for them predates the game by several millennia.”

“I’m sure I knew that,” she muttered, sounding distracted again. “I’ll try to take the servants down with projections first thing so she can’t get them killed.”

“Good plan,” he agreed, trying not to worry. “Let’s go.” He pulled his spear out of ‘hammer space’, as Tony called it and advanced. Kara moved to his right and slightly behind, allowing him room to maneuver the weapon while staying within his shielding. The others moved in behind, Gymir and Slingard all but hovering over Helblindi’s Intended, prepared to bodily protect her. As they reached the first corner, Kara whispered in English that two of the servants and one of the lesser targets were awaiting them and gave him the approximate positions of each. Stepping around, he blasted the female holding a weapon and watched the two servants collapse on the ground moaning piteously. “What did you…?”

“Grief, lots of it.”

“Hmm, interesting choice…” he broke off and spun as two more somewhat elderly female figures
rushed in from another room. The giantesses grabbed him and allowed ice to build up. Loki was startled for a moment, wondering why they thought this might hurt him then realized that Angrboða might not truly know he could take Jötunn form when their daughter, despite being nearly three quarter Jötunn, could not. He smiled nastily at them and shifted, letting the ice slough off of him, then slammed one in the gut with the butt end of the spear and used the length of the shaft to trip the other, sending them both crashing to the floor. Five down, just the two servants and Angrboða to face now. He strode forward into the next room, shifting back to Æsir form before entering it. Angrboða sat on a raised platform; the two servants cowered in front of her. “Fancying yourself a queen, my dear?” he asked.

Kara wouldn’t help staring. The woman was damned beautiful. Though the size of the female adult Jötnar, her appearance was Æsir; golden blonde hair and frosty gray eyes with lightly tanned skin. It was no wonder she’d been able to seduce Loki; hell, she probably could have seduced every damn male in Asgard up to and including Odin himself. “Loki,” she all but purred. “The years have treated you kindly.”

“I wish I could say the same of you; but that would be a lie.” Kara kept her expression blank at Loki’s outrageous statement. Angrboða couldn’t possibly have been more beautiful…could she have? “You’ve come down in the universe…pretending to be a clan elder, how demeaning.” Oh, that was what he’d meant.

Her laugh pealed out. “The failed king says such?”

“My plans worked perfectly. Thanos is no more and I am worshipped on Midgard and feted in Asgard and Jötunheim. Can you say nearly as much?”

Kara tried to ignore them and carefully probed the giantess. Her emotions were tightly shielded. She might be able to break through, but it wouldn’t be easy. “Better than Keebler,” she muttered in Loki’s ear, still in English, hoping he’d understand. His eyebrows rose and he nodded. “Then you’ll need to use what you did on the MTDs if I am unsuccessful.” Yep, he understood.

“What an odd language; is it some sort of code?” the blonde asked politely.

Kara didn’t get it; she was being threatened and she was…obviously planning something. Shit. A quick scan of the area worried her. There were far too many emotional signatures outside, and they didn’t all feel like Jötnar. “We’ve got hostile company coming; lots of it,” she hissed to Loki.

“Well, let’s prepare to give them a welcome they don’t expect.” He smiled charmingly, shifted his spear to the scepter formation and stepped closer to Angrboða. “I must say that you are every bit as beautiful as I remember.” She preened. “Darling, do something about the servants if you can,” he added. Angrboða frowned in confusion. He’d been looking the giantess directly in the eye as he spoke, but Kara knew he was talking about her projective empathy. She reached out; these servants were within Angrboða’s shields, but barely. Punching through it should be relatively simple.

Footsteps pounded from behind them. “Svartálfar warriors and traitors!” Gymir spat as he whirled to face them. Shit was getting real. Fandral and Hogun turned to take over guarding Skrikja as Helblindi and Slingard joined Gymir in defending them all from the rear attack. Kara punched through the shields and dropped the servants with a projection of terror; it didn’t take much, the poor women were already scared half to death.
Loki stepped into the space vacated by the servants and touched the tip of the scepter to Angrboða’s chest. The blue crystal flared and the giantess’s gray eyes turned an eerie blue. “What the actual fuck, Loki!” Kara yelled.

He flashed a wicked grin. “Odin separated it from Thanos’ influence; he did not remove its capabilities,” he told her. “Such language, love,” he murmured in a teasing tone.

“Holy crap; and he trusted you with it? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Shrugging, Loki returned the Scepter to its spear configuration and turned to face the approaching enemies. “I was saving it for an emergency; and truly, the knowledge would not have gone over well with our friends and allies on Midgard.”

“It’s not going over well here, Loki,” Fandral barked out as he engaged one of the Svartálfar with his sword. “We’ll be discussing this.”

“Oh, I’m certain,” her husband muttered snidely before blasting into the center of the attackers with the energy beam function of his weapon. “Kara, get Skrikja and Angrboða to the back of the room; it’s defendable. Burn anyone who tries to harm my cousin or you.”

“And we’re keeping your ex alive, why?”

“For questioning; she didn’t plan this alone.”

Oh. Good point. “Got it.” Grabbing Skrikja’s arm in her gloved hand, she tugged her to the corner Loki had indicated then frowned at the Æsir-hued giantess. “Follow Skrikja,” she told her, just to see if she’d listen. The blonde rose from her seat and made her way to the corner. “What do you know; huh.” Angrboða’s shields were down, too. If the Scepter’s control failed, she’d be able to drop the woman with a projection before the shields could be reestablished. Kara directed both women to sit on the ground and put their heads down to make them as small targets as possible, then stood behind them so that she could keep an eye on Angrboða and the attackers at the same time.

… …

Fandral spun, swinging his sword to decapitate one Svartálfar warrior before moving on to the next. Their enemies had made a mistake by coming inside. The smaller Æsir, and half-Æsir, he amended, thinking of Loki, had the advantage of movement. The traitors among the Jötnar couldn’t reach them, which left the more easily defeated Svartálfar to bear the brunt of the fighting. It didn’t appear that the dark ones had brought any sorcerers; had they succeeded in decimating them between the battle of Asgard and the battle of the Jötunheim Plain? “No magic-users?” he asked as he twisted around the swing of an axe and found himself side-by-side with Loki. He pushed down his disquiet at the revelation that the half-breed’s weapon still held the ability to control minds. Loki hadn’t betrayed any of them since his planned defeat on Midgard; he’d give him the benefit of the doubt.

“They may be holding them in reserve, thinking Angrboða would suffice in that area.” Loki thrust over the heads of the Svartálfar line with the energy crystal enhanced spear, taking out the throat of a Jötunn who had a death grip on one of their King’s shield brothers. “I kept the retained power of the Scepter confidential at Odin’s behest,” he continued.

Odin was a master strategist, much like his adopted son. He could accept that explanation until he had a chance to speak with the All-Father personally on the issue. “Will it hold her,” he asked indicating the giantess with a chin gesture as he all but disemboweled another Álfar.
“Only so much as it did me…damnation! Hold this line,” Loki ordered and dropped back. “Kara, she’ll likely have as much autonomy as I did when I first came to Midgard to gain the cube,” he warned.

“Got it; her shields are down, I can put her out if necessary.”

“Good reminder,” Loki muttered to him as he pushed forward once again. “My thanks.”

Fandral grinned as he grabbed a Svartálfar by the arm and twisted him around into Loki’s spear while his own sword was trapped in another’s ribs. “We work together, we are victorious together.” The prince’s grin was a welcome sight as Fandral struggled to pull his sword free.

“All right,” Loki said. With a gesture, the enemy’s flesh shriveled and the sword slid free. “Battle magic is too draining to do that often,” he explained as he went back to fighting using his spear.

“Ah, I’d wondered.” Fandral checked his swing as Hogun stepped up.

“Helblindi asks that you go to the fortress for reinforcements,” the usually silent warrior told Loki. “Find Fjolsvin who guards the Royal Wing, he is undoubtedly loyal. There are too many outside to deal with.”

“He doesn’t want Kara to use her fire on them, I imagine. Very well.” Loki backed up, allowing Hogun to take his place. “I’m going for reinforcements, love. They’ll take on the traitors from the outside.”

“Okay, I’ve got this.”

Between one breath and the next, their prince was gone. “I’ll never get used to that,” Fandral told Hogun, who grunted in response before surging forward to push the advancing enemy back from their charges.

… …

It would be nice, Kara thought; if Loki had bothered to tell her just what he had and hadn’t ordered Angrboða to do when he took control of her using the Scepter. The woman was sitting quietly, but she didn’t like the look in her disturbingly blue eyes or the way the Æsir appearing giantess was staring at Skrikja. “You will not do harm to Skrikja, order or encourage anyone else to harm her, or allow anyone else to harm her,” Kara told the blonde, hoping that Loki had commanded the woman to obey her. The eerie blue gaze settled on her and the perfectly proportioned lips twisted in an expression that matched the annoyance Kara could feel. Apparently he had done exactly that.

“Skrikja, just in case, don’t sit too close to her.”

The girl nodded. “Agreed; she makes me nervous.” Helblindi’s Intended edged back to Kara’s side, closer to the wall.

Looking up she saw two unfamiliar Jötnar warriors leap over the line of Svartálfar that had thoroughly engaged Fandral and Hogun. The two gleefully reached for Skrikja. Before Kara could react, Angrboða gestured and the two fell back. “What do you?” one of them exclaimed. Their faces echoed the shock Kara felt emanating from them. Angrboða didn’t answer as her hands dropped back down to the floor. Her resentment cut through her other emotions.

“Nice. The two Jötnar climbed to their feet, this time creating ice spears. One of them had nearly skewered Angrboða with his before Kara realized her mistake. The ice spear melted as she directed her fire to it. The heat ran up its length and the Jötunn screamed as his skin began to smoke.

“Angrboða, you can defend yourself from anyone not loyal to Helblindi, Loki, Odin or Thor,” Kara
amended. The giantess gestured again and the surviving attacker was thrown back again, his spear shattering. Nodding approval, Kara looked over the close-quarters battle. Helblindi, Gymir and Slingard had used bodies of their attackers to create a bottleneck. Gymir still faced the Jötnar attacking from the rear while Slingard and Helblindi turned their attention to the Svartálfar who were all but overwhelming Fandral and Hogun. Kara couldn’t see how she could be much help. Her friends were far too close to their enemies for her to use either of her gifts without affecting them. “Damn, I hate feeling helpless.”

“You’re born of Midgard; what else could you be?” Angrboða snidely commented.

Crap, she’d forgotten that Loki had been able to say pretty much anything he damned well pleased and did so with one hell of an annoying attitude while he was burdened with Thanos’ oversight. Unfortunately, she doubted Loki being able to hear anything Angrboða said was much of a deterrent for the woman. “Don’t tempt me to forget that we want you alive for now. I can and will kill you if you annoy me enough.”

“You will not anger your god,” the giantess said, her voice confident.

Kara gave her a sweet smile. “He’ll forgive his goddess.” The blonde eyebrows rose disdainfully. “Fully Æsir and goddess of Fire, honey. Yes, he gave up one of his titles to me. Bet he never did anything so meaningful for you.”

Angrboða sniffed haughtily. “I needed nothing from him but his seed.”

“You see; that’s why he’s mine. I wanted him, nothing else. And before you make any more snide comments, you’re the one who is busy plotting because you still don’t have what you really want. Now shut up before I send you on a one way trip to visit Hel.” Kara smiled even wider as Angrboða blanched and a thread of unease ran through her. “I hear she’s prepared quite a reception for her Mommy Dearest.”

Fjolsvin cursed the traitors and all of their ancestors as he ran to the garrison. Calling his own personal squadron, he told them to gather only those they trusted with their lives and with their king’s life and follow him into battle. He’d sent Prince Loki back to their king’s side. In short order nearly two dozen warriors joined him outside of the Enclave of the Venerable Ones. Unfortunately nearly three dozen surrounded the building with hostile intent. Fjolsvin was just glad that he didn’t recognize most of the warriors. “No mercy!” he bellowed to his followers. “For Helblindi and Skríkja!”

The battle raged for nigh on an hour before a familiar figure came out of the Enclave, using one of the rebels as a barely living shield. Gymir’s height made him easy to recognize, even in the throng of warriors. “Your allies are dead or captured,” he shouted. “Submit now and our king will be merciful. Continue to fight and you will all die by fire!”

Would their king truly unleash the power of his sister-by-marriage? He wouldn’t want to be the one testing Helblindi’s resolve, not after putting the king’s Intended at risk, Fjolsvin thought. “You heard the Councilor,” he added to Gymir’s warning. “You have no escape; lie down on the ground if you choose to surrender.” He shoved the two warriors he’d been facing backward to give them the opportunity to submit. Relief washed over him as they took it and flattened themselves on the ground, arms crossed over the back of their necks in the accepted posture of surrender. A quick glance across the battlefield showed that most of the rebels were following suit…and just in time. A small figure in iridescent gold armor topped with a long forest green tunic had moved out to stand beside Gymir; balls of flame cupped in her tiny hands. Princess Kara, wife to their crown
prince and Asgard’s goddess of Fire was ready to make Gymir’s threat a reality. He hastily signaled his own loyal troops to back out and away from the rebels they’d been fighting to give her clear targets.

She flipped up the face piece of her helm and met his gaze. “Fjolsvin, I presume?” she asked, using Asgard’s All-Speak. He nodded. “Allow those who have surrendered to crawl towards you. I’d rather not inadvertently harm them.”

He grinned as the remaining rebels dropped to the ground in submission, their faces contorted in horror. Of all the races in the Nine Realms, theirs was the only one that shared Midgard’s belief in a fiery punishment in the afterlife for misdeeds. “Midgard calls you Hellbringer,” he said loudly to enforce the concept with the rebels.

“They do, as I bring what Midgardians regard as Hell to Midgard to punish my enemies.” Several of the warriors on the ground visibly shuddered. “So far today I’ve only had to kill one of your people this way. He dared to lay hostile hands on King Helblindi’s Intended. Let’s keep it to that, shall we? I really hate the smell of burning flesh.”

Her disgusted tone was perfect; now several of the surrendering warriors were whimpering as though they were babes who needed their mothers. Taking a closer look at them, he realized that most were quite young and from the style and poor quality of their chitons they were from the more remote parts of the realm. Probably raised with rhetoric about Laufey and how he’d stood up to Asgard. Hah. That was laughable; Fjolsvin was old enough, he’d been there during the Great War. He’d seen how Laufey had sacrificed his warriors for his own safety and to protect his personal fortune. “I think you may avoid such, your highness,” he told the Æsir. “These boys have been listening to fools, I imagine; fools who rewrite our history and paint Laufey as a heroic king. I was there; he was not at all heroic. His firstborn did our Realm a favor by ending Laufey’s vile life.”

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It had taken hours to sort it all out. Loki glowered at the inoffensive wall while awaiting his half-brother’s leave to take his exhausted wife and retire to their chambers. Kara was lying half across his lap, all but asleep and bundled in a fur blanket to conserve her now waning energy. Finally the last of the council members, courtiers and sycophants departed and Helblindi threw himself down in a chair. “That is over, for now,” he muttered, his annoyance seeming equal to Loki’s own. “Perhaps once, just once you will be able to visit without a Svartálfar instigated attack disrupting us.”

“What I’d like to know is why, after all these millennia, they’re rising again. They stayed more or less quietly in their dark Realm; no one bothered them and except for a few skirmishes and raids now and again, they bothered no one. It’s not solely Malekith; he’s ruled them for centuries now.”

Helblindi shrugged. “Perhaps Angrboða can shed some light upon his reasons. I do not think he has returned. The last any of the rebels heard from him was before I threw him from Yggdrasill’s branches. They were astounded when told he was lost in the void.”

“You’d best question Angrboða; I do not have the stomach for it. She is the mother of my child.”

“So long as you do not quibble over my methods, I am willing to do so.”

“Do as you please with her. Neither I nor Hel will take issue with aught you do. The bitch has left us both soured.”

“Your men did not look too pleased with her either.”
True. The way Fandral and Hogun had acted around Angrboða made him wonder if he was perhaps not the only Asgardian she had seduced. “She sure got around,” Kara mumbled.

“What’s that, love?”

“Big, blonde and bitchy. Seeing her made the boys feel nervous and guilty and seeing them made her feel like a cat looking at discarded toys. You she still wants, though.” Kara stretched as she sat up and then yawned. “I take it you dumped her back in the day.”

“I-yes, I did. She made little secret that she wanted my title and that she had plans for us that included ending up on Hliðskjálf. Once I learned her secret, I no longer had any regret that I’d sent her away; I don’t doubt that if her schemes had borne fruit, I would have not lived long past taking Odin’s throne.”

“Humph. She still thinks you’re all that, though. I have to admit, she has good taste in men.”

“Does she now?” he murmured as his lady wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. “Kara, you’re already tired; I’d prefer you don’t drain your energy further just for closeness.”

“Just? Hey, you remembered to suggest rather than tell,” she said as she disengaged and sat back up. “Just for that I’ll take your advice even though there is no just when it comes to cuddling.”

He chuckled and brushed back her mussed hair. “With Helblindi’s leave, we’ll go back to our chambers, I’ll shift, and you may have all the cuddling you desire.”

“By all means, brother; take your wife and go. The ceremonies begin early on the morrow.”

Ceremonies? Oh, of course; Helblindi and Skrikja’s wedding…or joining as it was called in Jötunheim. He stood and held out a hand to steady Kara as she rose and staggered slightly. “Until tomorrow, brother; do keep a heavy guard both on Angrboða and on the path to Yggdrasill.”

“You can count on it.”

Chapter End Notes

Language Note: Svartlyn is Norse for Black Lightning.

Have you all seen Thor, TDW? Much like with Iron Man 3, I’ve decided to ignore the events therein and remain AU after the events of The Avengers. I may be incorporating some concepts detailed in the newer movies (such as Loki’s hair curling when he doesn’t use stuff to slick it straight or Tony having the Arc Reactor removed), but mostly, ah, no. Not going there, particularly with TDW as I detested Director Alan Taylor’s vision of Asgard.

(Minor Spoilers follow)

Seriously? A civilization that old (and magic based) using what looks like standard artillery as a ground to air defense? The man needs to get a grip. They really should have stayed with Kenneth Branagh as director. And did it not occur to Mr. Taylor that you can’t have the Bifrost being able to pick up and drop off people from or to any place at any time or you take all risk out of any venture? Give me a break! The acting was great, as usual, but the directing sucked in my not so humble opinion. Even my
hubby was appalled by it, and he’s not that discriminating so far as directing goes.

Ugh. Rant over. Anyway, until next time…
God, she was tired. Not drained of energy tired, just plain old tired. Loki had suffered from nightmares half of the night. He wouldn’t talk about it but Kara could guess they centered around Hel’s mom. He’d finally fallen asleep clutching her tightly, a position that did not lend itself well to comfortable sleeping for her. Kara stifled a yawn, but not quickly enough. “I kept you awake,” Loki murmured.

“It’s okay.”

He sighed. “It is not and I am sorry.”

She smiled at his self-disgust. “I know you are, but it’s okay, really. She really worked you over back in the day, huh?”

“As you say.” Hmm, he was bitter about it, too.

“Loki, don’t kick yourself over this. Angrboða was older, experienced, and had an agenda. It happens. And judging by the way Fandral and Hogun were acting and feeling, you weren’t the only one she fooled. Besides, you were pretty young. I’d bet no one could fool you like that now.”

If anything his mood deteriorated. “You’d be wrong. Thanos fooled me, at least for a while. It wasn’t until he sent me to Midgard and out of his direct influence that I realized I was being used and had to improvise a plan to thwart him.”

“Wait; that was all improvised at the last minute?” She stared at Loki incredulously as he nodded. “I’d thought you had the entire time while the Titan held you to come up with it all. Wow.”

“If I had, there might have been fewer deaths. That still bothers me.”

“Caring about the ants again?” That comment earned her an exasperated snort.

“It would have gotten me a lighter sentence or perhaps no sentence at all.” He smirked at her disbelieving look. “Fine; I care, perhaps a little. The point is that even with all of my experience, I was fooled again.”

“After you’d spent who knows how long sensory deprived in the void and were then tortured.” He shrugged her response off. “Loki, you’ve read far enough into my reference books to know that makes a huge difference.”

“I suppose seeing her again, much as she looked then, brought the resentment back.”

“No doubt. Wait; she’s looking ‘as she looked then’? Please tell me she was Æsir-sized when she fooled all of you.”

That got a chuckle out of him. “Yes, of course. Her Æsir form was tall, but not unbelievably so. She was about my height which is quite tall for a woman, but not unheard of.”

“No one can say that you have narrow tastes. You went from blonde and extremely tall to a short redhead. Did you pick up a brunette of average height somewhere in the middle?”
“Hmm, not really. Sigyn was blonde as was Sif when I was attracted to her. Obviously I didn’t know what I was missing by choosing blondes over redheads,” he teased. “And you are not short; you are simply not overly tall.”

“I feel terribly short when I’m in Asgard. Even Frigga is taller than me and she’s on the short side compared to the other women.”

“She’s Vanir; they tend to run a bit shorter than the Æsir. Mother is of average height among the women of Vanaheim. Her sister Freya is considered rather tall.” He shrugged. “It’s generally accepted that the Æsir are genetic descendants of both the Vanir and the Hill Giants. When they previously spoke of Odin being descended from giants, it was supposed that he had a great deal more Hill Giant blood than the average Æsir.”

“When in reality he was a quarter Jötunn. His people are still reeling from that one, Fandral said before he and Hogun left.”

“Our people,” he reminded. “It’s not as though he had much choice; else the negotiations would have been blocked by Asgard’s council.” Loki frowned and then gave her a mock glare. “You were babbling along just to distract me from overthinking,” he accused.

“Guilty. Are you ready for your half-brother’s wedding to your long lost cousin?”

“Considering I must stand as the approving family member for both my brother and my cousin, I had best be.”

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“What if she withdraws again?” Helblindi asked.

Gymir bit back a sigh. “She will not.”

“If she’s fearful enough, she may refuse me.”

“Your brother has calmed her fears, Skrikja will not refuse you.”

“Perhaps she is still too young.”

He’d only rarely been tempted to do violence to his shield brother, but this was swiftly becoming one of those times. “She is a year over minimum marriageable age and is mature for her years. While she is young, she is still a woman grown; cease fretting and be a man about this.”

“I do not see you marrying,” Helblindi grumbled.

“You know why I do not.”

“That was centuries ago; even if you cannot find another to love, you should father heirs.”

“I had an heir; she chose to leave our Realm.”

“She was not full blood; you cannot blame her. Besides which, she married a king, there is honor in that, even if he is Vanir.”

“Yet they do not name her queen because of her blood.”

“No; yet perhaps things will change. Asgard now looks upon us with some favor and their queen is Vanir born and bred.”
Gymir wasn’t certain how this conversation had changed from Helblindi’s insecurities over his Intended to focusing on Gýmir’s estrangement from his daughter, Gerd, but at least he was spared the need to continue reassuring his shield brother. “Perhaps; yet I shall not count upon it. Ragnarök will come before the other Realms truly count us as equals.”

“One step at a time, old friend; today we take another of those steps. My brother is called brother by the heir to Asgard and I take his and the All-Father’s cousin as my mate. You are first among my councilors and your daughter is wed to the Vanir king. We build our ties slowly and carefully; this will allow our Realm to prosper.”

“And it doesn’t hurt that your Intended is beautiful.”

Helblindi laughed loudly enough that he drew the attention of the guard stationed in the hall. “No, Gymir; that is not painful in the least.”

Sometimes being briefed on what to expect did not fully prepare one. This was the case with his half-brother’s wedding to his cousin…or rather ‘Formal Mating’ as they called it. He’d expected a gathering of Helblindi’s subjects, yet very few were in attendance and judging by the size of the room, this was expected. An elderly male Jötunn officiated. Loki knew that he was the eldest member of their - Helblindi and his - clan. The eldest member of the clan or clans involved always presided, regardless of whether they were male or female; so much for Darcy’s contention about feminism. Gymir, Slingard, Kara and he were the official witnesses, along with Helblindi’s remaining councilors. A few of the guard officers and a number of the children who had assisted with his rescue were the only other attendees. He straightened self-consciously when the Elder asked him, as the most immediate family member to both Helblindi and Skrikja, if they had his permission to wed. His lips curled up as he contemplated teasing them with a denial then Kara nudged him sharply in the back. Ah well, he supposed the jest would be taken poorly. “They have my permission, as eldest surviving member of their immediate families,” he said as he had been instructed.

The Elder nodded. “Helblindi,” there was no concession to titles in the ceremony. “Do you willingly take this female as your mate?”

“I do,” his half-brother agreed.

Turning to the girl, the Elder asked; “Skrikja, do you willingly consent to be formally mated to this male?”

“I do,” she said after darting a glance at Helblindi.

After wrapping a pure white length of ribbon binding their off-hands together, the old man held both hands over theirs. “In Ymir’s name,” he said, “Helblindi and Skrikja are declared Formally Mated.” Loki could almost literally hear capital letters when ‘formally mated’ was said; the man enunciated the words with such weight. He fought down another smirk when the Elder looked at him. “Prince Loki, would you grace this Mating with your blessing?” he asked.

His eyebrows shot up. “Gladly, what must I do to signify such?”

“Infuse the binding with your power, boy. You are a sorcerer of Bölþorn’s line; how is it you do not know such things?”

“I was not aware of my heritage until a few short months ago, sir. It may take some time for me to
become fully acquainted with all that may entail.” Loki tried to keep the irritation out of his voice in deference to the man’s age, but it was difficult. His wife’s light squeeze on his arm and her approving smile told him he’d succeeded. What kind of power could he use that would constitute a blessing? He wasn’t Frey; his power would not help with conception. Wait; they’d had problems with misunderstandings, his power over words and the ability to force honesty might do well. Full honesty was never a good thing; perhaps he could limit it to honesty about their feelings for each other? Not to compel it be expressed at all times, but that when asked or when offered, their words must match what was in their hearts. Frowning in concentration he shaped the working and then loosed it. The green-gold haze settled into the ribbon and then the ribbon lost cohesion. He was slightly startled as the ribbon and energy seemed to be absorbed into the clasped hands of his half-brother and his cousin.

The Elder smiled widely. “You learn quickly then,” he praised. “It is good.” Looking from one of the newly joined mates to the other, he nodded. “Have you aught to say to one another?”

They looked into one another’s eyes and surprisingly, Skrikja spoke up. “Helblindi, I have long admired you; not just your form but your honor. When...when he turned his attention to me I was horrified. Even though you, as Crown Prince, were far above my station, I’d harbored dreams of giving myself and my heart to you and only you. I feel blessed that I am finally able to do so.” Loki smirked at the slightly startled look in his cousin’s eyes. Apparently she hadn’t intended to quite say that much.

Helblindi’s expression was overjoyed. “It is I who am blessed,” he said. “Your courage, your intelligence and your beauty are more than I’d ever hoped to find in a mate. I will cherish the gift of your heart and offer you mine in return. You will always be first in my eyes and I will always consider myself your first in all things.”

Nice touch, Loki thought. He’d told his bride that so far as he was concerned, she was bringing her innocence to their marriage bed. Skrikja burst into the tearless Jötunn version of weeping and threw herself into Helblindi’s arms. His brother held the shaking girl and looked helplessly to Loki. “It’s for joy,” he advised quietly. “Hold her; rub her back to reassure her that she is safe in your arms.” Helblindi’s expression was dubious. “Truly, it happens all the time. It means you’ve said something to touch her heart.”

“Deeply touches her heart,” Kara added.

His brother smiled broadly. “We are both blessed,” he told his mate. “We have not only found each other, but we have found family to support and guide us.” Hmm, Loki thought. Perhaps he hadn’t properly limited it to their feelings for each other?

… …

“What did you do?” Kara hissed in Loki’s ear as she pulled him off to the side on the way to the Throne Room.

“Whatever do you mean?” he responded in a tone dripping with exaggerated innocence; an innocence that was not at all a good match for the mischief she could feel.

Oh boy. This was not going to be good. “I mean, what did you do to Helblindi that had him waxing almost poetic? And what was with Skrikja, not only speaking first, but so much? That’s not like them at all. What kind of magic did you work?”

“I gave my blessing, just as I was asked.”
“Loki…”

Her husband huffed an annoyed breath. “I used a working of honesty that was supposed to be limited to their feelings for each other and even then, only when solicited.” He scuffed the sole of one booted foot against the floor like a child caught doing something wrong. “It may have gone slightly awry.”

She thought about that for a minute. “Hmm; no, I don’t think it did. Not based on that exchange, at any rate.” His eyes widened when she hugged him tightly. “That was a very thoughtful blessing, particularly with the problems they’ve been having.”

“You approve?”

“Why are you so surprised? Am I that much of a nag?”

“A what?”

“A termagant,” she clarified after struggling to find a term he’d understand.

“No, of course not; it is simply that I didn’t expect you to approve of my using magic to force them to do anything.”

“Oh. Well, you didn’t, not really. The clan Elder insisted and you kind of did what you knew how to do. I don’t think it was at all inappropriate.”

“Hopefully Odin will agree. It did not occur to me until after the working was completed that it might violate the terms of my sentence.”

Kara pursed her lips in thought. “I don’t think he can disagree. You’re supposed to provide recompense to Jötunheim, a clan Elder of Jötunheim asked a service of you and you performed it to the best of your ability. It doesn’t particularly benefit you and it doesn’t harm anyone; based on Helblindi and Skrikja’s history it should actually help a great deal.” She shrugged. “If he doesn’t agree, we’ll just have to discuss it.”

Loki chuckled. “You say that with fire in your eyes, love. Behave; he’s done nothing recently to earn your ire.”

“Humph.” She stopped to glare at him as he all but doubled over in laughter.

“My fierce lady; I think perhaps I am more blessed than even my brother Helblindi.”

“If Tony were here he’d say ‘damn straight’.”

“So he would. Come, we need to take our seats so that the feasting may begin.”

“More food. Yay.” She folded her arms across her stomach, but otherwise didn’t move.

“You seem less than enthusiastic.”

“I’m getting so heartily sick of eating so much and it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to let up any time soon. What’s really terrible is that I used to enjoy food; now, not so much. Eating’s become too much of a chore to appreciate the taste of it anymore.”

“Has Eir had aught to say about it?”

She sighed and carefully avoided looking at him. “I’ll probably need to eat like this for at least
another year.”

“Hmm. Or longer should you get with child.”

“Uh, yeah.”

He stepped close and wrapped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her cheek briefly and pulling back when her heat quickly built to an uncomfortable level for him. “Are you still willing to go through with that? I-I’ll understand if you’d prefer to wait until you are fully stabilized.”

The words were the right ones, perfect in fact, but his tone echoed the flash of disappointment that rushed through him.

“You know, I can grumble about something and still be willing to put up with it.”

“I do not wish you to put up with anything. If we are to have a child together…”

“There’s no if; it’s when. Loki, I promise; when we have a baby it will not be just because you want one or because your parents want grandkids. I love you and I think we’d make an awesome baby together. A weird one, maybe, considering our gifts are such opposites, but still awesome.” He still looked troubled. “I’d be putting up with the having to eat all the time to get something I want; our baby.”

“Very well, love. I simply don’t…I didn’t want you to feel obligated.”

“I know.” She turned and brushed her fingers over his lips. “I love you for that, among other things.”

“You love me for my body.”

Kara snickered at his smug satisfaction. “Silly. You know damn well I love the whole package. Hmm, except the part where you try to tell me what to do, but you’ve been working hard on that.”

“I have; though I’ll likely never completely stop doing so as you’re well aware. Shall we go inside? Hungry or not, we’ll need to eat a bit, at least, to satisfy the obligations of hospitality.”

“I guess we’d better.”

… …

Gymir allowed himself to relax for the first time in what felt like months. His shield-brother was crowned, mated, and happy. Enemies had been vanquished and powerful new allies obtained. The rebels among their people were getting a good taste of Helblindí’s justice and the law-abiding citizens were as well, though in a much more pleasant way. Their energies could finally be spent in the rebuilding of their civilization so that it would be respected in the Nine Realms and included in decisions made by the great and powerful. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you smile before,” a woman’s voice said in the All-Speak.

He stared at Princess Kara in surprise. “No?”

“Not a genuine smile. Vicious grins when you’re about to make an enemy sorry he or she crossed you don’t count.” That pronouncement made him laugh. “No, I’ve never heard you genuinely laugh, either.”

“I’ve had small reason to do either, your highness.”
“I totally understand.” The woman picked up her bowl and drank down more of the flavorful broth then set it down and groaned. “How many more courses?”

“Two; the roast dádýr and the sælgæti.”

She frowned for a moment before her face cleared. “Oh, venison and dessert, we’d call them on Midgard. Sorry, it took a bit for it to translate.”

“You do well with it considering the Æsir tongue is not even your own so our words must translate twice for you.”

“Then you understand why I perpetually have a headache here.”

He chuckled at her wry expression. “I had wondered at your near constant annoyance. That would be enough to account for it.”

“I’m just glad we’ve finally gotten a chance to…” she broke off as Fjolsvin burst into the hall. “Oh, damn. I spoke too soon.”

Gymir was on his feet before the woman finished her sentence, as was Slingard, their crown prince, and their king. “What has happened?” He turned away and shouted for the healers before the guard captain could speak as he noted the growing pool of blood beneath his feet.

“Another path…the blonde Æsir and her Svartálfar…Angrboða is gone!” the man gasped before collapsing.

“We spoke too soon, indeed.”

Loki grimaced and looked up at his brother. “I shall have to go through the fortress inch by inch to locate and block any more paths to the branches. We cannot allow any more illicit access to your Realm.” Belatedly remembering Malekith’s survival of the avalanche he added, “Well, at least directly inside the fortress. There’s little I can do about paths that may exist elsewhere.”

“Your Realm as well, my brother,” Helblindi chided. Loki nodded reluctantly. “What are our losses?”

“One guard dead and six injured,” Fjolsvin told them. “Several critically.”

“Including you?” Helblindi asked.

The man flushed. “It’s just a scratch, my king.”

Kara pushed past him and held her hands over the captain’s side. “Just a scratch my lily-white behind. There’s damage to your intestines and if the wound was any wider, they’d be falling out.”

“A healer is on the way,” Gymir advised. “Lie down, Captain. Now.” The guard obeyed and the councilor took a knee beside him and pressed a folded cloth against the wound in an attempt to staunch the flow of blood.

“I’ll need guards to watch my back as I search,” Loki told them.

“I’ll go with you,” Slingard spoke up as he gestured to one of the guards milling about to join them. “Gymir shall remain with their majesties and your lady.”
Kara gave him a tight smile. “I’ll be fine and help with Fjolsvin. Don’t worry.”

He leaned over and brushed his lips against her temple. “It may take a while, love. Be on your guard. They could easily exit the fortress in one spot and reenter through another.”

“Lovely. If they do, I’m going to turn all three of them into piles of ash…with your brother’s permission, of course.”

Helblindi nodded. “You have it. I do thank you for asking.”

Her chuckle was rueful. “I really try to not repeat my mistakes.”

They continued their light interchange as he turned and began to examine all of the walls in the hall. “We’ll ensure they are safe in this room first then move on to the Royal quarters so that my brother and his lady’s security are ensured. Once that is handled, I’ll secure the areas where I know paths exist before moving on to the rest of the fortress.” He groaned at the thought of how long it would all take. “I should have thought to block the other paths when I encountered them.”

“In your defense, you were a bit preoccupied with the safety of her majesty and your friends at those times.”

“True. The Midgardians have a saying: Hindsight is twenty-twenty…ah, vision is perfect in hindsight, translates better.”

“Wise of them.”

“I’ve learned that they do have their moments.”

Slingard gave him a sharp grin. “Wise of you since you now have family and friends there.”

“So I thought.”

… …

Kara watched anxiously as the healer began working to repair the savaged intestines. She’d used her energy to slow the bleeding so the captain was no longer in danger of bleeding out. It might be a good idea if she spent some time with Eir experimenting with her energy healing; maybe with her new genetics she could do some physical repairs instead of just encouraging the body to naturally heal at an unnatural rate? The rips and tears began to close, albeit slowly. “Thank you for helping,” her brother-in-law said quietly from beside her.

Helblindi had crouched down beside them, one arm wrapped securely around his new wife’s shoulders. Yes, even Skrikja was hovering worriedly. “I’m glad I can help. It’s always nice to be able to do something positive. I kind of hate that the gift everyone knows me by is a destructive one.”

“Gifts are gifts. It is not ours to question the fates as to what gifts we are given, but simply to use them wisely.”

Wow; Helblindi was philosophical. Who’d have thought? “I do try.”

He grinned, exposing his sharp teeth. “You succeed.” The smile faded as he examined his guard critically. “This will require much rest to properly heal,” he told the captain. “Be sure to obey the healers’ instructions, hmm?”
Fjolsvin nodded. “Yes, my king.” He looked troubled.

“What is it?” Helblindi prompted.

“I-I failed you, my liege.”

Both eyebrows rose in an expression quite similar to Loki’s when someone said something surprisingly stupid. “Nonsense; you faced two sorceresses and an ensorcelled Svartálfar Berserkr. You and the others are fortunate to have lived to tell us what happened.”

“If you say so, sire.” The man didn’t sound convinced.

“Wife of my brother, what say you of this?”

She blinked. Why was Helblindi putting this in her lap? Oh. “Well, I sure couldn’t stop the Berserkr. His armor protected him fairly well from all of my gifts and he damn near killed my friend, one of Midgard’s greatest heroes. It took Asgard’s goddess of Healing and Queen Frigga’s foresight to save his life. We even had Slingard trying to help us and we still couldn’t completely stop him. I’d say you got off pretty lightly.”

“And you saw what she did to the traitors, with little more than a thought,” her brother-in-law added.

“Aye, sire; I did. Thank you, princess. Perhaps just surviving was a success.”

“There is no perhaps about it,” Helblindi said firmly.

… …

Prince Loki had located and closed one egress to the paths in the kitchens, and another in the Queen’s Chambers. The King’s Chambers had been pronounced free of them and they were now in the rooms his shield brother used as his royal offices. “None here either,” his prince finally decided. “Let’s go down to the farming level and close the one I know is there and search for others.”

“That guard who just reported to me said they tracked the intruders from the one you found in the kitchens to the Great Hall and then on to the one in the farming level.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “That’s quite a distance. That argues for there being no other egresses between those two points. They had to know there would be a heavy guard on the Royal Chambers. Hmm. All right, I’ll close the one on the farming level and then look beyond it. Once the lower levels are all clear we’ll return to the kitchens and search out from there.”

“There’s little between that point and the fortress exits.”

“Then we’ll check that area, then go outdoors to close the one we’re aware of out there.”

“What one is that?”

“The one they used to reach the complex that housed the Venerable Ones. Unless I’ve gotten totally turned around, that’s fairly close to the point where Malekith was buried by the avalanche Dr. Banner caused. It is likely the only one in the vicinity.”

“How likely?”

“Extremely. Yggdrasil can only tolerate a certain amount of contact with each Realm before all of
the paths to its branches will begin to degrade. Such degradation would threaten the stability of the World Tree itself and thereby all of the Realms. It’s also difficult to create a path egress. I believe only the Grand Vizier and I have that ability and neither of us has dared to create more than one or two in our lifetime and even those only as a last resort.”

Slingard choked back a laugh. “Is that not egotistical?”

“Not hardly. I’ve created only one and it was make a path or die along with Thor and his friends. It drained me so thoroughly that Thor had to carry me to the healing chambers once we reached Asgard. Surely you understand how embarrassing I found being carried like a child by my so-called hero of a brother?”

“Ah. And if it took so much effort for you…”

“The other sorcerers and sorceresses alive today, with the exception of the Grand Vizier, would have died before they could possibly have been successful. But I won’t assume. Once I return…oh, bloody hell.” Loki stopped walking and shook his head. “I’ve become so used to hiding things from our Gatekeeper that I’ve forgotten how helpful his ability can be. Heimdall?” he said and then paused. “Would you contact the Grand Vizier on Midgard and confirm whether there is anyone other than he or I who can create paths to Yggdrasill’s branches? Also, it would be helpful to know if he knows of any egresses here in Jötunheim other than in the kitchens, the farming level, the Queen’s chambers and near the complex that houses the venerable ones. Thank you.”

Loki resumed walking and glanced over his shoulder. “If there is someone else who can do it, or if the Grand Vizier knows of any more egresses, Heimdall will send a messenger to us. Else we can safely assume that I am correct so far as the Grand Vizier is aware.”

“You trust this man’s knowledge?”

The half-Æsir shrugged. “As well or better than I trust my own.”

… …

Skrikja smiled nervously as her husband approached the mound of luxurious järv pelts that covered their sleeping platform. She’d undressed, as was the custom, and was stretched out atop them, covered only by a sheer golden veil. He’d insisted that she be given all of the rights and honor of an untouched maiden even though she was no such thing...thanks to his deceased brother. Helblindi had decreed that any maiden who had been taken against her will and who had lain with no one voluntarily should be still considered a maiden for all legal and traditional purposes. When he’d made that declaration a few weeks ago, she had held her calm façade until she’d reached her rooms and then had sobbed for a good hour. He was truly a man of honor and compassion; she was so proud to be his mate. He sat down on the edge of the platform and examined what he could see of her body through the shimmering material, a ritual also prescribed by tradition. “You are so beautiful,” he murmured as his hand brushed across her covered skin. “I-I will go slowly for you; but you must tell me what is good and what is not.”

She blushed at his earnest expression and her smile widened as he slowly pulled the veil from her face. ”I will try.” Her cheeks heated further as one of his brows arched up. ”It is hard…”

“Yes, it certainly is,” he returned with a wicked smile. Her eyes were involuntarily drawn to his sex. It was indeed hard and she gasped when she realized he was far larger than Byléistr. Helblindi’s expression changed to one of concern as he followed her gaze. “Relax, please. While I have not been licentious, I do have experience; willing lovers who have taught me how to take care not to hurt my partner. I will be as gentle as possible.” She bit her lower lip as he stroked her cheek. “He was not, hmm?”
Helblindi nodded, a pained look tightening his mouth. Leaning forward slowly, he stroked the curve of her jaw and captured her bottom lip between his, tugging lightly on it until she relaxed and let him take her mouth fully. A moan escaped as his tongue explored inside. The building of desire that she felt at his caresses gave her hope that relations with him would be pleasurable. “I will replace that nightmare with joy, my Skrikja. You and I, that is all there will have ever been,” he murmured as he abandoned her lips and nuzzled the sensitive skin on her neck. She shivered as sharp incisors scraped the long tendon and gently nipped down to her clavicle. His hands were sliding the golden veil down and his fingers were exploring as they want. The long fingers cupped her breasts now, making them seem tiny when she had long despaired of their weightiness in comparison to the renowned beauties of the realm. His palms pressed hard against her nipples, making her whimper as an unfamiliar warmth shot through her veins. “Ah, you like that?”

“Yes...I...yesss,” she hissed as the fingers drew together to pinch her nipples and moisture gathered between her thighs.

“And what of this?” he asked before moving down to close his lips around one of them and sucking strongly. Skrikja found herself bucking upwards and keening; the warmth was now akin to a fire within. “I'll take that as a yes,” Helblindi told her, sounding amused. She forgot to be self-conscious at his reaction when he pulled the veil completely off and tossed it to the side and slid his fingers along the folds that contained her center. Her blush deepened as he discovered the wetness. “I please you,” he said as he moved from one nipple to the other. He suckled that one as well while his fingers played freely with her sex. Strangely, she felt...empty.

“Is it supposed to feel this way?” she wondered aloud.

“What way, my beautiful mate?”

“Hot...and, and empty?”

His chuckle sounded kind. “Yes, but it won’t feel empty for long.” One finger slipped into her canal and was thrust gently in and out. The heat within her grew. “More?” he asked, smiling as she nodded. A second finger joined the first and she moaned as the thrusting created a wonderful friction. Her head began to spin and she realized the fingers seemed thicker somehow...ah, perhaps he’d added a third? She didn’t know but tension was building within her and she waited breathlessly for...for something.

An explosion of heat rocked her core and fluids gushed out between her thighs. Her cheeks heated to match. What had she done? “I-sorry, I…” Skrikja trailed off in confusion as Helblindi laughed softly.

“Do not be sorry, beloved. That…you do not know, do you?” She shook her head. “Did your release not feel good?” Her jaw dropped as she realized what he meant. “Yes, my Skrikja. That is what happens when your body achieves sexual release. It is what I wanted for you.”

“Oh.” She felt beyond foolish and turned her face into the thickness of the järv pelt that she lay upon.

"You see? You were still innocent, my beautiful mate.” She looked back at him. ”I am your first; the first to bring you to orgasm. Shall we go there together now?”

His eyes glowed and his pleased smile welcomed her home as he gently stroked her cheek. ”Yes.”
Kara looked up when Loki finally fell into bed beside her. His skin was colder than usual and she found herself reflexively pulling away. "Sorry, I’ve been outdoors for a few hours," he told her as he shifted to his Æsir form.

"That sounds miserable."

"Boring, definitely. I found and blocked a total of nine path egresses." His shift complete, he pulled her into his arms and rested his cheek upon her hair. "I'd no idea there were so many."

"Is someone going around making new ones?" That would be a big problem...huge, in fact.

"No, these were all very old. Possibly hearkening back to Bölþorn’s day. There’s nothing, here at least, to suggest that anyone other than the Grand Vizier or myself have the power to create them now."

"Thank God."

"You’re welcome." He chuckled tiredly as she swatted his chest. "Seriously, Kara. Has anyone arrived from Asgard? I asked Heimdall to check with the Grand Vizier."

"Yes, Thor is here."

"What?"

She shrugged. "He brought a gift for Helblindi and Skrikja. A personal one since we already delivered one from Asgard. Last I saw he was talking to Gymir. Your father also sent an official invitation to Helblindi and Skrikja to visit Asgard at a ‘time of their convenience’ so that Skrikja can meet the rest of her long lost family members. Oh, and Thor said the answer was that ‘nothing more was known’, if that makes any sense."

"It does. Good. Jötunheim should be safe from Amora and her ilk, then."

"Unless they have more artifacts from the Titan?"

"Even if. They need two points, remember? My father and Heimdall have locked all of the Bifröst egresses so they cannot be used with an artifact, and father and the GV have warded all of the known artifacts still in Asgard. They’d need to have someone still here with an artifact to travel here from another Realm using yet another artifact and I’ve used the Scepter to scan for such here and have found none. Hopefully the sorcerer’s guild is searching out the path egresses in Asgard and blocking them even now." He gave a sighing groan and held her tighter. "I’ve no idea what can be done about Midgard. It’s far too large to search."

"We’ll give parameters...well, you and the GV will give parameters to Tony and Bruce and they’ll set something up to search. You know they can do it."

"So they could. Gods. I want to make love to my beautiful wife so badly, but I’m too damn exhausted for my body to cooperate.”

She smiled and shifted on the bed so that his head rested on her shoulder. “That’s okay. We’ll have time later. Meanwhile, cuddling is good."

He sighed and settled in. It always surprised her how so tall a man could snuggle in so compactly around her much shorter body. “So it is,” he managed around a yawn. “Wait; what is Thor doing
“Hogun and Fandral; Heimdall sent them to Midgard to talk to the GV. Thor was worried…well, actually Nick Fury was pissed when Tony didn’t get back as scheduled so he insisted Thor personally go and find out what was going on. Thor is thrilled about Tony’s, uh, change. He likes the idea of having him around a lot longer. Oh, and your mother is looking into ways to help Pepper, Darcy, Beth and Clint. She thinks maybe there are natural ways to extend the human lifespan so they can be around a good bit longer, if not as long as their loved ones. Asgard can’t officially do anything for them, but if they should just so happen to stumble on something…well, you know how it goes.”

“Hmm. I-oh, it’s something from Vanheim that she’s thinking of, I believe. If her siblings agree, it might help. How is Tony doing?”

“He hasn’t aggravated anyone into killing him yet, but it might be a good idea if he goes home soon. Eir doesn’t want him on the Bifröst yet, though.”

“I’ll have to take him home while Heimdall sends you and Pepper.”

“Traveling is nice, but I’ll be glad to get home so I can have a real vacation.”

“Not for long,” he murmured. “We’ve still our wedding to deal with.”

“Damn.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, it’s been a month. Well, I did say updates would be intermittent! Hope it was worth the wait. järv = Norse for wolverine. Dáðýr = Icelandic for venison. Sælgæti = Icelandic for candy or sweets. I use a mix of Norse, Icelandic, and Swedish words when I’m choosing names for things in the other eight Realms as I’ve postulated that these modern languages would all have remnants of the cultures that spawned their shared mythology. The only rhyme or reason I use for which one I choose is which sounds/looks best to me. Thanks for hanging in there! Oh, and my Tumblr account - see my profile for the link - has a picture of me with ‘Thor’ at Disneyland. Enjoy!
“It will be fine, love,” Loki insisted. “You’ll only be gone for a few days at most, starting the healing and training Asgard’s healers in the technique. Then they’ll be able to continue monitoring those with meng mein injuries until they are fully restored.” Amora hadn’t left well enough alone; the wretch had ambushed a caravan transporting trade goods from Asgard to Vanaheim aided not only by Angrboða, but by the giant of a Svartálfar they’d encountered in Jötunheim that she’d called Kurse. A good dozen Æsir and Vanir had taken injuries to the meng mein and Eir was not able to heal them all on her own. Unfortunately, though she’d been able to replicate Kara’s healing method to a small degree, her juniors had not the time yet to learn even the basics from her.

“Are you sure? It will only be you and Steve here. What if…”

“No ifs. The only if is that if you don’t go to Asgard, people will die who need not. Yes, it would be better if there were more of us here so that I could accompany you, but that’s not the case. Now go, before Eir is overwhelmed.”

“Fine.” She hugged him quickly and brushed a kiss across his lips. “Bruce’s lecture is tonight; he’s already called the airline and changed his flight so he’ll be home by tomorrow afternoon. I left a message for Logan at the academy; he’s still tracking down the missing students. Scott, uh, Cyclops said to call him if we have a problem we can’t handle and he’ll bring help. Nat called S.H.I.E.L.D. and put them on alert so that Clint can take off the minute he’s needed, they’re keeping our QJ in launch position for him. If Nick didn’t have a stick up his ass, he could let him leave now, but nooo, only the Hawkeye can tell who should be trained in his specialties or not. Ridiculous; Nick just wants to keep Clint on a leash, he’s such a jerk.”

“I know, Kara. It’s fine. Get on the platform and go, now. Every moment you delay…”

“I’m going, I’m going. Don’t forget to call Tony again; or rather, call Pepper. You know he doesn’t remember anything. He may be in the South Pacific for the rest of his honeymoon, but he’s got his suit with him.”

“Yes, darling; give mother a hug for me, hmm?”

“Sure. But I’m not hugging Odin.”

That made him laugh. “Ah, but he will hug you, mark my words.”

She shrugged as she stepped up on the fountain that was temporarily covered by a landing platform where Hogun, who’d delivered the summons, waited patiently. The moment she crossed the rune covered circumference, the telltale shimmer of Bifröst energy arose. “That’s better than Thor hugging me; though at least now he’d have a harder time accidentally crush…” her sentence was cut off as they were pulled to Asgard.

“He’ll still all but smother you with his affection, no doubt,” Loki muttered as he returned back to Avengers’ Tower to finish his interrupted breakfast.

… …

Steve looked up as Loki materialized in the middle of the lounge. “Darcy called. She said Jane and
Erik are almost done with the Galisteo egress. The GV is already headed back to Asgard to help with the injured and to learn Kara’s technique.”

“Good. Are the three of them returning here?” Loki asked in an officious tone. Steve repressed a sigh. Just because the guy was a Norse ‘god’ or whatever, he had to constantly try to take charge. “We should at least have someone in the Tower should we be called to duty. Bethany spends too much of her time on her schooling to be much help there.”

“Hey, she’s got finals coming up and board exams. Her job here is to be a doctor, not man the Tower for us.”

“I’m well aware, Steven. That was not a criticism, simply an observation.”

Steve couldn’t hold the sigh in any longer. “You manage to call Tony by his right name when he’s not being a jerk; any chance you could start just calling me Steve?”

Loki smirked. “You had only to ask, Steve.”

“Damn irritating…” he muttered under his breath as he headed for the gym, ignoring Loki’s snarky chuckle.

“Was that an expletive I heard? Hmm, there’s hope for you yet.”

He refused to rise to the bait and kept on going. “Jarvis; let me know if we get any reports of trouble. Considering we’re undermanned, I don’t want to wait until our help’s officially requested before knowing something’s brewing.”

“Of course, Captain.”

… …

Groaning, Natasha panted, trying desperately to relax until the contraction passed. “Kakogo chyorta,” she muttered. ”I’m not due for over three weeks. Jarvis; call Beth, I seem to be in labor.”

There was an atypical pause before the AI responded. “My apologies, Natasha; Miss Anderson is not answering. My records indicate that she is in a lab at this time of day. Students are not permitted to keep their cellular devices on during their labs.”

“Chyort voz’mi. Who is here?”

“Prince Loki and Captain Rogers are both at home.”

“Tell them…uhnnn, tell them I’m having contractions, bad ones, and they’re less than five minutes apart. Then call S.H.I.E.L.D. and see if they have a doctor in the area.”

“Immediately, Natasha.”

She caught her breath as Loki apparated into the bedroom she shared with Hawk. “You’re in labor?” he asked. “Isn’t it far too soon?”

“Yes, by more than three weeks.” She winced as another contraction rippled through her body leaving her gasping for breath. “I’ve been shot multiple times and had broken bones along with it that have hurt less than this,” she complained.

“Jarvis, any word from S.H.I.E.L.D. or Bethany?” the god demanded.
“No, your highness. I’ve taken the liberty of contacting 911; unfortunately they are unable to assist. All ambulance and paramedic teams are currently either en route to the docks to transport casualties from a loading accident or are out on other calls. They suggest we transport Ms. Romanov to the nearest emergency room.”

“Govno, my water just broke,” she told them as Rogers burst into the room.

“Jarvis gave me the update, oh, crap, you’re soaked.”

“Her water broke,” Loki told him. “Jarvis, I’m going to need instructions on delivering a baby,” he continued as she felt another severe contraction seize her. “I much doubt we could transport her to an emergency room quickly enough to help.”

“Can’t you just, you know, magic her there” Steve asked.

“No, that wouldn’t be safe for her or the baby.” He gave her a worried look. “I am sorry, Natasha. It looks as though we’ll need to handle this one alone.”

… …

Kara stepped out of the Observatory, noting that Heimdall was gazing distractedly off into infinity. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I am following Amora and her companions. The All-Father intends to send a company after them if we can locate their sanctuary.”

“Loki will want in on that; so will I, for that matter. The blonde twosome and that freaky dark elf really need to go down.”

“Tis most likely your assistance will be requested.”

She reached for the reins of the black stallion that had been brought by a stableman. Svartlyn eyed her warily, but didn’t object when she pulled herself into the saddle. “Don’t give me any grief today, horse. Haul butt to the Valhöll, there are Æsir in danger of dying.”

“A number of Vanir, as well, Princess,” the stableman said. “It is a terrible tragedy.”

“You hear that, Svartlyn? Move it, let’s keep the body count down.” The huge stallion reared once, but used the maneuver to pivot and turn back towards the city rather than as a ploy to unseat her. His powerful back legs hunched and then he shot forward, devouring the length of the Rainbow Bridge with strides worthy of a giant. “Woooo! You, go, boy!” Kara leaned in close to the beast’s mane to cut the wind drag. The journey to the gates seemed to take no time at all. Now the big horse practically danced through the twisting streets and paths and when she tried to pull him up at the Valhöll’s gates, trotted right on through. “Ooookay, I take it you know we’re going to the Healers’ Hall?” He snorted and unerringly took the correct turns. Servants and guards scrambled out of their way. “Sorry!” she called over her shoulder.

Svartlyn finally came to a halt just outside the doors to the hall that housed everything medical. He snorted again and then bent his front knees, somehow managing to lower himself so that she could slide off without any effort. “You made good time,” Hrútr told her.

“Thank Svartlyn. He practically flew me across the bridge.”

“He is the second fastest steed in all the Nine Realms,” the healer told her. “Only his sire, Sleipnir is swifter.”
She did a double take. No, Svartlyn had only four legs. “Huh, I guess the magic that gave Sleipnir extra legs didn’t go to the genetic level,” she said to the man. “Okay, what have we got?”

“Five Æsir and two Vanir at the brink of death, your highness. Another three need your technique as well. Lady Eir has only been able to heal two of those with meng mein injuries.” He gestured to a corridor within the Healers’ Hall. “Two others were declared dead at the scene of the attack. Eir has put these seven most gravely injured in a form of stasis to await your attention while we have been focusing on those with no or little injury to the meng mein.”

“How long can they stay in stasis?”

“They have already passed the point of safely doing so.”

“Crap. Okay,” she said as they entered a room with a number of tables that were surrounded by glowing blue light. “Where do you want me to start?”

… …

“Sir, according to my scans, the baby is in the breech position.”

Loki frowned at the AI’s pronouncement. Natasha had been fully dilated for over an hour and there was no sign of crowning. “Explain.”

“The infant’s head is upright, in the same orientation as Ms. Romanov’s body. It should be the opposite.”

“Why wasn’t something like this noticed before?”

“There was no sign of it during last week’s scan, sir. It also appears that the umbilical cord is wrapped about the baby’s throat.”

“I’ve been having pains for two days. Not labor pains, just like the baby was getting restless. Maybe she moved?”

He muttered a few choice curses under his breath in the Asgardian common tongue. “What can we do about it?”

“Normally, the child would be delivered by cesarean section, that is, surgically through an incision in the mother’s abdomen. However, we do not have the proper programming available for the surgical room equipment to assist with this. When surgery is not an option, the obstetrician or midwife must reach up into the uterus and turn the baby into the proper position.”

“You are kidding me,” both Loki and Natasha said in unison.

“I’m afraid not.” Jarvis paused. “I have Miss Anderson on the line…”

“Steve, Loki? Who’s there?” Beth interrupted.

“We’re both here, Loki is working with Natasha, he has a little more medical experience then me,” Rogers told his girlfriend.

“Oh, Loki, Jarvis briefed me and sent the scan results to my phone. I’m stuck in traffic, you’re going to have to do this.”

“Lovely.”
“Bare the arm you’re going to use and sterilize it. Alcohol, the kind in the medical unit, will do the trick.”

“Magic will be faster,” he said as he used his power to change the clothing on his torso to what Kara had described as a muscle shirt and disinfect his arms and hands thoroughly.

“Fine, whatever works. It looks like the baby is not quite upright, she’s listing to Nat’s left a bit. First you’ll need to reach in, she’s fully dilated so it shouldn’t be too difficult, your lower arm isn’t that big…wow, good thing you’re so skinny.”

“Um, Beth?” Steve interrupted. “He actually isn’t. I mean, his arm isn’t as big as mine, but it makes Tony’s look like skin and bones.”

“Really? Doesn’t look like that under the clothes.”

“Can we get on with this?” Loki asked.

“Sure, there’s a glycerol lubricant you can use. It should be in the fourth cabinet to the right of the door.”

Rogers lurched to his feet and hurried to the cabinet. “Found it!” He brought it back to the table and squirted it liberally on Loki’s arm. Loki used his other hand to spread it evenly, glad he had taken the time to disinfect both.

“Once you’re ready, make your hand as small as possible, getting past the base of your thumb will be the most difficult part. Don’t reach to the left for the baby. Slide up over her body, carefully now.” Loki bit back an exasperated comment. “Touch her gently until you feel the cord that’s around her neck. You’ll have to tilt her a bit more upright to get it loose enough to get it over her head. Let me know when you’ve gotten that far.”

“Will do.” Even though the mortal’s cervix was fully dilated it was still difficult to ease his hand all the way inside and Natasha groaned painfully. “My apologies.”

“Don’t worry about it, just help my daughter,” she managed.

“All right, I’ve got the cord, but…” he paused as hot fluid seemed to be flowing over his trapped hand. “Jarvis, scan again, what’s happening in there?” he demanded.

“Oh my God,” Rogers said faintly. Following the man’s gaze he noticed red viscous fluid dripping down his arm.

“I believe she is hemorrhaging, sir,” the AI informed him in a odd tone.

Loki tried not to panic and succeeded until he heard a heavy thump to his left. “Oh for pity’s sake,” he snarled. “Heimdall, we need a healer’s help here, now!”

“What happened?” Beth asked.

“Besides Natasha hemorrhaging? Your hero just passed out.”

“Where are my energy donors?” Kara asked.

“Waiting in the next room,” Eir informed her.
“Okay, we need chairs or beds for them. Once I start transferring the energy, they’ll get lightheaded and then…”

“They are Asgardian, your highness, there won’t be…”

Kara cut her off with a gesture. “Are they stronger than Thor? With this much damage to heal it’s a painful and draining process on the volunteer donor. Thor was in perfect health and he passed out cold.”

Eir paled satisfactorily. “I’ll have cots brought in immediately.”

Nodding, Kara examined the first patient. “There’s a lot of damage, even more than Loki had. I’ll need someone to reach into her abdomen and hold the pieces of the organ together while I transfer the energy. Once enough energy is transferred, it should begin to kind of knit itself back together. This one is really bad, you might want to get several volunteers in for each patient, just in case.”

Eir dispatched another assistant as the first two returned with a cot. “Bring in more cots immediately. We may need several for each.” The assistants’ eyes widened and they hurried back out.

“Speaking of Thor, where is he?”

“Escorting the remains of the caravan and the surviving Vanir to Vanaheim, Kara,” Frigga’s soothing voice informed her. “How is it going?”

“It’s not yet, we’re waiting for the donors.”

“Ah, well then, I’m here. This woman is Vanir, from what you said previously, she may need energy from another.”

Oh. She turned back to examine the patient critically. Once the stasis was removed there wouldn’t be time to experiment; this one was in really bad shape. “Okay, but once we get to someone who isn’t this close to death’s door, I’d like to try and use an Æsir donor. I understand the races are closely related.”

“They are; and we have few full-blood Vanir here in Asgard at the moment to act as donors so it would be most wise to find out.”

… …

“Damnation, Heimdall, this is life or death here,” Loki muttered as he used his limited healing magic to staunch the blood flow within Natasha’s uterus.

“Didn’t…didn’t they have life or death emergency…too?” the former assassin gasped weakly.

Loki groaned in frustration. “So they do. Jarvis, what’s the baby’s status?”

“Apologies, your highness, but the child’s heartbeat is weakening rapidly.”

“Loki, save her. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m damn well going to worry about both of you, woman. I-I didn’t want to do this, it may cause complications later but it looks like we have no choice. I’m going to use my magic to remove her from your womb. Do you agree?”

“Yes, yes, just help her, ublûdok.”
He frowned as he meticulously crafted the necessary working. “In point of fact, I am the legitimate son of Laufey and Fárbauti; making that expletive invalid.”

She quite literally growled at him. “It’s metaphoric, not literal, just save my baby.”

“I’m working on it; if I could do this any faster, I would, I promise you that.” Natasha subsided into pained moaning. He buried his horror at the situation and worked as quickly as he could.

“Loki?” Beth’s voice asked. “Don’t forget to cut the umbilical cord and tie off or cauterize the end of it before you take the baby out.”

“On it,” he replied. “All right, it’s ready.” He allowed the energy of his magic to travel through the woman’s body. Concentrating carefully as the green-tinged energy sank within her, he fitted it to the weakening infant and once the baby was safely enveloped, pulled the energy back to him. A blood-smeared newborn appeared in his hands. He checked her over and his panic rose once again. “Fuck. She’s not breathing.”

… …

Frigga had fainted as had the second volunteer, but the Vanir woman’s meng mein was healing nicely. Kara had endured the senses of no less than five healers and one aged sorcerer ‘riding’ on her consciousness as she performed the energy transfer. Absolute hell for an empath, but if she didn’t want to have to heal all of the patients herself, vital. She was sitting in a chair, drinking some concoction of Eir’s that was supposed to restore her energy levels. Kind of an Asgardian Gatorade, she supposed. “Okay, who’s next?”

Eir gave her a worried look. “Can you do this again so soon?”

“How about you join in on the ride-along and be prepared to take over once I get it started?”

“Very well.”

The next most serious patient was Æsir, and they had no shortage of volunteers, thank heaven. “Okay, can you take hold of the energies?” she asked Eir. “I’ve about had it…it’s not the healing, it’s the being watched thing.”

“Yes, of course.” Eir slipped her energetic ‘hands’ around the transferring energy with confidence. Kara monitored it for a minute and pulled out as soon as she was certain all was well. Eir frowned as Kara dropped out of the connection. “It’s surprisingly draining,” Eir told her. “The injuries I’ve dealt with before were minor, I had no idea how…” she trailed off and directed her concentration back to the process as Kara staggered back to the chair they’d brought in. Finally Eir stepped back and one of the apprentices was assigned to ensure the remaining injuries began to heal properly.

“How in the Nine did you manage this when you were mortal?”

Kara shrugged. “I didn’t have any choice. Thor was desperate for his brother to be saved; I couldn’t let him down and visa versa when Thor was injured.” She chugged back more of the energy drink. “It did knock me out afterwards. I think that now my exhaustion is because of all of the ride-along energy. I’m used to shielding from everyone else’s energy and feeling it like that is kind of traumatizing.”

The Grand Vizier spoke up from where he’d been examining the results of their work. “None of the born-Æsir empaths could have managed it; you did well.”

“Thanks. Okay, who’s ready to try the technique, start to finish, on the next patient?”
“This is insane,” Beth shouted in the back of the cab. “What is all the traffic about? It’s not rush hour, there’s no events, Jeez!”

The cabbie shrugged. “Dunno, been like this all day. Must be a full moon thing.”

“Great.” She rolled down the window to get a better look at her surroundings. “Five more blocks. Pull over, I’ll run it from here, but keep working to get to Avengers’ Tower. I’m not going to be able to carry my stuff.” She handed him two of the fifty dollar bills that Tony had given her for emergency cab rides. “I’ll have someone meet you at the main doors to take my stuff and pay you any difference, okay?”

“You work for the Avengers?” the guy said, sounding impressed.

“Yes, I’m their personal physician.” She turned and bolted down the street, dodging foot traffic and vendors, thankful that Steve had been joining her on her runs. His company pushed her to push herself, even though he didn’t intend it. She’d made half the distance when Loki’s voice came over the Bluetooth earphone she was wearing.

“Bloody hell; there’s fluid in her lungs and…Natasha? Damn it, woman, don’t do this!”

“What’s wrong?” she gasped.

Jarvis answered instead of the frantic god. “Ms. Romanov is also not breathing.”

“Oh my God.” Beth put more effort into her running, a litany of panicked curses on the tip of her tongue. She held them back to save her breath for the mad dash back to the Tower. “You’re going to have to aspirate…”

“Just. Shut. Up.,” Loki grated. “I have to do this my own way, there’s no other choice.”

She nodded, and felt silly since he couldn’t see it, but kept on running. “Jarvis, can you do anything to wake up Steve?” she asked.

“Yes, Miss Anderson.”

“What is that damned robot doing in here?” Loki demanded. “I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Apologies, sir. I am using Dummy to awaken Captain Rogers.”

“Sodding useless blighter.”

Despite the desperate situation, Beth found herself grinning at the very British expletives Loki came up with when stressed. Kara had told her that Loki had learned modern English in the British Isles, but it was still startling to hear an alien cussing colloquially. “Almost there,” she gasped as she rounded a corner and saw the Tower’s entrance a half block away. A very welcome sound erupted in her ear; a baby’s irritated cry.

“Thank Yggdrasill,” Loki muttered. “That’s one of them.”

“How’s Natasha?” she said as she pressed her palm to the reader and looked into the optical scanner. The private door opened and she headed for the elevator that Jarvis had awaiting her.

“Ms. Romanov is still not breathing,” Jarvis informed her as the doors closed and the car began to rise.
“Oh, shit.”

… …

The other patients were critical, but not so bad as the first two. Another Vanir proved able to use the energy provided by an Æsir donor; that was one big headache resolved. Soon the four other healers were each finishing up their own patient with Kara and Eir keeping a close eye on the proceedings. “Do you need my help with any of the others?” she asked Eir.

“No, we can handle it from this point on.”

“Good. I’m going to go back to our chambers and collapse for a while.”

“Take more of the tonic with you and be sure to eat a full meal,” Eir admonished.

“Yes, ma’am.” She trudged out of the Hall and down the corridor towards Loki’s suite of rooms. She still couldn’t get used to calling it ‘their’ suite. She’d just made the Royal Wing when a messenger reached her.

“The All-Father requests your presence, your highness,” the woman said.

Kara sighed. “Is it really a request or is it one of his usual demands?”

The messenger smiled. “Ah, a demand, I’m afraid. He awaits you in the family room.”

She sighed again and changed direction towards the smallish hall that Odin used as an informal receiving room. He was sitting in an armchair staring into the fireplace when she arrived. “Thank you,” he said without looking away from the flames. “I realize you need to rest, but this could not wait.”

Wow; an apology in advance of her expressing any annoyance. The old man was actually learning. “Sure; what did you need?”

“I’d like you to look into the flames and tell me what you see.”

Kara blinked. “Um, what am I supposed to see?” she asked as she stepped up beside him and looked into the fire.

“You are both our goddess of Fire and something of a seer. You tell me. Sit down and let your conscious mind wander.”

One of the attendants hastily pulled another chair up beside Odin’s. She sat down and tried to do as he’d instructed. Her mind was beginning to zone out when she realized what he was trying to have her accomplish. It was almost like watching a blurry movie. “Thor’s found them,” she said.

“Heimdall found them; Thor has simply confronted them.”

“Uh, it’s not going well.”

“No, it is not. I’ve sent for reinforcements. The best that Thor can hope for at this moment is to keep his people alive long enough for them to get there. He’s too stubborn to allow them to escape.”

“He can certainly be an idiot.”

Odin actually chuckled. “Which is why I am so pleased Loki has recovered. Thor will need his
counsel to reign successfully.” She felt rather than saw her father-in-law’s one-eyed gaze focus on her. “Have you told him yet?”

“Told who, what?”

“Your husband about your visit to Eir when your trip to Jötunheim was so rudely interrupted by Angrboða’s spell work.”

“Oh, ah, no. I was waiting for the right time.”

“Make it soon,” he advised.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, another cliffhanger. I realized it would be far too long if I continued and my head is throbbing from my sinus/ear infection, so you’re Burdened with Glorious Suffering right along with me. If my antibiotics kick in the resolution will be up before I leave for Vegas on the 28th. BTW, ublûdok = Russian for bastard. Natasha was a bit upset.
A sharp prod in his rear brought him back to near consciousness, but Steve couldn’t quite manage to move. “Damnation, Hel; what do you want? If this is a social call, I’m a tad busy here.”

Hell, Hel? What the heck? He couldn’t get his mind to focus or his mouth to really move. “Gnnnh,” was all he managed.

“Point one; she is not dead, not yet. Point two, she is not one of our people, and point three, she does not worship any of us so you have no claim.” Steve wondered distractedly who Loki was lecturing…and who wasn’t ‘not yet dead’. “Rogers, some assistance would be helpful,” the god’s voice grated.

He jumped as a sharp pain zinged through him. Electricity. Something had just given him an electric shock. Forcing his eyes open he noticed that he was face first on the floor. Another bolt of electricity stung his rear end. “Ow, knock it off, I’m up.”

“Not yet you aren’t. Get your backside off of that floor and take the baby lest we lose Natasha.”

That did it. Pushing himself to his knees, he staggered to his feet, narrowly avoiding tripping over Stark’s old robot, Dummy. The thing turned and zapped him in the butt once more. “Ow, knock it off, Dummy! Baby? What do you mean lose...” he trailed off as his vision came into focus. The former assassin was still spread out on the gurney, red fluid still seeped from between her legs and she didn’t seem to be breathing. Oh crap. Loki was standing beside her, holding a blood-smeared baby against his chest with one hand and pressing the fingers of the opposite hand over Natasha’s heart. A greenish-gold glow emerged and the woman’s body jerked. “Oh, crap.” Lurching forward he relieved Loki of the infant.

The Asgardian immediately moved the now free hand to Romanov’s abdomen. More greenish-gold glowed around it and then sunk deep within. “Get the baby cleaned up. I cleared her nose and throat, but it wouldn’t hurt to double-check them. Then get her wrapped in a towel or blanket or some such, we don’t want her getting cold.”

“Ms. Romanov is still not breathing,” Jarvis said from above them.

“I bloody well know that! I’ve got to get the bleeding stopped or all the breathing in the world will do her no good.”

Steve turned around, looking for something that could dispense oxygen. He knew they had to have it, but he’d never taken the time to get someone to show him around in here and nothing looked like what he was used to. Big mistake, huge, and a possibly fatal one for his friend. “Any word from Beth?” he asked.

“Miss Anderson has just exited the elevator,” Jarvis’s clipped tones told them. Sure enough the doors to the medical bay opened and Beth dashed in.

“Why don’t you have her on oxygen?” she demanded.

“I don’t know what it looks like,” Steve found himself saying in chorus with Loki.
“Oh for…that’s it, we’re having mandatory EMT training just as soon as I can arrange it,” Beth told them as she hurried over to one side of the room and pulled what looked like a metal cabinet over to the gurney. Opening a panel, she pulled out some clear tubes and fastened them over their patient’s head then adjusted some dials on the cabinet until a quiet hissing began. Beth then reached back into the panel and grabbed the kind of oxygen mask he was used to, except it had a big bulb on the outside of it. She placed it over Natasha’s nose and mouth and began squeezing rhythmically. “This will force the air into her lungs,” she explained. “Kind of like the breathing portion of CPR.”

“What’s CPR,” they both said, again. Steve gave Loki a sheepish look as the god rolled his eyes.

“We’ll cover that later. Steve, there’s sterile solution in the same cabinet as the glycerol. Get that and several packages of the gauze sponges, take them to the sink, and get the baby clean. Check her nose and mouth; I don’t hear any blockages, but we need to be sure,” she ordered.

“I already told him that,” Loki muttered.

“Yes, I heard you over the open feed Jarvis was sending me, but it looks like he forgot.”

Steve did as he was told, shooting worried looks over his shoulder as the pair hovered over Natasha. “The Avengers’ Quinjet is landing,” Jarvis advised them.

Loki chuckled, but it sounded grim. “Captain, get the baby clean and use her to distract Barton so he doesn’t interfere with our attempts to save his lover’s life,” he said.

“I’m on it.”

“About time you made yourself useful. Some hero,” Loki muttered. And if he didn’t already feel bad enough, Beth gave him a thoroughly frustrated look before returning to her task. He’d let them all down.

……

Clint ignored the elevator and ran down the stairs. His baby was being born and he was missing it. From what Hill had told him, so was Beth and pretty much everyone else that could have helped. He was so damn pissed he was ready to shove his bow up the ass of the first person who looked at him funny. Three voices could be heard through the half-open door to the medical bay, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. Entering the room he saw Beth and Loki bent over a gurney and Cap holding a bloody baby. Bloody? “What the fuck happened to Brianna?” he asked.

“She’s fine,” Rogers said calmly. “Babies just need to be cleaned up when they’re born.” The man held the tiny bundle out to him. “Do you want to bathe your daughter?” he asked.

He stared, then looked, really looked past the blood and other fluids. His little girl had wisps of reddish curls. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut and her tiny fingers were curled into equally tiny fists. “Wow, yeah.” He took his baby…his baby, and then moved to the sink. Cap had opened a bottle of what looked like water and was handing him a gauze pad when he realized the other two were still bent over the gurney. Fuck. “Nat?” He spun, still holding Brianna, and headed for the center of the room. Rogers wrapped his arms around him and the baby and stopped his forward progress. “Let go, now,” he growled.

“You need to stay out of their way; they’re doing everything they can.”

“What the hell do you mean everything they…”
“Ms. Romanov’s pulse is now steady,” Jarvis reported.

“Oh, thank God,” Beth said.

“Now steady? Somebody tell me what the fuck is going on or…” he was cut off by a thin wail from the baby in his arms.

“Barton, tend to your daughter, we’ll have Natasha all sorted out in a moment,” Loki commanded. Brianna’s godfather sounded stressed. Oh, this wasn’t good. Casting worried looks over his shoulder, he let Rogers guide him in getting the gunk off of his baby. Her skin was turning a nice baby kind of pink, if still awfully wrinkly, which was reassuring after seeing the splotchy red mess she’d been when he arrived. “Bethany,” Loki continued. “Check her breathing again, I think…”

“Yep, she’s breathing on her own, phew.”

“Thank the Lord,” Cap murmured.

Clint shuddered. “Is she going to be okay?” he asked quietly, doing his best not to panic.

“She should be,” Beth said. Her tone was not reassuring.

“We’ll make her okay,” Loki insisted. “Asgard owes her…and I owe her. We will find a way to make her okay if she isn’t.”

“Holy fuck.”

… …

Kara was flying down the Bifröst again on Svartlyn’s back, despite having had only a few bites of her meal and no rest. The messenger sent by Heimdall followed behind on another horse to return the stallion to the stables, but he was losing ground. “I thought you were supposed to be all seeing and all hearing?” she snapped as she dismounted and ran for the observatory.

“I was occupied with tracking Amora and then with Thor’s situation,” the Gatekeeper pointed out mildly. “I cannot see and hear everything at the same time.”

She flushed. “Sorry, I-I’m scared for Nat and the baby.”

“I understand, Princess; safe journey.”

“Thanks.” Moments later she stood on the egress in Central Park. Thank goodness Tony had figured out how to make the energy of the Bifröst trigger the cover on the fountain or she’d be sprawled inside of it and soaking wet instead of standing on top. She hopped off and triggered the release that would turn it back into a fountain again.

“Look, it’s one of the Avengers!” someone in the park called out. Another voice added “Wow, it’s Hellbringer!” Still another said “Ohhh, it’s Loki’s fiancé!” Nice to know they had priorities.

She was glad Odin had made her stop and change into her spare set of armor. While people might point and stare, they weren’t going to try and get in her way. Or maybe they were. A small crowd materialized, seemingly out of nowhere, and someone was thrusting a pen in her face. “Could I have your autograph, Princess?”

An autograph? Really? “Sorry, on a mission, life or death,” she bit out and dodged them to run towards Park Avenue, activating the comm. unit on the way. “Jarvis, can you send someone to pick
“Captain Rogers is on the way with the Quinjet, your highness,” the AI replied. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks. I’ll meet him in the clearing.” Jarvis would know she meant the place where Natasha had landed the S.H.I.E.L.D. Quinjet when Loki had first returned to Midgard. She reached it just as the quiet throb of the engines reached her ears.

A moment later the QJ was on the ground and the ramp was opening. Running up it, she barely had time to reach the cockpit when the ramp closed and the QJ lifted. “Glad you’re back,” Steve said.

“How bad is it?”

“They’re both stable right now, but Loki and Beth are still worried. Clint is tearing his hair out; well, actually he’s holding the baby and kind of rocking back and forth. He’s pretty close to losing it. I don’t want to even think about how he’ll take it if Natasha doesn’t recover.”

“Oh, geez. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.”

“Not your fault. None of us expected her to have the baby this early.” He fell silent and guided the QJ back to the landing area on the back of the Tower. “Loki was amazing; he delivered the baby and then was working on saving Natasha all by himself.”

“What do you mean? Weren’t you there?”

The super-soldier’s entire face reddened. “I, um…I passed out when she hemorrhaged. It’s not the same as seeing people shot and bloody on the battlefield.”

Her eyebrows rose. Wow. Okay, Steve was probably going to need to talk about this later. She filed the information away and settled for patting him on the shoulder. “We all have our less than stellar moments; try not to dwell on it.” The ramp eased down and she rushed out and grabbed the waiting elevator.

… …

“Kara, thank the Nine. I was beginning to think the situation on Asgard was more dire than I’d been led to believe.” Loki could feel the relief sweeping through him as his lady gave him a quick embrace.

“Heimdall was tracking Amora and didn’t hear you. He’s very sorry. The moment he’d found her he immediately checked on you guys and sent for me. Eir is still swamped in the Healer’s Hall, but she’ll get here when she can. I sent Steve back to wait for her. How is everyone?”

“Our goddaughter seems to be fine…”

“She is,” Bethany interrupted him. “Nice and strong, her lungs sound good, especially considering she’s nearly a month premature. Nat, however, is really weakened from the blood loss. S.H.I.E.L.D. is sending Dr. Nassar with a cold pack of her autologous banked plasma so that we can replace it.”

“Another medical process I do not know,” he muttered, disgusted with his ignorance.

“It means she donated blood for herself to be held in case of emergency. All S.H.I.E.L.D. agents do it routinely. Nat does it more often than most because her blood has factors in it that aren’t found in normal plasma. Which reminds me; Beth, you should probably do that for Steve. It’s not necessary
for Bruce, since he just shifts into the Hulk when he’s hurt bad and the Hulk regenerates pretty much everything so fast.”

Bethany nodded. “Good call. It hadn’t even occurred to me. I’m almost ready to get my M.D. but there’s still so much I don’t know.”

“That’s why they have internships,” Kara told her. “There’s only so much you can teach, the rest needs real life examples before you can learn to apply it all. I wouldn’t have thought about it if it weren’t for spending a few months with S.H.I.E.L.D.”

As she spoke his lady had moved to Natasha’s side and was scanning her energy. Kara frowned and scanned again. That was worrisome. “What’s wrong, love?”

“She’s weak, like you thought, but she’s also upset. Clint, bring Brianna over here and set on her Nat’s stomach.”

“What’s that doing to do?” the archer asked.

“Even though she’s not conscious, Nat is worried about her baby. If she feels Brianna’s energy, she’ll find it easier to rest and rebuild her strength.”

“Oh, and do that bonding thing, too, right?”

“Exactly. Wow, you were paying attention during the childbirth classes, I’m impressed.” They watched as Barton placed the now clean infant on Natasha’s abdomen so that mother and child lay facing each other. Kara scanned again. “Ha. That’s helping. She can feel Brianna so she’s relaxing. I’m going to infuse her with energy but she’ll still need that blood.”

“Loki?” He met Bethany’s worried gaze. “You should sit down. After all that magic you used you kind of look unsteady. I don’t know what to do for a god, so please rest, okay?”

He managed a wry smile. “I’ll do that.” Stretching first, he settled down on one of the chairs that sat along the wall and leaned his head back. “Feels like it’s been hours.”

“It has,” the woman told him. “I got the first call from Jarvis at eleven this morning. It’s nearly nine now.”

“That’s…no wonder I’m exhausted. Kara, did you get any rest in Asgard?”

“Um, not really. I ate a bit, though.”

Bethany rolled her eyes. “Jarvis, order in some pizza, two thirds the usual order since our biggest eater isn’t here.”

“Yes, Miss Anderson.”

“I know pizza isn’t your favorite,” she directed to him. “But it’s got all of the food groups and is easy to eat.”

“Did I protest?”

“You made a face.”

“Hmm, I’m slipping. My apologies, I’ll eat the pizza and be glad to have it.”

… …
Kara chuckled as she rubbed their goddaughter’s tiny back and looked over her shoulder at him. “Wow, apologizing? You are tired.”

“I did say that I was.”

“Oh, uh huh.” Turning her attention back to the baby she frowned. “Huh, her energy feels off.”

“Off how?” Loki asked.

“Not bad, just kind of odd. Maybe it’s because of Natasha’s special enhancements; it could be affecting her at the genetic level.” She scanned both baby and mother again; no, the energy differences from normal human didn’t match. This felt more like…she scanned Brianna again. “Well, she feels healthy, so it’s fine. I’m going to go up to the roof to get some air. I didn’t get a chance to settle after either Bifröst trip.”

Loki eyed her suspiciously. He’d know she was lying, that was his specialty, but he didn’t call her on it. “Whatever you need, love. I think we’re fine here now.”

Beth nodded agreement as she moved a chair over beside the mother and infant. “Yeah, we’re good. Clint, why don’t you come and sit here? You can make sure Brianna doesn’t slip off and you can get some physical contact with Nat, she’d appreciate that, I’m sure.”

“Sounds good,” he agreed.

As the elevator doors closed Kara let out a sigh of relief. “Jarvis, is Steve at the clearing?”

“He’s landing now, your highness.”

“Connect me to him once he’s down and settled, please.”

Emerging out on the observation deck, Kara walked to the rail. “Heimdall, we’re going to need Lady Eir or maybe the Grand Vizier. I’m not sure what’s going on, but the baby’s energy looks almost Æsir. Maybe it’s because Loki had to use his magic to save her, I don’t know, but I’d like a more experienced opinion. It’s not a big rush, but as soon as one of them can manage would be appreciated.

“Rogers here,” Steve finally responded.

“Steve, I’ve just asked Heimdall to send Lady Eir or the GV, but I told him there was no rush. Do you want to wait for one of them there, or come back in and grab some pizza and then go back when the sensors pick up the Bifröst activity?”

“Ah, I’ll lock down the QJ and go grab a couple of hotdogs; I passed over a vendor as I was landing. I’ll eat while I’m waiting for our visitors.”

He probably didn’t want to face everyone, she imagined. “You okay? They’re going to be fine, really.”

“Sure; I’m just pretty embarrassed.”

“I know. When Tony finds out he’s going to tease the hell out of you, but I promise that no one’s mad.”

“I’m mad at myself.”

She sighed. “I get that; but try to give yourself a break, okay? You may be a super soldier, but
nobody is perfect.”

“Sure.” He cut the connection and she sighed again.

… …

Raj walked into the medical bay and had to smile. Barton was sitting in a chair, one hand on the back of his infant daughter. Romanov seemed to be semi-conscious, and was holding tightly onto the archer’s other hand. Loki’s gangly length was sprawled in a chair with his head tilted back. The god’s normally pale complexion was a bit gray and he appeared exhausted. His protégé and eventual successor was sitting in a chair on Romanov’s other side, checking the new mother’s blood pressure. “Did someone call in for a special delivery?” he asked.

“Actually, we put in a desperate call for help nearly twelve hours ago; what kept you?” Loki asked acerbically.

“I can’t answer for the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D., but I was on vacation in Montreal; that’s in Canada,” he added for Loki’s benefit. I returned this evening. As I was the only physician available, I agreed to bring this even though I was off duty. Am I excused?” he returned in the same tone.

The god winced. “Sorry, doctor. I’m unable to filter my thoughts at the moment, I’ve exhausted myself.”

An apology? Hmm, he must be tired. “Understood. From the briefing, you did an amazing job under extremely trying circumstances. I’m impressed.”

“I did what was necessary.” Loki sighed. “Again, sorry, and thank you.”

Beth took the cooler from him and set it next to an outlet, plugging it in. “Not sure how much room we have in our fridge,” she told him. After removing one of the bags of plasma, she double-checked the label and set it up on an IV stand next to the patient. Once the needle was in and the blood was flowing, the girl dropped back into her chair. “You brought an awful lot,” she commented.

“Yes, the director thought it would be wise for you to have a good supply on hand so he sent half of what we had. Half of Clint Barton’s supply is in there as well.”

“Oh, okay. Didn’t Kara have any?”

“She did, but as she’s no longer human, it would do her no good. We’ve placed it in the division’s general blood bank.”

“Makes sense.”

“Where is Dr. Gunnarssen?”

“Upstairs, getting some air,” Beth replied. “She did a bunch of meng mein healing in Asgard this morning and then hurried back here without any rest to help.”

“Ah. “I’ll…” he broke off as their psychologist turned goddess walked tiredly into the room.

“Pizza’s here,” she said. “Oh, hi, Raj. I put it the conference room just down the hall and brought down some napkins, paper plates and a cooler of drinks. I figured we could eat in shifts and still be nearby.”
“Why don’t you and Loki go eat first? When you get done, Clint and I can go,” Beth suggested.

“I’m not hungry,” Barton claimed.

“You’re eating anyway,” she insisted. “I’m not going to have you passing out; we don’t need any more patients, got it?”

The man’s grimace was charmingly sheepish. “Okay, okay. But you’ll call me if anything changes, right?”

“Of course we will,” Raj assured him. Loki and Kara gave him a questioning look. “Did you expect me to just drop off the plasma and leave? I know it’s after the fact, but I am here to help.”


They’d ended up pushing two of the beds together in the recovery area and had settled Natasha in one of them. Clint took the other and held the baby between them. The new mother drifted in and out of full consciousness for a worrisome amount of time. Loki shook his head, pushing back his dismay. “If she’d been a normal human, I’d have lost her and perhaps the baby as well,” he told his lady as they headed back to their own chambers for a bath and some sleep. Bethany had also been sent to bed. Dr. Nassar had offered to stay the night, assuring them that he was well rested from his vacation. Jarvis was monitoring the situation and would wake the doctor up if he did drift off.

“You did great,” Kara told him, stopping to give him a warm hug.

“Really? Then what were you so concerned about that you immediately ran to bespeak Heimdall?”

She winced as she realized he had not let her lie go. “Figured that one out, huh? Her, Brianna’s that is, energy is weird. I can’t quite categorize it and nothing I know about her or the situation explains it.”

Truth, in and of itself, but she was still hiding something. “Out with it,” he demanded.

“No. I’m not certain of what I seem to be reading and I want an expert opinion. I could be way off and end up getting everyone excited over nothing. We’ve had enough drama.”

Also the truth. He sighed tiredly. “I see. Do you think I inadvertently harmed the child in some way?”

“No! Loki, you did an amazing thing today. If I had been here and you hadn’t, they’d have both died. I’m so very proud of you.”

They closed the door behind them and Kara wrapped her arms around him once again, this time holding on tightly. “Thank you, love. I-it was…frightening.” He looked anywhere and everywhere but at his wife. Admitting fear; that wasn’t something he did readily.

“Of course it was. But you didn’t panic, you did what had to be done and held it all together. You were great.”

“I’m informing Barton that I’ve now paid my debt to him in full.”

Kara laughed quietly, shaking her head. “Silly. He hasn’t felt like you owed him for a long time.”
“It matters not what he felt. I believed the debt was owed. That is no longer the case.”

“Well, good.” She pulled off the soft clothing that she’d changed into before taking the pizza delivery and dropped it in the laundry chute. “Let’s get a nice warm soak before we go to sleep.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan.” After discarding his own slacks and the tee shirt he’d changed into after ridding himself of the bloodied clothing, he followed her into the large bath that Tony had designed for them. While it was not quite so good at regulating water flow and temperature as their bath in Asgard, it was still far superior to even the most opulent of such Midgardian accommodations. He turned to find his lady staring at him with her mouth open. “What?”

“You undressed without magic.”

He frowned. “Were you not present when I said that I was exhausted?”

“Well, yeah, but I thought you meant physically. When you’re physically tired you still undress with magic.”

Joining her in the bath he settled down in front of a set of water jets. He’d never admit it to Stark, but they actually added something positive to Asgard’s design. “I exhausted my magic as well,” he told her. “We’d best not have any other emergencies for a few days.” The pulsing water soothed his aching back. He’d spent far too long bent over in one position without respite.

“Poor baby,” she said softly and slid in next to him. “Guess you’re too tired for lovemaking then.”

He huffed in disbelief. “Will you lie to me again and claim that you are not?”

“Loki, I didn’t lie to you; I did need some air. I simply omitted one point.” His eyebrows rose. “Fine, whatever. No, I’m not going to lie, I’m pooped. Cuddling would be very nice, though.”

“It would indeed.”

… …

Thor hopped off of the egress platform and turned to lend a courteous hand, first to Lady Eir and then the Grand Vizier. He wasn’t certain why the two were necessary, no one wished to discuss the matter with him. For himself, he was eager to see the Hawk and the Lady Widow’s infant who was being given the name he had suggested during their ‘brainstorming’ session. He smiled to himself. Brianna was one of his favorite names among the Celtic peoples. There was just something about the sound of it rolling off the tongue that he enjoyed. They walked through the rapidly lightening ‘park’ as he’d been told it was called, to the clearing where the Avengers’ air vehicle was waiting. The sun was just cresting the tree line. Captain Rogers stood on the open ramp, stretching and yawning. “Good morrow, captain!” he called out heartily.

“Welcome back,” the man said, looking at each of them politely as he spoke. “Tony’s sensors are working great. I was napping in the QJ and they detected the Bifröst energy and woke me up just in time.”

He understood the science behind the ‘sensors’, but the use of the primitive technology rather than Asgard’s techno-magic still left him confused from time to time. He was accustomed to the more straightforward methods used by the Sorcerer’s Guild to do such things. “Doubtless he’ll be pleased to hear it,” he returned. “Though tis also doubtless he will claim no disbelief that it would.”

“No kidding. Okay, you folks ready for a quick trip to the Tower?”
“We are,” Lady Eir agreed. “I had not thought you were one of the operators of this transport.”

“Oh, well, I learned to fly during WW two…um, a big war that pretty much encompassed the entire planet. Once Natasha’s pregnancy was confirmed, I got certified for this so we’d have a backup.” Steve gave them an odd smile, one that Thor normally associated with his brother. “Did you know that Loki’s learning to fly it?”

He laughed boisterously. “No, but I am less surprised than you seem to be. Loki is well versed in the operation of all sorts of crafts in Asgard. Though he must needs translate what he knows about our magic to your science, it should be well within his abilities.”

“Really? Huh. Guess I don’t know enough about Asgard. I was shocked when Jane taught him to drive a car and he got his license first try.”

Hmm. “Why Jane?”

“Loki insisted. Apparently he appreciated her skill...meaning he loved the story about her hitting you with her truck a couple of times.”

“He would,” Thor muttered, annoyed but also a bit amused if he were honest. “Does she well?”

The captain stared at him, his lips moving for a moment as he echoed the words silently. “Oh, you mean how is she? Yeah, she’s doing great. Um, Dr. Nassar has been seeing a lot of her.”

“Ah, yes. Kara mentioned such. I am glad for her, he seems to be a good man, all in all.”

“I guess. I’m still kind of wigged out about him being the council chairman.” Rogers took his seat and checked to see that they were all strapped in before taking the craft to the air. The man fell silent as he piloted them to the Tower’s landing area. “Okay, we’re secure. The new parents and baby are all in the medical bay.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Eir told him. The Grand Vizier simply nodded and followed her into the building.

“Are you well, my friend?” Loki might call him an oaf, and often rightly so, but he was learning to notice things. Things like Roger’s discomfort when speaking of the new parents and baby.

“I’m fine.” Thor frowned at the obvious evasion. Rogers chuckled ruefully. “You’re getting good at this,” he told him. “I, uh. Loki did it all. He delivered the baby, he saved their lives, everything. I totally messed up; the bleeding shocked me so much I passed out. I mean, I don’t have any problems with blood and guts, you know? But this was a woman, a friend and a new mother. It just wasn’t the same as injuries and death on a battlefield. I-My mind didn’t want to believe it was happening, so I just totally shut down.”

“When Loki fell into the void, father and I sat down heavily on the Bifröst. We simply stared into it for hours, shocked, horrified and sorrowing. I do not jest, we were incapable of moving. Had enemies come upon us, they would have had an easy victory. I understand what shock can do. It simply needs the right trigger for it to manifest. Do not blame yourself, my friend.”

“Yeah, I’m trying not to.” Thor nodded and clapped him on the shoulder and headed inside.

… ...

“Well, what do you think?” Kara asked the visitors after they had scanned the baby thoroughly and
joined her in the conference room down the hall.

Eir and the GV exchanged looks. “We’d best speak to your husband, dear. Where might we find him?” Eir asked.

“Do you think I’m right?”

The GV grumbled under his breath before speaking aloud. “I don’t see how this could have come about, so we cannot be correct about it.”

“Which is why we must speak with Loki. Seriously, sir,” Eir directed to the GV. “You know his power better than any. Do you not believe he might be capable of it?”

The elderly Æsir frowned deeply. “Aye, but why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t think he did it intentionally, he was just doing whatever he could to save them both,” Kara told them. “He was all alone and pretty desperate; you know he hates to admit it, but he loves our friends.” She smiled, remembering Loki’s awe at being asked to be Brianna’s godfather. “And he loves this baby. He’d move the stars, if he had to, to save her.”

“What it seems he has done,” the GV said sonorously, “is quite nearly that serious. Still, we must speak with him.”

“Is this okay here?” The two nodded. “Jarvis, please ask Loki to join us.”

“Yes, your highness.”

“I believe we should speak to him alone,” Eir told her. “He will be far too emotional about it, I think, should you be here.”

While she didn’t agree, Kara could see why they thought it. “Okay. I’ve got wedding things to do, I’ll go work in my office if you need me.”

… …

“Thor! Good timing, man. I’ve got to take a leak. Can you keep an eye on the peanut?”

He stared at Clint Barton, wondering why a peanut would need an eye kept upon it, then he noticed the man turn to fuss over the infant ensconced in a bassinet. “Peanut is a pet name?” he guessed.

Barton grinned. “Yeah, we’ve been calling her that since we saw the first pictures, you know, the ones they make from the scans…oh, no, you wouldn’t know. Anyway, yeah. So, can you watch her for a second? Kara and Beth just took Nat into the shower so they’ll be a while and Nassar’s taking a nap. He stayed up all night with us.”

“Of course, my friend. Take your time.” Barton all but ran from the room and Thor settled himself in the seat the archer had abandoned. The baby had sparse auburn curls and pink, slightly wrinkled skin. Her mouth was reminiscent of a tiny rosebud. All in all, an adorable child, but she did not appear to be from a premature birth. In fact, she looked to be more than a month old from his experience with Volstagg’s numerous offspring. He reached out with a careful hand and stroked one finger along the soft silken skin of the infant’s cheek. Her eyes opened and focused on him. His jaw dropped in surprise that a babe so young was able to do such. And those eyes…for an infant, her lashes were noticeable and dark and they surrounded orbs of a startling sapphire hue. Beautiful. “Hello Brianna,” he said softly as he next touched one of the tiny hands.
He started when that hand turned and those tiny fingers gripped his lone one. She gurgled and made a “Unnnh” sound that seemed like an attempt at speech, though of course that was just his imagination. What he did not think he imagined was the baby’s smile, or the fact that she reached out with her other little hand and grabbed another one of his fingers. The blue eyes focused on his again, and he was lost.

His heart swelled with love for this tiny being, and…no. “That’s not possible,” he whispered. “This cannot be…can it?” Brianna made a sound that was suspiciously akin to a giggle. “Sweet girl,” he told her. “You are a miracle.”

“Everything okay?” Clint asked anxiously as he returned to the room.

Thor stepped back, pushing away misplaced guilt. “Wonderful. You have a beautiful child, friend Hawk. Congratulations.”

“Thanks…but we owe it all to Nat, well, and to Loki for saving them. Your brother worked miracles, did you hear?”

“So I was told. Once I’ve congratulated your lady, I must return to Asgard. Mother is eagerly awaiting word.”

“Yeah, that’s cool. I poked my head in the shower room, they should have Nat back here in a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable.”

Smiling, Thor grabbed another of the chairs and placed it on the baby’s other side. “I shall, my friend.”

… …

“Is everything okay?” Kara asked him when he returned to their suite.

“Yes, no…I suppose.”

“Loki, what’s wrong? They’re not mad at you, are they?”

“Hmm? Oh, no. They…your suspicion was correct. I’m not certain how I managed it, but…”

“Brianna has Æsir energy?”

“No. Brianna is Æsir, down to the genetic level. Or, rather, she has an Æsir version of Romanov and Barton’s DNA.”

“Wow. Good thing we’re the godparents, then. She’ll long outlive any of their other friends.”

Loki frowned at his lady for a moment and then saw the humor in it. “True,” he agreed, chuckling lightly. “Stark will be most annoyed.”

Kara giggled. “He sure will. Eventually there will be two virtually immortal babies in the tower that will be born to mortals, or in my case a former mortal.”

“Hmm. About that.”

“What?”

Loki fidgeted for a moment, then took her hand and tugged her over to the couch. He sat down and put her in his lap to hold her close. “I almost lost them both, love.”
“Almost doesn’t count. They’re fine.”

“It was the most horrifying situation I’ve ever been in, bar none; and you know I’ve borne much horror in my life. I was so…helpless.”

“It’s okay. You did great, but it’s fine to be shaky about it. It’s another facet of PTSD.”

“It’s more than that. As Natasha was bleeding out, all that I could imagine was putting you into that situation. Kara, what if you became pregnant and had a bad delivery? What if you could not be saved? I could not live with that.”

“The odds of that happening…”

“Are likely greater than we imagine due to your birth and my mixed heritage. No, I won’t risk it. We’ll continue to use the sigil and…and if we want children we shall adopt. Did I tell you that Hel came for them? She felt them dying, and because of their close association with Asgard came to take their souls to Niflheim.”

She stared at him with her mouth open. He’d managed to render her totally speechless this time. Amazing. Then she was shaking her head. “No, you didn’t. But you also didn’t let them die. You’re just in shock, Loki, you really wanted a baby with me, I know you did.”

“It is not worth the risk of losing you.”

“I…I appreciate that, really, I do.”

Loki frowned. “But?” he prompted.

“Do you remember that morning in Asgard in the bath?” His frown deepened; they’d spent a number of mornings in the bath in Asgard, but what did that signify? She sighed. “The morning after we found out that Tony was going to age so slowly for a human because of the healing Eir did when she removed his Arc Reactor?”

Ah, that morning. The morning she had teased him so deliciously. He smiled at the memory. It had been glorious. “Of course; it is unforgettable.”

“Um, yeah.” She was silent again. Frustrating minx.

“And, what of it? I wouldn’t mind a repeat performance,” he said in a tone meant to encourage such.

“The morning may not be forgettable, but activating the sigil was.”

What in the Nine was she babbling about? “I don’t understand.”

“Loki, it’s too late to change your mind about me having your baby. Eir thinks the gestation will take place in an Æsir timeframe, so we’ll be parents in about ten months. Oh, by the way, you could have warned me that Æsir pregnancies were a year long.”

“You…what?”

The impossible woman rolled her eyes. “I’m pregnant. We’re going to have a baby.”

He stared at her and found himself shaking his head. “That…that’s…” he traile off and gasped. “I-That’s both wonderful and terrible, all at the same time.”
“It’s not terrible. What happened with Nat isn’t normal. Maybe fifteen percent of all pregnancies and that’s including the ones in third-world countries where medical care is sparse if not non-existent go that badly. We’ll have Asgard’s healers taking care of me and I’m a lot stronger than a human, even an enhanced human like Natasha. I’ll be fine.”

“You…we…sweet Yggdrasill.” He was going to be a father. True, he was technically already a father, but he hadn’t known of Angrboða’s pregnancy or Hel’s birth until his daughter was nearly two centuries old. This was…was overwhelming. And amazing.

“Loki? Oh, honey, don’t cry, I’ll be okay.”

“What?” He wiped at his cheeks; damn, he was crying. “I’m not upset, love. This, tears of joy I believe you’ve called them.”

“So it’s okay? I mean, it kind of has to be because there is just no way Odin or Frigga would let me get away with terminating this pregnancy. They’re both really looking forward to us giving them grandchildren. They haven’t had any that they knew from birth, after all.”

“No, they wouldn’t and they haven’t. Okay? No, it’s terrible and it’s wonderful, and gods, Kara, I love you so much.”

“I know,” she said in a serious tone.

“Humph; you’ve been watching The Empire Strikes Back again.”

Her sweet lips curled up in a smile. “Guilty. So, the wonderful part…are you happy?”

He tugged her close, tangled his hands in her flame-hued locks and kissed her thoroughly. She gasped when he finally allowed her to come up for air. “Ecstatic. But frightened. You will be spending the last few months of your pregnancy in Asgard, and I will not bend on that.”

Kara pursed her lips thoughtfully and then smiled. “Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

To all of those who have been championing the idea of a LoKara baby; this one is dedicated to you. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and may all of you have a very Joyous New Year. I’ll pick up the keyboard again upon my return from Las Vegas in early January.
As she looked out from her balcony, a slight movement in the center of her garden caught her eye. Frigga frowned; her husband was in the council meeting being held to discuss the results of the fruitless chase after Amora and Angrboða and Loki was on Midgard, resting, she was told, after exhausting his magic in a successful attempt to save the life of his godchild and her mother while Thor watched over him. Hurrying down the spiral stairs to access the gardens through her private entrance, she disguised her presence with an illusion as she crept down the path, then sighed, shaking her head in vexation as the hulking form of her eldest was revealed. “I didn’t realize you’d returned so soon,” she told Thor as she dropped the veil of magic.

He managed a wan smile, leaned down to kiss her cheek, and then continued on his way to the bench that faced the waterfalls. “All was well there,” he said, far too quietly for her comfort. Thor was rarely quiet, even when stealth was required.

“What is wrong, my son?”

“Nothing.”

“No wonder your brother regards you as the worst liar in the Nine Realms. Come now, tell me.”

“Second worst,” he began and then hesitated. “Though technically, nothing of the Titan remains in the Nine Realms so I suppose Loki once again would consider me the worst.”

She laughed softly at her son’s disconcerted expression. “It matters not; what troubles you?”

“I’m not troubled, mother. Not really…perhaps confused is the better word? You saw my other half, did you not?” He sighed. “I know, you cannot answer, but I assume you did since you knew Jane was not she. Can you tell me if my other, perhaps, was a mortal with auburn hair and eyes as blue as the sapphire in the clasp father gifted you with on your last name day?”

A mortal? Her own confusion must have been evident on her face as his expression fell. “Thor, don’t despair, son. I will tell you that you must yet wait for your other half to come along and that she is not mortal.”

“I don’t understand, then. I met a mortal female; she had auburn curls and beautiful deep blue eyes and I could swear she is mine. There was this simply all-encompassing connection…I’ve never felt the like. Are you certain?”

Oh dear. He was convinced, but unless her sight was suddenly failing her, it could not be. “I am sorry, my son, but your other is not mortal.” He bowed his head and leaned forward with a groan, his forearms resting on his thighs. Stepping behind him, she gently rubbed the slumped shoulders. “Take heart, dear one. You will find her and she will love you beyond all others. I see the four of you ruling Asgard some time hence. You on Hliðskjálf with your fated love by your side and Loki and Kara standing with you honored by all of Asgard for their service and their wisdom and loved dearly by you both.”

“It is just…mother, I was so certain.”

“Give it time, Thor. Give it time.”
“Where were they all, Nick?”

Nick Fury gave Raj a sour look. The man had just returned from Avengers’ Tower in the pissiest mood he’d ever seen him in. “On assignment.”

“Ridiculous. You have half a dozen physicians in this sector alone; I’ll ask you again, where were they when Natasha Romanov needed them?” The psychiatrist and Council of Regents Chairman’s dark eyes were narrowed in a flinty glare.

“The Avengers are not S.H.I.E.L.D. assets; I asked for medical volunteers and got none.”

“I-Why?”

“Romanov didn’t make many friends here, you know that.”

“What should friendship have to do with it? We are talking about the life of a pregnant woman and her innocent child. There are a good many S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who would not be alive today were it not for her efforts, and that isn’t even counting Natasha being the one who actually shut down the portal during the invasion of New York!”

“Don’t you think I know that? I called you back from Quebec as soon as I realized none of our people on duty could be trusted to help if I ordered them to do so. Raj, she wasn’t simply not liked; she was envied and feared.”

The doctor grimaced. “You were sending her after rogue agents, I take it?”

“When necessary.”

“Further isolating an already isolated woman. Did it not occur to you that was more than a tad irresponsible?”

“After Agent May retired from field work I had little choice. There were a limited number of agents who could successfully bring down agents who had gone rogue. Barton and Romanov were at the top of that very short list.”

“And as a result, once they were given another option, that list became shorter still. Nick, things need to change or S.H.I.E.L.D. will crash under its own ponderous weight. You need to first clean house and then begin delegating.”

“I know.” He frowned at his old friend. “It’s time for our secret weapon to go back into the field.”

“You need to tell the Avengers first.”

“They’re not cleared for it.”

“Then clear them. Nick, this isn’t a council recommendation, this is my personal advice. Though they aren’t truly a S.H.I.E.L.D. asset, you need them as allies. Tell them.”

“I can’t. Not yet.”

“..."..."

“They will hate me again,” Loki said in a distant voice.
Kara was worried. They’d celebrated her pregnancy with lovemaking. It was a short but very tender session since they were both still exhausted; then they’d slept the day away. Bruce had returned while they were sleeping and when they awoke Jarvis informed them that the geneticist was sitting with Nat and Clint. Steve had just stopped by with a tray full of breakfast food but after politely thanking him, Loki had placed the tray on their table and sat down in a chair staring out the window. This had been the only response she’d managed to drag out of him in fifteen minutes of trying to get him to tell her what was wrong. What was truly frightening her was that whatever was bothering him was so far buried that she couldn’t read anything but a quiet despair. “Who will hate you…and for what?”

His green eyes were unusually dull and his brows were drawn together. “Barton and Romanov, of course.”

“There’s no of course, why should they hate you? You saved Brianna and Nat. They’re totally grateful.”

A deep sigh escaped him. “I’ve ultimately taken their child away from them, Kara. They will never see her fully grown as she’ll mature so slowly in comparison to a human.”

Oh. Shit. She hadn’t thought about that. Clint was in his mid-thirties, he’d be in his seventies before his daughter could no longer be considered a teenager. “Yeah, that’s going to be tough for them, but really, there’re advantages, too.”

“Name one.”

“She’ll be immune to the normal childhood diseases kids get here. A lot of human children die every year from things as simple as the flu. They won’t ever have to worry about that happening to Brianna.”

“But will that be compensation enough?” He shook his head; the look in his eyes even more lost than when he’d first sat down. “I must tell them, today.” Loki abruptly rose from his seat and headed for the door.

“Let them get over their close call first. They need that time together.”

He paused and his frustrated disbelief poured over her. “And have them discover it in some other manner? Then they will accuse me of hiding it from them; they will hate me enough if I am honest now.”

“No one is going to hate you and no one will tell them; we’re the only ones here who know. I’m not saying never tell them, just give it a few days.”

“What is to stop Bethany from running routine tests on what she thinks is a normal infant? She’s seen the results of your scans as you changed. Despite her lighthearted nature, she’s quite intelligent. Our soon to be physician will quickly realize what she is seeing.”

“I’ll ask her not to tell them anything other than Brianna is healthy.”

“Fine. And if Thor returns with his friends or worse, with my mother; think you they will not reveal it?”

She rolled her eyes at the dramatic gestures he made as he began pacing back and forth across their living room. Tony was right; she loved Loki, but the man was a full-tilt diva. “They won’t do anything of the sort; they’re not out to get you, they’ll respect your right to tell them.”
“What? I was suggesting no such thing. Kara, they will see this as a great boon and will no doubt gush about how fortunate Clint and Natasha are to have an Æsir child. They’d not intentionally try to cause trouble for me; I simply do not believe they will be able to contain themselves in their excitement.”

Crap. He had a point. Even Frigga might inadvertently spill the beans when she realized that her forthcoming grandchild would have an Æsir companion of nearly the same age to grow up with. “Oh. Damn.”

… …

Thor slid into the remaining seat in the small audience room. The Grand Vizier and Lady Eir had already joined his parents. “My apologies; there was an issue in the training arena.”

Odin waved off the excuse. “Now that we’re all present,” he began, giving Thor an only slightly chastising look, “what did you need to speak with us about? Are the child and mother still in danger?”

“I cannot speak to the mother,” the Grand Vizier stated pompously, as he put most things. “But the child is in no danger other than that of discovery. She should be raised in Asgard.”

Thor eyed his parents. Both seemed as confused as he. “Why should a mortal child be raised in Asgard?” Frigga asked. “It is not that I have any objection; she is the godchild of our children, but they will not be here often for what will likely be the girl’s entire lifespan.” Odin harrumphed in agreement.

“That is not exactly the case, my queen,” Eir said, sounding a bit apologetic. “There was, ah, an unusual result to Loki’s use of his power to save the infant’s life.”

Odin and Frigga stared at the goddess of Healing and the Grand Vizier with annoyed looks as neither of them seemed inclined to elaborate. “Explain this unusual result, and what it means both to Brianna and to us,” Thor finally asked, unwilling to wait for his parents to become irritated enough to do so.

“It is wholly unprecedented,” Eir said.

The Grand Vizier snorted. “Impossible, or so I’d say if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Odin’s fingers began to tap on the arm of his chair; that was never a good sign. “And what, exactly,” the All-Father demanded in a hard tone, “is so unprecedented and impossible?”

Eir shrugged. “For all intents and purposes, my liege; this child born of two mortals is Æsir.”

Thor felt his jaw drop but he could not bring himself to change his expression. He turned to Frigga whose smile was growing. “I did tell you she would not be mortal,” his mother said with a smile.

… …

Kara had convinced him to wait two days or until Jarvis alerted them that someone was on their way from Asgard; whichever came first. By that time, she had reasoned, all of the Avengers and their support staff would have returned to the Tower and after the parents were apprised, the rest could be told all at once. The time had passed and he walked down the stairs to the floor occupied by Romanov and Barton, feeling very much as though he was walking to his execution. He could all but feel the weight of the shackles he had worn in Asgard on the way to his original trial, the one from which Thanos had stolen him. He took a deep breath as he stopped outside their door and
let it out slowly. “Jarvis, please announce me.”

“Of course, your highness.”

It only took a moment for the door to open and Clint Barton’s smiling but slightly strained face looked up at him. “Loki! Hey, man, come in. Your goddaughter’s been running us a bit ragged. Never realized babies slept this little.”

From what Kara had told him human babies slept a great deal more than their Æsir counterparts; likely because they matured so much faster and used more energy in doing so. He followed the archer into the living area and stared around at the atypically untidy mess it had become. While it was less disordered than Thor’s chambers were wont to be when he did not have servants putting things away for him, for the usually compulsively neat former assassins, it was an unmitigated disaster area. Natasha was sitting in a softly upholstered loveseat with her baby resting in one arm. The other held a bottle that the child suckled on noisily. “I thought you had intended to breastfeed?” he was startled into asking.

“I had,” she agreed. “Unfortunately my body can’t keep up with my daughter’s appetite so we’re supplementing with organic baby formula that Tony had flown in.”

He winced. When he and Kara had first decided that they would eventually like to be parents, he’d done some research. Æsir infants consumed nearly three times the amount of mother’s milk daily during their first two years of life before introducing solids than human young did while they were milk dependent. Additionally, human infants relied on milk for only their first six months. Natasha had little hope of managing the task. “I see.”

“I’m glad someone does. Beth is stumped. She’s trying to find a trustworthy Pediatrician to keep on call. For some reason S.H.I.E.L.D. can’t come up with one.”

“Perhaps you’d best sit down,” he suggested.

“I am sitting. What’s wrong? Maybe you should sit down?”

“Geez, yeah. I never thought a baby could be the one thing that freaked you out,” Clint added. “You look like sh…uh, crap.” The archer grinned sheepishly. “I’m trying to watch my language in front of the kid.”

He sank down onto the ottoman that sat in front of the loveseat. “Clint, please sit down as well, I need to talk to you, to both of you.”

The pair exchanged uneasy glances as Clint joined Natasha on the loveseat. “If you’re trying to back out of being Bree’s godfather, forget it. You’re going to be joining me in diaper duty if I have to get Bruce to make you,” Barton insisted.

That almost made him smile. “No. I-I really don’t know how to tell you this, so…”

“The infamous silver-tongue is at a loss for words?” Natasha said incredulously.

Sighing, he shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? Is something wrong with my kid, Loki?” Barton shot back up to his feet and his hands were clenching as though he wished he held a weapon.

“No, please sit back down. Brianna is fine. Look, during the birth you both know how close we came to losing her…to losing both Brianna and Natasha, correct?”
Barton shrugged. “I guess,” he muttered. “It’s kind of something I don’t want to think about, you know?” Natasha put the now empty bottle down and shifted the baby to her shoulder and reached out to squeeze her lover’s hand before patting the infant’s back gently.

“I do know. It was closer than even you might think from what you saw.”

“Not closer than what I might think,” Natasha stated, quite matter-of-factly. “I died, at least for a few seconds, I’m fairly certain.”

“Fuck,” Barton muttered and then gave Natasha an apologetic glance. “Sorry. Is that right?” he asked Loki.

“While I was fighting to save them both, Hel arrived; oh, not in corporeal form, she traveled astrally. She knew they were dying and was there to take their souls to her realm. Because you are both important to me, she wished to see that both Natasha and Brianna’s souls had a kind place to… rest.”

“You didn’t let her take us.”

“No, Natasha. I-I hadn’t given up on you or Brianna so I warned her off, quite emphatically. She’s probably a tad annoyed, I’ll need to go visit her and explain myself.”

“Wow, Loki. I knew you’d saved them, but I didn’t know it was that damn close. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Clint.”

“You’re not inspiring confidence, Loki,” Natasha grumbled as the baby burped.

He tried not to sigh. The new mother competently wiped her child’s tiny mouth, handed the now messy towel to her partner and wrapped the baby in a blanket, all while staring him down. He had to admire her ability to remain so focused while multi-tasking. “The magic I used to save the two of you; it was…instinctual, not something I had time to research or plan out, you understand.”

“Nice instincts. Now, what is the problem?” she said in a hard voice. Brianna began to fret and she fussed with her gently until she settled.

Loki wished fervently that he had accepted his lady’s offer to accompany him. Though it would have been cowardly, her confidence in him would have given him more focus. “I inadvertently altered her DNA,” he told them and then tensed as he awaited the expected outburst.

Both former assassins frowned, but neither seemed to be preparing to either attack or berate him. “In what way?” Natasha finally asked.

“You aren’t angry?”

“You might become angry if you don’t explain quickly.”

That was better than he’d hoped for. “I’m not sure how it happened; the experts from Asgard tell me it should have been impossible. They don’t understand it either, but I somehow changed her DNA from human to Æsir.” Loki found himself holding his breath again as he fell silent.

“Lemme get this straight,” Clint began. “Brianna is going to be like Kara?”

“Well, no. She’d be more like Sif, but hopefully less warlike. Kara is a highly gifted Æsir as she was a highly gifted human.” He frowned at the pair. “Though Brianna may well have gifts; neither
of you are exactly average amongst human-kind.”

… …

Kkrovavyĭ ad. Natasha glanced down at the baby sleeping in her arms. Letting her mind go on automatic, she quickly parsed through everything she had learned about the Æsir and Asgard over the past two years to come up with a list of pertinent questions. A quick glance at Clint showed that while he was calm, there was a good bit of silent processing going on in his mind as well.

“How long do Æsir live, on average, Loki?”

The god winced. “Most Æsir live seven or eight thousand years if they do not die in battle beforehand. Odin is a bit more than eight thousand of your years in age. If he continues to husband his energy using the Odinsleep, he’ll make ten thousand, easily.”

“So that’s a bad thing?” Clint asked.

“If they live that long, how slowly do they age as children?” Loki winced again at her question. Ah, now they were getting somewhere.

“For the first forty or fifty years, at less than half the rate of humans.”

“So Brianna will just be reaching adolescence in maybe twenty or so years?”

“Exactly. After they reach young adulthood, at about fifty of your years, their aging slows considerably.”

“Bozhe moy.” She frowned at the floor, not wanting to make Loki more nervous than he obviously already was, and took a deep breath. “You’ve said something about being immune to our diseases. Do the Æsir have diseases of their own?”

“Not really; at least, none that aren’t easily curable by our healers.”

“I’m still not seeing the bad; Nat, what am I missing?” Clint asked. “I mean, parents are always saying their kids grow up too fast, ours won’t. She won’t get sick either. What’s so bad about that?”

“Hawk, you’ll never see grandchildren; not as things stand. She’ll barely be an adult when you’re near eighty.”

“Unless she starts a little young, but…”

“No, Clint,” Loki interrupted. “Æsir are not fertile in their first hundred years or thereabouts. Volstagg and his wife’s brood notwithstanding, Æsir are not particularly fertile at any point, but in the first hundred years it is impossible for them to sire or bear offspring.”

Clint swallowed. “Oh.” Natasha quickly turned and placed Brianna in her bassinet and prepared to intercept him. Much to her surprise, instead of attacking Loki, her Hawk leaned back in his seat and nodded slowly. “Okay. So, I don’t get grandchildren, but my kid is durable, disease resistant and will live practically forever. Seriously, man; I wasn’t even expecting to ever get to have a kid, so this isn’t a big deal. I mean, I was worrying about people trying to hurt her and all because of us. But she’s not gonna be so easy to hurt.”

“As a baby and small child even a human could seriously harm her, Clint. But I swear to you that Kara and I will protect her with our lives.”
“That’s not a good idea,” They both turned to stare at her. “Loki, you and Kara are linked; if one of you dies the other dies. I need you to be around for Brianna when we’re gone. Even though I’m aging slowly compared to most humans, I am aging. I want my daughter to have family she can count on.”

“Yeah, she’s right. How about you two just do your best, okay? Your best is pretty freaking awesome,” Clint agreed.

Loki was staring at both of them now, looking totally flabbergasted. “You’re not angry with me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Did you do this on purpose?”

“I didn’t even know I had done it until Kara read her energy and called in Lady Eir and the GV.”

“We’re not going to be angry with you over an accident. We’ll deal with it; it’s better than Brianna and I taking up residence with your daughter. No offense.”

“None taken,” Loki said faintly.

… …

Kara frowned as the drinks were passed around. “It’s not fair,” she grumbled. “Everyone gets to drink champagne but me.”

Sif raised an eyebrow. The warrior and Nyvorlas had managed to escape Ljósálfheim for a few days to attend the bridal shower and bachelor party. Pepper and Darcy had planned the shower, everyone else had just shown up…with presents. Presents were a good thing. “Why not you?” she asked.

“It’s not good for…oh.” Damn. She hadn’t told them yet. Oh well, no time like the present. Pulling out her phone, she speed-dialed Loki. “I’m going to tell them,” she advised as he answered. “Yes, now. You can tell the guys. Okay, bye, I love you too.” Sif was still staring at her, but now both eyebrows were up. Kara sighed and pushed to her feet. “Everyone, I have an announcement.”

“You changed your mind about marrying Loki?” Darcy asked. “It’s okay, because if you did we’ve got about a hundred thousand women on FacePage alone that would gladly take your place.”

“No, I haven’t changed my mind. Besides, he’s already my husband whether we get married again here or not.” Darcy was snickering. “Ha-ha. No, this is not about the wedding; this is about why I’m not drinking.”

Natasha looked up sharply. “Is Loki going to ask Logan to stick around for another year more than he’s already promised?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, what’s that got to do with anything?” Darcy demanded.

“Oh my God. Should I just trade specialties and intern in Obstetrics?” Beth asked.

“No, Asgard will handle it; the Pediatrics, too.” The blonde nodded and relaxed back into her chair and quaffed down half of her champagne.

“Hey, how come they know what you’re talking about and I don’t? How am I supposed to handle the social media if I’m the last to know what’s going on?”
“I don’t know what’s going on either,” Jane offered.

“Nor I,” Sif agreed.

“Kara, are you…” Pepper asked.

“Yes; I’m pregnant.”

… …

“Kara is pregnant with our child,” Loki finished.

Tony stared at him. “Son of a bi…basket,” he finally managed. “I thought you were going to wait?”

“We were; this is all your fault.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa…I had nothing to do with it; she’s like a sister to me.”

“Idiot. That’s not what I meant as you well know. We were awaiting word on your condition and were rather…distracted. We both forgot to invoke the contraceptive sigil.”

“I think this is excellent news, brother,” Thor boomed. Yeah, boomed, and he wasn’t even trying to make a pun. Tony shook his head. No wonder big bro got on Loki’s nerves. Though the Lokester, for once, didn’t look pissed at Point Break. In fact, he was actually smiling…damn.

“It is, though I must admit that Natasha’s close call makes me rather apprehensive.” The younger god turned to Spangles. “Steve, would you advise S.H.I.E.L.D. that Kara and I will need to spend the last few months of her pregnancy in Asgard? Since she is so newly Æsir and I have mixed genealogy, it would be prudent to have her close to the healers best suited to care for her should complications arise.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Uh, Loki? Have you discussed that with Kara?” Clint asked.

“Yes; I actually discussed it rather than decided for her this time. I am trying to learn from my mistakes, you know.” Tony kept his jaw closed by sheer force of will as Loki smiled kindly at Master Archer and Clint smirked back at him.

He shook his head. “Wow; I’ve officially fallen down the damned rabbit hole.”

“Don’t use that language in front of Brianna,” the two of them chorused.

Staring at his empty whiskey glass he sighed. “I don’t suppose this merits a refill?” No one answered.

… …

“What has that to do with champagne?” Sif asked.

“Alcohol isn’t good for the developing baby,” Beth responded. “It can cause all kinds of birth defects, development issues, and other problems.”

Sif bit her bottom lip as she thought about how to explain. “Expectant mothers in Asgard drink mostly what everyone else does. Almost all of our beverages are fermented in some degree, even if
they are comparatively weak in strength to our ales and meads. It causes no harm to their child.”

“Wait,” Kara interrupted. “You mean I can drink champagne?”

She shrugged. “You can drink most anything you please save our ales and meads; which, as I recall, means our meads since you spat out our finest ale.”

“It tasted like I was trying to drink liquid cotton it was so dry.” She picked up the oddly slender glass that had been placed before her. “Huh. I’d better check with Loki and make sure he knows that. Otherwise he might have a hissy if he sees me drinking.” Kara punched buttons on her small calling device again and waited for a response. “Loki, do you know that it’s okay for me to drink pretty much anything I usually drink except for Asgardian mead?” The new goddess rolled her eyes. “Yes, I mean alcoholic beverages. Oh. Yes, Sif told me. Okay, just checking, bye.” She grinned and took a sip of the bubbly wine. “He knew; he just forgot I didn’t know. Thanks, Sif.”

“You are welcome.” She eyed the stack of packages that sat by Kara’s chair. “When do you open the presents?”

“Um, now, I guess.” Kara reached down for the nearest package. They were all covered in what Darcy had called ‘wrapping paper’. This one’s covering was a glossy white decorated with golden bells. It seemed a bit wasteful. When gifts were given in Asgard, a pouch or fine piece of cloth was used to hold it; one used something that added to the value of the gift when they were not simply handed over as is. She watched as the honoree carefully lifted the paper away, handing it off to Beth who then flattened it out on a nearby table. How odd. Would it be used again at some point? Her eyes were drawn back to Loki’s lady as the woman chuckled. “Nice,” she said with a quiet chuckle. “Come on, Darce, do you really think I’ll need this? Loki doesn’t exactly have any problems in the performance department.”

“What is it?” she had to ask. The package had a picture of what looked like a man’s member on it.

“A vibrating dildo,” Darcy replied promptly. “I told you about vibrators; this one is insertable, you know, just like…”

“Enough,” she interrupted, clapping a hand as gently as she could over the mortal’s mouth. Sif really didn’t want any more of an explanation. Not in public. She frowned as she stared at the box…such a thing might actually come in handy if one were not in a relationship. It would avert the necessity for finding a discrete partner to gain sexual relief. Of course, she was in a relationship now, but she knew other women amongst Asgard’s warriors.

“It could still be fun, Kara,” Darcy continued after twisting out of Sif’s light grasp. “Couples use toys all the time even if they don’t have sexual issues.”

Sif shot a look at Kara who had buried her face in one hand. A slight flush of pink was suffusing the covered cheeks. “I don’t even want to think about what Loki would do with this and how gleefully he would do it, but I do appreciate the thought. I know it’s a serious gift, but I think I’m going to tell him it was meant as a joke.”

“Absolutely not,” Sif told the woman. “You’ll have him targeting your friend with a return jest and you do not want that.”

“It’s okay,” Darcy insisted. “He’d have to go through Bruce first.”

“Okay, okay…let’s just kind of, um, huh.” Kara trailed off and frowned at the package.

“Just tell him it’s traditional to give the bride one of these, especially if she doesn’t need it.” This
bit of wisdom, surprisingly, came from the blonde healer. Sif her nodded agreement. “That way he won’t get any ideas about payback and he’ll be grateful that someone is making sure all of the traditions are followed for you.”

“Perfect,” Kara said in relief. “Better yet, that’s even kind of true so he won’t hear a lie.” She set the embarrassing box down and reached for the next gift. This one was from Pepper. It, at least, should be a lot safer to open. The professionally done wrapping parted with a flick of her fingernail and a box from one of the designer shops was revealed. “Lingerie?” she guessed before lifting off the lid. Pepper just gave her an enigmatic smile. “Oh. My. God.” Lingerie, yes; safer to open, no. The garment, if it could be called that, revealed as she unfolded the tissue paper, was made from a lovely forest green silk edged with matching lace, but it was a teddy with open cups and an open crotch. “Seriously, Pepper? I’d expect something like this from Tony, but from you?”

The strawberry blonde CEO shrugged one elegant shoulder. “He rubs off on you after a while.”

Kara stared at the thing for a minute more before noticing the black satin material behind it. Lifting out the teddy she found a bustier and matching G-string set. “I sense a pattern here,” she commented dryly. Peeking out from behind the black satin was a wisp of metallic gold lace. “You do realize that Loki is going to insist I wear these on a regular basis?” The gold proved to be a strapless shelf bra and thong.

“The gold set is to wear with your wedding gown. Your strapless bra wasn’t cut low enough, the cups showed to anyone who was standing close to you. The others, well, a girl’s just got to have fun. Before he gets to the point where he starts demanding you wear them for him often, Loki’s eyes are going to bug out and he’s going to drool like a teenager.”

“Uh huh; and what do I get out of this?”

“You will get to revel in the power you have over his libido.”

“Huh. Okay, that’s fair.” She looked down at the rest of the presents with a feeling of dread. “Do I really want to know what’s in the rest of these?” The laughter that greeted her only semi-serious question was not reassuring.

Loki looked down at the baby sleeping in the crook of his right arm. She’d been fussing and after watching Clint unsuccessfully try to quiet the infant, he’d offered to take her. Brianna had fallen asleep almost immediately with not so much as a smidge of magical assistance. The other men had been impressed. He glanced around the large conference room in one of the lower floors of the Tower, designed when it was intended to be the new headquarters for Stark Industries. A group of nubile young women dressed in short pants and barely there tops with lighted representations of the arc reactor were dancing in what Bruce had informed him was called a chorus line. Everyone but him was watching the girls with varying degrees of interest or embarrassment. Roger’s, unsurprisingly, looked the most uncomfortable. “Every last one of you has a woman that outshines the lot of them; why do you stare so?” he asked Banner.

“It’s a testosterone thing,” Bruce replied, “kind of hard-wired into our brains. Regardless, it’s not every last one of us,” the scientist added, nodding in the direction of the Æsir guests, particularly Thor.

“Brother,” he said, knowing that would catch Thor’s attention faster than his name. “Where were
“Fabio had a date,” Tony told them as the Irontettes finished their performance. The man stood, clapping and took a few steps towards the girls. “Absolutely stunning, as always, girls. There are snacks and drinks for you all next door, movies, whatever. Enjoy yourselves, hang out if you want. Just tell Jarvis when you need your rides called, okay?”

“Thank you Mr. Stark!” and the like chorused from the girls as they filed out, all smiles. Several stopped by Loki’s seat to coo over Brianna before they too took their leave.

Loki shook his head and looked up at Thor. “So, with whom? The lovely Eleanor or the delectable Olivia?”

His brother sighed. “Olivia.”

A very short and not terribly informative answer; not at all like Thor. “And what did you and our favorite S.H.I.E.L.D. agent do on your date?”

“We attended a musical play about a false Prince, a Princess, a Djinn and a magical lamp.”

“He means they saw ‘Aladdin’ on Broadway,” Raj Nassar supplied. They’d all been surprised when the psychiatrist had shown up for the bachelor party. They were also rather relieved that Fury had not accompanied him. They’d only invited the Director out of courtesy.

“Sif and I also attended,” Nyvorlas offered. “Though I do not remember seeing Thor there.”

“Olivia arranged for seats in the back in case she should be called away for emergency duty. She did not wish to disturb others in the audience.”

“So, you saw a Broadway Musical. Then what? Dinner? Dancing? Oh, no, you can’t dance.” Loki tried not to smirk at Thor’s blush. “Hmm, though I hear you do a passable job at the horizontal dance.” The smirk emerged as his brother glowered at him, face now brick in hue.

“You are perilously close to being offensive, Loki,” he growled.

“You are attempting to embarrass me.”

“No, I’ve totally succeeded in embarrassing you; there’s a difference.” Thor groaned and Loki was treated to the sight of his brother’s chin dropping to his chest.

“Okay, if we’re boasting, who has been with the most women at one time?” Clint asked.

“Oh, that would be me,” Tony claimed.

Loki doubted that. “Really? How many?”

“Eight. It was fu…freaking amazing.”

“Good catch,” he approved, looking back down at his sleeping godchild. “But no, you don’t win. Anyone else had more sexual partners at one time?”

“Hey, orgies don’t count, only times when everyone was there to please you or be pleased by you, not just a bunch of people doing each other,” the reformed playboy complained.
“Again; you don’t win.”

“Bull…hockey.”

Thor chuckled. “He does not lie, friend Tony. You are not the winner. Is he, Nyvorlas?”

“No, and I would also like to know if any of the others can claim more.” No one spoke. “Then Loki wins.”

A flurry of disbelieving comments flew about the room as Loki smirked widely. The night in question had angered him at the time, but now…he might just forgive his brother and his friend for arranging it. “Okay, Casanova. Out with it; how many?” Stark demanded.

He shrugged. “You’ll believe Thor before me. Or better yet, ask Hogan or Fandral. They were not part of the plot.”

“An even dozen,” Fandral volunteered immediately. “One for each name day of Loki’s adulthood at the time.”

Tony frowned at him. “Uh, what does that mean?”

“Until we reach fifty years of age in Midgardian terms, we are what you consider children or teens and we celebrate our name day once every five years. Thereafter, we are considered a young adult and our name day is celebrated every ten years until we become fully adult at two hundred and fifty.” He gave Nyvorlas and Thor a quelling look. “When I was one hundred and seventy in your years, these two miscreants decided that since I was rather withdrawn and, to their knowledge, had not indulged in any sexual liaisons, that they would provide me with a willing partner for every one of those name days, all at the same time.”

“Fandral told us that you had not,” Thor said defensively.

“Fandral, contrary to popular belief, does not know everything that happens in the Valhöll, you should have asked Volstagg.”

“Wait, so you made it with twelve women in the same place, the same night?” Clint’s eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

“They weren’t certain of my preferences, so no, they were not all women.” Silence reigned as the humans all turned to stare at the five of them who were not.

Nassar finally broke the silence. “All right, I’ll regret this, I’m certain, but did you really have all of them?”

Loki chuckled. “I think you’ll find upon closer questioning that Tony did not actually have, ah…” he trailed off as he glanced at the baby. “Have, ah, physical congress, with all eight of his partners, but that some were simply kissed, fondled and the like while, ah, congress was going on with a select few. Correct, Tony?”

The self-proclaimed ‘international playboy’ blustered a bit and then sighed. “Yeah, correct.”

“It was much the same for me, though those select few may have numbered fully half of them.”

“Holy shit…take,” Clint muttered.

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Darcy finished taping the last piece of wrapping paper around Kara’s annoyingly fit form just as Beth held out the bouquet made from the bows and ribbons that had decorated the packages with a flourish. “Ta Dah!” Beth said with a wide smile.

“Good job. How does the dress look?”

“Picture perfect.” the blonde said. “How’s the veil coming, Pepper?”

“Almost done, Beth. Darcy, why don’t you get the camera ready while Jane and I finish pleating this tissue paper.”


“Of course, pictures. You look gorgeous, don’t sweat it.” She set up the tripod for a still shot and then began snapping some candid pics.

“I still do not understand,” Sif told them. “I thought her wedding dress was being made by a man in the village and that it was made of fine fabrics, gold and gems.”

Darcy sighed as she tried to find another way to explain the tradition to the Asgardian. Flailing her hands she looked at Pepper. “Can you take this one?”

Mrs. Stark, and Darcy still couldn’t get over that, nodded. “It is, Sif. This is a pre-wedding dress made of the good wishes of her friends, it’s meant to be good luck.”

“Ah, a superstition to bring good fortune. We have many of those. Thor is invited to most weddings; touching Mjölnir to the bride’s belly is supposed to guarantee fertility. Total nonsense, but it reassures the common folk.” The warrior frowned. “Hmm, many of the nobles request the blessing as well, but I think they do so seeking to make him feel important and thereby curry favor.”

“We don’t really believe in the superstitions,” Darcy told her. “It’s just fun and a good way to laugh and tease the bride to be.”

“By all means, laugh at me. I don’t have enough problems,” Kara grumped. “And we definitely don’t need Mjölnir. The fertility thing is a done deal.

“You need the laughter, Kara,” Natasha said dryly. “We all do.”

“What Nat said,” Darcy agreed as Jane and Pepper pinned the tissue paper veil into Kara’s hair and Beth placed the ribbon and bow bouquet into the goddess’s hands. “Now look this way and say ‘Loki’s got diaper duty’.” She snapped the picture when Kara reflexively smiled. “Ha! Knew that would get a big smile out of you.”

“I am never going to live that down,” Kara said morosely, as she stared at the photo gracing her FacePage.

“You were right; you do look rather...odd,” Loki agreed with her.

“I didn’t say odd, I said stupid.”

He shrugged. “You’re brilliant, therefore I will never say that word in relation to you. But odd, most definitely, love.” A huff of breath caught her attention and she turned in time to see him
forcing back an outright laugh. “Oh my.”

“What? What are you looking at?” she demanded, dismissing the holographic image of her FacePage account. “Oh that little sneak.” Loki was watching a YouTV video that Darcy had posted. Apparently their intrepid social media director had Jarvis film the entire Bridal Shower and had then edited choice moments into a short film. “She’s going to pay for that,” Kara promised.

Loki let the laughter emerge. “That’s more my department, Kara. Unless you aim to scar the woman, physically or psychologically, you’d best leave retribution to me.”

“Darcy didn’t post video of you opening a package with a vibrator in it; I mean, really. What the hell was she thinking?”

“At least she included your comment; thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome, and it’s true.” Kara gave him a considering look. “You’re not upset about the gift?”

“Hmm? No, why should I be? Bruce tells me it is a tradition to give such things to a new bride regardless of the sexual prowess of her groom.”

“Oh. Well, yes, it is; I just didn’t think any of the guys would think to warn you.”

His smirk wasn’t annoying for once. “They also told me you’d likely be regaled with ideas on how to best tempt me into not straying from our marriage bed.”

“Ha. You stray and you’ll be one toasted Frost Giant.”

“Damn; and here I was hoping you’d demonstrate some of the wiles you were taught.”

She made a raspberry sound and wrapped her arms around his lean waist, resolutely turning her back on the video which was now showing a curious Sif, examining the sex toy with a frighteningly thoughtful expression. “You’ve taught me more wiles than that group has ever imagined.” Giving the video a second glance to confirm what she’d just seen, Kara shuddered.

“Sif’s interest in the gift bothers you?” Loki asked.

“No; I’m just glad she asked Darcy to take her shopping and not me. Do you think batteries will survive the trip on the Bifröst?”

His impossibly green eyes widened. “Does she mean to take…sweet Yggdrasill. I foresee a cultural upheaval in Asgard.”

“Humph. That started the day your father married us.”

“Hmm, yes. Therefore, it is all Odin’s fault.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys. It’s a long one to make up for it; hope it was worth it! It may be a couple of weeks before the next chapter, I am headed back to Disneyland (hope the cute guy is still portraying Thor!) for Valentine’s week with my hubby. It’s nice to
see some of the Fire & Ice readers are still with us. Oddly, the first two parts of this story are still gaining subscribers…though I suppose some of the newbies there have read a bit of this one and then went back to pick up the earlier part of this saga.

“Krovavyi ad” means “Bloody hell” and “Bozhe moy” means “Oh my God” if you’re keeping track when Natasha lapses into her native Russian.

The Wedding is coming…the Wedding is coming! Who would you like to see in attendance? Speak now, or forever hold your peace!
Kara could see the mob of paparazzi from all the way up here on the ninetieth floor of Avengers’ Tower. Granted, her vision was a lot sharper now that she was Æsir, but it was still unnerving to be able not only to see the group of people, but to make out the cameras and video equipment and even some of the network logos at this distance. Cox News, of course, was front and center. She’d rather have a view of the Tonight’s Entertainment crew, though Marco Lopez wouldn’t likely be hanging out on the street until one of the Avengers was spotted. Loki came out of their bathroom and moved up behind her. “Looking for your underwear model?” he asked.

“Hah. No, just contemplating how weird it is that I can see far enough that I’d know if he was down there,” she claimed.

“Partial lie,” he said with a smirk. “Don’t fret, I’m not angry. You’re allowed to enjoy the scenery; it’s touching it that’s a breach of your vows to me.”

“I’d much rather look at you, not to mention touch you,” she told him, eyeing the slightly damp expanse of skin that was only partially covered by the towel wrapped around his lean hips.

“Hmm, that’s one hundred percent truth; gods, how I love you.”

“Should I be counting the ways?” She chuckled at his perplexed expression. “Not familiar with that poem, huh?”

Loki frowned and then his expression lightened. “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight for the ends of being and ideal grace. I love thee to the level of every day’s most quiet need, by sun and candlelight. Browning, I believe; and also, very true.”

“Yes. I should have remembered that you read everything you can get your hands on, especially after I tripped over that stack of books you borrowed from Tony.”

“That was only the one time, and was because you did not have a bookcase.”

“I’m not complaining, just remembering.” She smiled as he enfolded her in his arms from behind, leaning over her shoulder to press his cheek against hers. “Though I’m surprised you don’t have a whole wall of bookcases in here. Are you really going back and forth to Tony’s study to borrow his books?”

“What? Of course not; I have a library of my own down the hall.”

“You…since when?”

“Since shortly after these chambers were renovated for us.” She frowned at him. “There was still a room across the hall behind the elevator shaft. It was originally a guest room, but Tony had intended us to eventually use it for a private study for you while you were still practicing psychology. Since you’d decided you cannot…”

“I didn’t decide, I just can’t, period.”
“As you say. Rather than make you feel badly about that, he asked me what I wanted done with the space so I requested that it be set up as a library. I’ve been filling it with books ever since.”

“Oh. Nice of you to tell me, I would have enjoyed having a place for books too, you know.”

“No need to be sarcastic, darling. I simply didn’t know how to bring it up without reminding you of what you’d lost.”

She flushed. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not be; I am called silver-tongue, I should have earned the sobriquet by finding a way.”

“I know of another way you can earn it.”

“Naughty minx.” Loki nuzzled her sweet spot, as he called it. “I’d have to bathe all over again.”

“But would it be worth it?”

… …

“Totally.” Loki swept her into his arms and headed for the bedroom. Once upon a time, he’d have just shifted them there, but he was still, technically, restricted from using his magic and doing so for pure convenience would surely break that restriction. Kara’s delicate hand stroked his cheek lovingly and he decided that this way was far superior after all. Laying her down on the bed, he made quick work of the buttons on the blouse she wore and then reached for the fly of her jeans.

“Your highnesses?” Jarvis began, much to Loki’s annoyance.

“If you are calling for the Avengers to assemble, we resign,” he told the AI.

“I do not believe that is permissible according to your parole, Prince Loki,” was the prompt reply. “However, I am merely advising you that your parents are approaching your door.”

“Oops,” Kara managed before dissolving into laughter and reaching for her buttons.

“Damnation. The warning is much appreciated, Jarvis.”

“You are quite welcome, sir.” The sentient machine made a noise that was a credible imitation of a man clearing his throat. “The All-Father and Queen Frigga request admission to your chambers, your Highnesses.”

He glanced at Kara who was almost finished refastening her blouse. “You’re more dressed than I, perhaps you should greet them.”

“You think?” She snickered at his put upon expression. “Go; make yourself presentable, I’ll get your folks settled.”

… …

Odin frowned as the disembodied voice advised them that they had been announced. It was almost as disconcerting as dealing with Mimir, he thought for a moment before deciding that conversations with the semi-alive head of his uncle had been far easier. The facial features expressed vestiges of emotion that could be considered to infer deeper meanings in what was actually said. A few moments passed before the door opened to reveal their daughter by marriage. She was somewhat disheveled. “Have we come at a bad time?” he asked, trying to keep any hint of sarcasm from his tone.
The girl smirked. “Just for that, and yes, I could feel it, I should tell you that you did. But really, Loki is still getting dressed after bathing and I was waiting for my turn in front of the mirrors. You do know your son is as vain as all get out, don’t you?”

That observation drew a reluctant smile from him and his dear lady-wife laughed aloud. “We do indeed know that, Kara,” Frigga said. “I must admit I encouraged him shamelessly. It was nice to have one son show up for feasts or court that was well dressed and clean. Thor, more often than not, would arrive in torn or rumpled clothing that was dusty from the practice arena, or perhaps even blood spattered.”

“Not when I’d intercepted him first,” Loki argued as he emerged from what must be the bathing chambers, straightening a Midgardian style shirt. “Though he did eventually become adept at avoiding me.”

“You’re looking well, son,” Odin told the boy.

“Thank you, father. Don’t take this poorly, but why are you here? The ceremony isn’t until tomorrow evening.”

“Your mother insisted that we arrive in time for what she called a ‘rehearsal dinner’. I’m told it is an opportunity for the families and closest friends of the bride and the groom to meet in a more informal setting before the actual wedding celebration.”

“Oh, I see; that is tonight.” Loki frowned. “You’ve met most all of them, I believe.”

“Not at a good time to get to know them, Loki,” Frigga scolded. “These are the people who will be involved in the lives of our children and our grandchild. We wish to become more comfortable with them.” Odin harrumphed in agreement; relieved she hadn’t mentioned the godchild. It was Thor’s to tell his brother about what he had felt regarding the infant, or not, as he chose. They mustn’t meddle.

A relieved smile stole across his lips and Loki’s eyes narrowed. “What are you up to, father?”

“Imagining all of the opportunities your mother will have to meddle in your lives through the good offices of your friends and how much joy that shall bring her,” he replied. That was true enough to cover the omission, even from the god of Lies.

Loki’s grimace was rueful. Good, the distraction worked. “Please, don’t encourage her. We have enough meddling going on right here without it coming from Asgard as well.”

… …

The rehearsal was scheduled to start in a half hour and all of the participants were gathered in the lobby of the Beacon Theater. In addition to the wedding party, Loki’s parents and a few of the closest friends of the Tower’s residents had joined them. Darcy grinned as she was engulfed in a genuinely warm hug by the Queen of Asgard. “How are you, my dear?” Frigga asked.

“I’m good, you know how it is.”

The goddess’s eyes narrowed. “Still at odds with your love? Have you not come to terms with it?”

Frigga had been the one to reach out to her in Asgard after she’d discovered that Bruce wasn’t aging. She tried not to sigh. “We’ve talked about it, and you know, I love the guy.” She shrugged. “I guess we’ll just deal with it when and if it becomes a problem. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I don’t want to lose that just because of what might happen. That would be
pretty stupid.”

“You are not a stupid woman.”

“True, that. Besides, it’s gonna be like twenty years before it’s even much of a problem.” She caught sight of a white-streaked head of auburn hair through the group that gathered around the table of hors d’oeuvres. “Huh, why is it so many female supers have red hair?” Frigga stared at her. “Sorry, total non sequitur. It’s just Kara’s a redhead, so is Natasha. Pepper’s a strawberry blonde and though she’s not technically a superhero, she’s super smart and gets things done in a way that makes you think she is, and then there’s Rogue.”

“I see…no, I do not see.”

Darcy chuckled. “I guess that didn’t make a lot of sense. Sorry, my brain just kind of spews out my thought processes sometimes. Let me introduce you to Rogue. Kara’s been counseling her; the kid accidentally killed a boy when her abilities manifested and she’d been having a hard time dealing with it. Technically, she’s not part of our group, she’s in the X-Men’s academy…and you have no idea who the X-Men are either, I’ll bet.”

“No, dear.”

“Right.” She looked across the room and caught Marie’s eye then beckoned her over. The girl’s face split into a huge smile and she hurried through the small crowd. “Queen Frigga? May I introduce Marie from the group of heroes known as the X-Men? She’s a protégé of Logan, Wolverine, who was one of those honored in Asgard for taking down the Mad Titan. Rogue, this is Loki’s mom, Queen Frigga.”

“Ah, yes, I remember Logan. Rather rough looking fellow, but quite good hearted. I’m pleased to meet you, young one. How is it you’d prefer to be called?”

The kid flushed. “Um, Marie, if you don’t mind ma’am,” she managed with kind of a funky curtsy. Frigga seemed pleased by the effort.

“I understand you’re well acquainted with my daughter-by-marriage. Is Loki treating you well?”

“What? Oh, yes, ma’am. He’s been real kind, a total sweetie.”

Darcy choked as Frigga abso-fucking-lutely beamed at Rogue. Not that it wasn’t true; Loki had been all kinds of patient with the kid. It didn’t matter that everyone else figured it was because he was fascinated by her unique ability to absorb the powers and life-force of anyone she touched. He’d finally convinced Kara to allow Rogue to experiment with them. It hadn’t gone well. They’d done it inside of Bruce’s panic room, the one reinforced to contain his other and that was a good thing. It was bad enough that when she’d absorbed some of Loki’s power that she’d damn near turned the god into a popsicle, but absorbing Kara’s was epically bad. Rogue had dropped every last person in the Tower, and a few on the streets immediately around it with a projection of abject fear. Well, everyone but Kara who was already on her knees, though surprisingly conscious, from Rogue’s touch. Then fire had pretty much exploded from the kid and only Loki’s caution in preparing to shield not only him but Kara and Rogue as well had saved them. The clear walls of the room had gotten kind of melty. “Rogue’s abilities impressed him, so he sees her as powerful,” she told the queen.

“Oh, come on, Darce; Loki was real sweet at Mr. Stark’s wedding too and he didn’t know what I could do then.”
She shrugged and decided to let the kid keep on her rose-colored glasses. Loki was an okay guy, but he was even more of a snob than Tony sometimes. He was getting better about it, though. “I’m pleased to hear it, Marie,” Frigga said.

“Yo, Darcy, stop hogging all of the beauties!” Speaking of the other devil on the team, Tony Stark sauntered over, the ever-present tumbler of Scotch in his hand.

“I’m not hogging all of them, just these two.”

“Well, three or maybe four, we’re both here,” he said with a roguish grin that made her wonder if he’d gotten into more than his allotted one glass.

“Seriously, Tony?” she asked as Rogue giggled.

“How have you been, Tony?” Frigga asked.

“Great, really; thanks to all of you. Hey, my chest finally stopped itching and the scarring is minimal. The local doctors are dumbfounded; it’s been fun watching them run around in circles trying to figure out not only what Lady Eir did, but how she did it.”

Frigga tsked at him. “That is not terribly kind.”

He shrugged. “No, but neither are the constant demands that I submit to their endless tests and examinations. Enjoying their amazement was my way of making the best of a bad situation. Anyway, I just wanted to warn you; we’ll head the members of the medical profession off as best we can, but you still may be subjected to some of them at the dinner. We had to invite a few.”

“I’ll keep that in mind and advise the All-Father of the possibility.”

Wow, Darcy thought; Tony had actually had a point. Maybe that was still his first glass. Her eyebrows shot up when the billionaire turned to wink at her. “Gotcha,” he murmured.

“Yeah, you sure did.”

… …

Loki eyed the evening gown his lady wore with distaste. “Why are you dressed so revealingly?” he asked.

Kara turned to give him a reproving stare. “It’s only revealing when you compare it to Asgard fashions.”

“I can see the inside swell of your breasts, Kara.”

“So? You’re the only one who gets to see the rest of them. All of the unattached men will be green with envy and so will some of the attached ones. You like green.”

“Not in skin tone, love. I’ve had enough of that with Dr. Banner’s other.” He frowned. “Our out-realm visitors may be scandalized.”

“Please, I’ve seen what they wear on Ljósálfheim and Jötunheim. This is absolutely modest in comparison.”

“Not by the standards of Asgard or Vanaheim.”

“I know; late medieval and early renaissance prudery…unless you’re a warrior like Sif. Look, do I
gripe about the style when I’m wearing Asgardian clothes in the other Realms? No. But this is Midgard, and this is a regular if elegant and pricey evening gown. At least it’s in your colors.”

Trying to be objective, he examined her outfit again. She did look spectacular, but…”Everything looks good on you; it is your beauty rather than any particular garb you might be wearing that makes it so,” he decided.

“Aw, very sweet, but you wouldn’t say that if I was wearing orange or anything pastel. Those colors make me look like crap.”

His mouth twitched with the effort not to smile at her perfectly serious expression. “I suppose I shouldn’t change your dress’s color to pastel pink, then.”

“Not if you ever want to get laid again in this lifetime, no.”

This time the laughter wouldn’t be held back. “Ah, love,” he finally managed as he nuzzled the long line of her neck exposed by her upswept hairstyle. “That would indeed be a tragedy.”

Her return chuckle warmed him. “For me, too.”

… …

Tony grinned at the wide catwalk that had been built over the middle of the center section of the orchestra seating level to provide an aisle leading to the stage for the bridal procession. The thick opaque material didn’t look like much with the power off, but flick a switch and… “Light ‘er up,” he told the crew chief. A glow began where the path met the stage and progressed slowly and dramatically to the back of the venue. “Damn, that looks good. Am I a genius, or what?”

“You’re a genius, boss,” Happy told him with a grin. “Does it look like the real thing?”

“Close enough. As close as we can get without building a real one and I don’t think our guests would approve. Of course, I haven’t figured out what that sucker’s made of yet, so it would be a while before I could replicate it here. This will do, though. Plenty theatrical; the media is going to absolutely love it.”

“Yeah, but will the bride and groom love it?”

He frowned and then gave his long-time driver a roguish wink. “Damn straight he will. Loki’s a full tilt diva and this is the stage to end all stages.”

“Princess Kara ain’t…isn’t.” Happy’s face was scrunched up in a way that made him look like a worried pug…okay, a gigantic worried pug. “You should probably tell her about it; I don’t think she’ll like being surprised.”

Shit. Happy was probably right. “You’re raining on my parade, Happy.” He sighed. “Yeah, I’ll brief her and her attendants before the ceremony starts. Don’t want to surprise her into projecting something or into burning the place down. That would put a dent even in my wallet. I’ll tell her about it when the rehearsal starts, but I’m not powering it up again. I want that part to be a surprise for everyone else.”

… …

The rehearsal was over and they’d gone across the way to the Beacon Hotel for a celebratory dinner in the Broadway room. For what was supposed to be a small gathering, they had one heck of a crowd. There had to be thirty or forty people there, nearly half of the eighty-plus that were
expected for the reception dinner tomorrow in the combined Broadway/Amsterdam banquet room. “I thought rehearsal dinners were just supposed to be family and the wedding party,” Steve asked as Beth smiled and nodded to Dr. Miller from New York Presbyterian. The trauma specialist had a different woman on his arm then he’d had at either Tony’s engagement ball or wedding.

“It is, but Pepper and Darcy decided we needed the good will from some of the people we may need to deal with on a regular basis; besides, Dr. Miller is in charge of my internship. He’ll need to make special arrangements for me to get off duty there when you guys have an emergency and to allow some of my regular work with the Avengers count towards it as well.”

“So we’ve got to brownnose, okay, I understand him, but why the reporters?”

“Loki and Kara are going to do an interview with them tonight so that they’ll have their sound bites for the wedding without disrupting it. I just wish we didn’t have to invite that turkey from Cox News.” She snickered as another TV reporter came through the doors. “Loki’s less thrilled that Marco Lopez was invited. He’s cute and all, but I don’t know what Loki thinks Kara could possibly see in the guy when she’s got her very own prince.”

“Loki’s no Prince Charming.”

“Oh, come on, Steve. He’s very charming…too charming sometimes. Anywho, it doesn’t matter, he knows Kara loves him so there’s no reason for him to get so bent out of shape.”

Anywho? Steve decided to ignore the mangled word, guessing that Beth had picked it up from Darcy. The two hadn’t hit it off all that great when they’d first met, but were pretty good buddies now. He shuddered. That thought kind of scared him at a really basic level. He eyed the doctor again as the man peered into his date’s ample cleavage. “Geez, another different girlfriend, what’s that, three this year?”

Beth shuddered. “Third woman, second wife. He was married to the first one we saw at both Tony’s and Loki’s engagement balls, was cheating on her with a call-girl at Tony’s wedding and then divorced the first wife in Reno, and then met and married this one in Vegas a month later. I think this one’s a stripper.” His jaw dropped as he stared at his girlfriend. “What? He’s the hot topic of gossip at NYP, and all of the nurses made sure to warn me about him because they think I’m sweet.”

“You are sweet,” he told her. “But you’ve got a good head on your shoulders; you wouldn’t fall for a jerk like that.”

The press corps personalities, the invited ones, not their crews, were settling in at their tables; it was time for them to go to theirs. “You’re right. I have a thing for gentlemanly blondes.”

Dang, he could feel a blush creep up his cheeks and concentrated as hard as he could to remember the things Loki had suggested on how to respond in this kind of situation. “I just have a thing for you,” he finally said. “The real you, you know, not your looks or anything even though you’re so pretty it kind of makes me dizzy.” Aw, geez. She was staring at him. Did he get it wrong or did Loki set him up to look bad?

Beth was moving and then her arms were around his neck and she was peppering his jaw with kisses. “That was so…so…wow. Sometimes I just have to pinch myself to realize I’m not dreaming this, that you really do like me.”

“Like?” He’d made a very embarrassed confession that he loved her; hadn’t she gotten it?
She flushed bright pink. “Love,” she whispered. “I didn’t want to just blurt it out in front of the reporters…didn’t want to put you on the spot.”

“Oh. See? You’re so thoughtful on top of everything else. Really Beth, you’re pretty much perfect.”

“Damn, you rate, Miss Anderson. Captain Perfect himself declaring you ‘pretty much perfect’. You’ve reached the pinnacle of this existence.”

Steve rolled his eyes as the sarcastic billionaire pushed between them. “Stark, just because…”

“Can’t catch a clue with those G.I. hands, can you, Cap?” the annoying man hissed. “Unless you want Cox News all over your girl about whether you’ve made a commitment yet; Shut. Up.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He chanced a quick look in the direction from which Tony had come. Sure enough, Bill Rosen was eyeing them curiously. “Uh, thanks, Tony.”

“Why does everyone think I act like an ass just for the fun of it?” Stark griped as he continued on his way across the room.

Steve looked at Beth as she stared after the man. “Because he usually does?” he asked her; and smiled as she dissolved into giggles.

… …

The solo interview was grating on Loki’s nerves. The reporters had exhausted the serious questions and were now exhausting his patience as they began talking about the wedding and surrounding festivities. “Really, your Highness,” the annoying pup from the entertainment show said. “As a married man myself, I have to admire your commitment to your lady’s happiness. Not many married men would jump through all of these hoops just to ensure that his wife gets the wedding of her dreams. Most wouldn’t understand how important it is to her happiness and would just think that having the deed done would be enough. That you really get it is very impressive.”

He held his jaw shut through sheer force of will though he was certain his eyes widened a bit. The pup was actually complimenting…a snide laugh interrupted his musing. “Please. This is all just theatrics designed to appeal to you soft-hearted liberals and women out there, another grand illusion. You’re big on illusions, aren’t you, Loki, god of Mischief,” the man with the microphone labeled ‘COX’ scoffed.

This was the fool who had been so abusive to his lady; Bill Rosen, Loki recalled. He smiled benignly at the two. “Thank you, Mr. Lopez, I appreciate your understanding. Your own wife is no doubt pleased by your sensitivity.” He paused for effect. “Are you married, Mr. Rosen?”

“Oh…not at the moment, but that…”

“Hmm, that would indeed explain your attitude. A romantic partner should be cherished, sir. Their needs, their happiness, should come above one’s own; particularly if they have made sacrifices on your behalf. Kara sacrificed her humanity for me. She will watch her friends and other loved ones grow old and die, she has had to give up the psychology career that she was devoted to, solely that I might continue to have her love beyond her original lifespan. That is why I willingly participate in all of…” he gestured around him with a purposely languid hand, “…these exercises in sentiment and tradition.” He shrugged, carefully arranging his expression to reflect patience and mild amusement. “I may not understand the traditions, but I do understand their importance to Kara; and for that alone I will do my utmost to fulfil them.” Letting his smile widen, he brought his hands
together. “Thank you all for your time. I must see to my guests; please, enjoy the rest of the evening’s festivities.” Turning on his heel, he headed back to where Doctors Foster and Selvig stood chatting with his mother.

... ...

“Oh dear,” Frigga muttered. Jane looked over her shoulder to see what had caught her attention. Loki was headed towards them, his expression was mild but his shoulders were stiff. “Relax, son. It’s over.”

“It is not over; are you certain I can’t kill any of them?” he snapped.

“You aren’t serious?” Jane found herself asking before she thought better of it.

“Am I not?” His eyes drifted closed for a second and he sighed. “No, I’m not. Though torturing the one is swiftly becoming a favorite fantasy of mine.”

Erik chuckled. “I don’t think we need to guess which one. We’ve all had our run-ins with Cox News; their on-air personalities have no journalistic integrity let alone competence. They called our research suitable for nothing but fantasy novels.” The quick wink he gave the god surprised her; Erik had been getting a lot more comfortable with Loki since the defeat of the Titan, but this? She supposed a common enemy, more or less, was closing the last of the distance. “Not so fictional now, is it?”

“No, it is not.” Thor’s brother sighed again. “I do not know how she managed to deal with them so well; I should have been able to manipulate them and... simply could not. At least, not so easily as I would expect with mortals, eh, humans, sorry.” He looked thoroughly disgusted with himself.

She smirked and swallowed a laugh. “That’s the problem. Average humans generally consider most reporters to be subhuman. The rest of us just accept that reporters march to the beat of a different drummer, so to speak.”

“Speak for yourself, my dear,” Erik muttered. “Subhuman is too kind a word for Rosen and his ilk.”

“Call them what you want, you can’t expect they’ll react the same way as the rest of us.”

“Ah, quite true, my dear. There is your problem, Loki. You are expecting a human reaction and that is not what you will find with them.”

A third deep sigh emerged. “I shall have to delve more into Kara’s books, I suppose. At least psychology is an interesting subject.”

... ...

Kara moaned appreciatively as Loki’s strong fingers eased the tension in her bared shoulders. “I see you enjoyed that at least as much as I,” he said with a quiet laugh.

Tonight’s one-on-one session with the press had been nearly as excruciating as the previous solo interview. “And the award for extremes in sarcasm goes to Loki of Asgard,” she replied. “At least we can ignore them tomorrow.”

“True. Tomorrow can be all about you...ah, us,” he amended when she turned to frown at him. “The merits of this dress are growing on me.” She shivered as his lips caressed the curve of her shoulder and then trailed down her back and over to her spine.
“Stop that; well, save it for later.” His laugh was warm and sent a shiver of desire through her body. A sharp nip on her earlobe made her gasp. “Oh, it is so on. You are going to be as hard as I am wet before we can get out of here,” she promised vengefully.

“Too late, love. I barely manage to control myself before I catch sight of you again and am immediately aroused. Who chose this…lovely frock for you?”

“Lovely frock? Seriously?”

Loki shrugged. “Is that not more polite than calling it an instrument of torture?” His hot gaze raked up and down her body. “It accentuates every asset you have excruciatingly well, my love. So, who am I to thank for my suffering?”

She couldn’t hold back a snicker. “Oh, no. I’m not going to tell you if you have that attitude about it; I’m enjoying this way too much, you don’t get to prank anyone over this.”

“You are a cruel woman, Kara. Though not so cruel as…Natasha?”

“Nice guess, but too obvious.”

His eyes narrowed to viridian slits. “Pepper, then. Darcy would have chosen one that exposed your legs as well.”

“I’m not going to tell you regardless of who you guess.”

“That must be against the rules.”

“Guessing each person until you finally come up with the correct answer is against the rules. Okay, here’s the deal. You’ve guessed wrong twice. You get one more guess and then you just have to let it go.”

“Fine. I…I’ll have to think on it.”

She smirked. “You do that…but you’ll never get it.”

… …

“Looks like Kara’s dress is a big hit with Loki,” Darcy murmured in his ear as she slipped an arm around his waist.

Bruce smiled and hugged her close while pressing a soft kiss to her temple. “He certainly looks distracted.”

“Yep, good job. He’s going too crazy with want to go ballistic over the press, though we should probably get them out of here soon. I never thought green eyes could be so heated, but sheesh, if he stares at her like that much more she’s going to spontaneously combust.”

“He can handle it for a while longer.”

“Oh, come on, you suddenly into torture, big guy?”

“Consider it the ultimate trick on the trickster. Tony will owe us a favor for getting back at Loki for him.”

“Oh no, not us; this was totally you. I’m not taking any credit for it. I don’t have the threat of turning big, green and destructive to keep him from retaliating.”
“You have the threat of me doing it, Darcy. Don’t discount that.”

She sighed and leaned back into his embrace. “I-I love you, and I’m not just saying that, you know.”

He did know, but from the way Darcy’s lush mouth twitched that knowledge was making him blush. “I love you too, honey. I…” he trailed off in frustration, not sure she’d want to hear this now.

“You know, if you maybe someday like, wanted us to be something kind of committed, ah, legally, I’d be okay with that.”

His jaw dropped; literally. It took an actual physical effort to close his mouth. He tried to reach for his glasses, for the familiar comfort of cleaning them to buy time to think, but his arms were full of Darcy. Oh boy. “Um…”

“I guess I’m kind of pushy. Sorry,” she mumbled and tried to pull away. Oh no. Hell no.

“Darcy, you’re not pushy; you just caught me by surprise. Honey, I don’t know what’s going to happen with me. I don’t know if I’m going to eventually start aging, if I can keep this level of control of my other, or if I’m just going to suddenly burn out and…ah…”

“Die? Yeah, I kind of figured that might be a possibility when I looked at your notes that time.”

His eyes closed. Everyone underestimated Darcy’s intelligence because of her personality and that amazing body. Even him. “And that’s the only reason I’ve been hesitating. Well, that and how upset you were about my not aging.”

She shrugged. “I’m okay with it, all of it. Well, not really okay, but I’d rather be not okay with it and be with you than not be with you, and well, crap, I’m babbling.” He smiled as Darcy rolled her eyes in frustration. “I’d just rather us be together, however we’re together and for however long than not, you know?”

“I know.” He took a quick look around the room. The reporters were all surrounding Odin and Frigga in the far corner of the room. “I haven’t prepared for this, honey, but…” he dropped to one knee. “Darcy, I love you more than I thought possible. You’re intelligent, brave, beautiful, funny, and just all around wonderful. Would you please do me the honor of marrying me?”

… …

Kara turned as the sudden burst of happiness shot through the room. Darcy was standing with her back towards them and… “Oh, wow. Loki, look.”

Her husband/fiancé looked in the direction she indicated and his eyebrows shot up almost comically. “Is he? Hmm, of course he is. Mother will be thrilled.”

“What? Why?”

“She likes them; as a couple, that is, not simply as individuals. They balance each other, or so she tells me.”

“Oh, like we do?”

“Just so.” His hands slipped around her waist and he tugged her closer. “Though perhaps not as perfectly, my fiery love.”
Yep, he was hard again, and was taking the opportunity to hide the ‘evidence’ against the fullness of her skirt. “I guess we would be difficult to beat with the whole fire and ice thing we’ve got going on. Hmm, with Darcy we could actually do a bachelorette night.”

“What is that?” he asked with an annoyed frown. “Is this something you missed out on? You were supposed to enjoy all of the traditions.”

“This one’s optional. If the bride likes to party, her friends take her bar hopping a few days or so prior to the wedding. Somewhere along the line they’ve got a, ah, exotic dancer waiting to perform for her.”

“Exotic dancer?” His eyes narrowed. “One who removes his clothing, you mean?”

“Exactly.” She bit back a giggle as his jaw set. “Of course, since I never was a party girl and don’t care for bars, we decided to exercise the option not to have any of that.”

“You did not wish to have a man dance naked for you, or nearly so?”

The laugh bubbled up and out of her mouth before she could force it back down. Oh dear; now his expression was suspicious. “Well, yes, but that man would have to be you for me to enjoy it.”

“Good answer. Will you arrange such a thing for Darcy?”

“Probably. Well, we’ll get Pepper to arrange it; she can arrange pretty much anything. She’s already researching the right one to hire for when Steve gets off the fence and proposes to Beth.”

“Loki’s eyes rolled. “Oh! You guys have got to…never mind; Tony will handle it for sure.”

“A female dancer for Rogers? Yes, Tony has already mentioned such and has turned over his little black book to Pepper. He’d rather not make the call himself and risk antagonizing her. I do believe he was sincere in his pledge of faithfulness.”

“He’d better be or she’d probably castrate him; uh, psychologically, I mean.”

“If she’d like it done physically, that could be arranged.”

“Loki! No. If and when Tony ever screws up you’ll let Pepper handle it. Believe it or not, I think she’d manage a far more devastating revenge without actual bloodshed.”

“There is no bloodshed; one simply heats the castration tool until it is hot enough to cauterize…”

“If I didn’t know you were teasing me, I’d be getting pissed so knock it off.”

He managed a put-upon sigh, though the corner of his mouth twitched. “Fine, take away my fun.”

“You can have lots of fun later.”

… …

Frigga smiled up at Odin as she cuddled the tiny infant. “Is she not adorable, husband?”

“I suppose. It seems Asgard shall have a queen with red hair regardless of which son rules.”

“I told you that a millennia ago. Her eyes are so very blue, such a striking shade.”

He sighed deeply. She supposed she was fortunate that he was not glaring at the babe. “It would be best to give her back to her parents, Frigga, lest they suspect aught from the intensity of your
“Brianna is my younger son’s goddaughter and she is miraculously Æsir. They know that much and it explains it well enough.”

“What in the Nine…” Frigga looked up as Odin trailed off in surprise. Hel had entered the room, accompanied by Director Fury and the gentleman called Dr. Nassar. The director looked around, saw them, and gestured in their direction. “I thought she was to arrive on the morrow.”

Casting a nervous glance at her granddaughter and then at her future daughter-by-marriage, Frigga tried not to worry. Loki had made issue with Hel over the child and Natasha Romanov’s lives. Surely the Queen of Niflheim wouldn’t contest their survival? “Hel, my dear, it is good to see you on a happier occasion,” she ventured.

“Your Majesties,” Hel said respectfully and then frowned at the infant. “Know you where my sire might be?”

“I believe he and Kara stepped out for some fresh air, or as fresh as one can find in this place.”

“I’ll go check with Mr. Stark, Nick, perhaps you might check with Mrs. Stark.” Dr. Nassar said. “If you’ll excuse us?” he asked them politely

Hel nodded and Frigga smiled at the men. “We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow,” she mentioned to fill the silence once they had left. Odin was ignoring their granddaughter as he often did. “Husband, you did not hear otherwise from Heimdall and forget to tell me, did you?”

Odin frowned at being dragged into the conversation. He still mourned the only biological son they had in common, though why he resented Hel for the boy’s loss, Frigga had never understood. His death had been the result of a foolish bet and no one was to blame save the young man himself. “No, I did not. Is all well with you, granddaughter?” he asked, sounding far more interested than he usually managed.

“Indeed, and you will be pleased to know that all is well with Baldur.”

Oh dear. Hel had to bring him up. “That is good to hear,” she said to cover Odin’s sudden silence. “I know that you look after him, though I do wish we could visit. It has been so long.”

“I wish that as well; unfortunately few can cross the border into my realm and survive. To this day, only Loki and I have done so successfully. I strongly suspect that he manages it only because the power recognizes his close relationship to me.”

“And neither Baldur nor we are biologically that strongly related to you, I do understand, my dear. It is simply a mother’s sorrowful yearning. Had you heard from Loki about his parentage? It seems he is my lord’s cousin of a degree; and Thor’s as well, of course.”

“I did not; he was a trifle busy the last time we spoke.” Hel looked around and frowned as she failed to spot either Loki or the mortals who had escorted her to them. “I should like to have words with him tonight; I do not wish this to go on until the morrow.”

“What words are those, Hel?” Odin demanded. Oh dear, that was not a good tone to take. Hel was nearly as stubborn and easily insulted as Loki. “Do you begrudge your father’s saving of his friend and his goddaughter?”

“Of course not. I was certainly annoyed at the time as I had intended…ah, here he comes now.”
Loki and Kara were hurrying across the room, the dark-skinned mortal striding beside them. Director Fury looked as worried as her son. Kara was talking rapidly to the two of them, but they seemed to be ignoring her. The young goddess finally threw her hands in the air in defeat and shook her head and pushed past the men.

… …

"Welcome to Midgard, Hel," Kara said before Loki or Fury could say a word. "It’s so nice of you to come earlier than expected. We probably wouldn’t have had much time to spend with you if you’d arrived tomorrow."

"That was my thought as well," Hel replied. "Father."

Loki blinked, looking every bit as surprised by the way Hel had addressed him as he felt. "Hel, daughter. I…I did not have a chance to thank you."

The woman’s eyebrows rose in a manner very reminiscent of Loki. "You did say that you were a tad busy."

"So I was. I am sorry; I know that you had only the best intentions and I do appreciate that. It is just…"

"You were not ready to give up on those you love, I understand."

"Ah…yes." Kara pressed her lips together to hold in a giggle. At least she wasn’t the only one to call him on loving mortals. "You…you’re not angry?"

She shrugged one elegantly clad shoulder. Seriously; someone had coached the woman on Earth fashions and she was wearing what had to be a designer original gown. "I was annoyed that I’d used so much energy to do you a kindness and that it was not needed. I truly did not expect you to be able to save them. Your power has grown."

"I think it was more a matter of desperation than power," he admitted. "Did you…well, you can see for yourself what happened to Brianna, I imagine."

Hel glanced down at the baby; Brianna was staring at the people around her. It really seemed as though she could focus on them individually which seemed weird, but Kara didn’t know a lot about babies in general and nothing about Æsir babies. "She seems whole and healthy…oh. However did you manage that?"

"I haven’t a clue. I did not even know what I had done other than the fact that she lived and seemed well."

"Hmm. It is best if this is not much spoken of, I think."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kara saw Frigga wince. "Uh oh. I think maybe it’s too late for that," she told them.

"I’m afraid so," Frigga agreed. "The news is all over Asgard by this point and has no doubt traveled to the other Realms."

Hel sighed. "Then perhaps the fact that my sire is not capable of repeating this happy accident should be spread equally well and quickly. There are others who have loved mortals."

… …
Loki swallowed. That point hadn’t even occurred to him. “You are right. Father, mother, will you see to that?”

“Of course, my son,” Odin agreed. “Thank you, granddaughter for realizing such might be at issue. It is well that we shall be prepared.”

Odin was calling Hel ‘granddaughter’ and without being prompted? Oh, this was new. Loki decided that ignoring it was the best option. “Do you wish to meet the parents of my goddaughter?” he asked her.

“Of course; though they be mortal, they are still family, are they not?”

He smiled. “They are. Mother? May I take Brianna, please?”

Frigga sighed and reluctantly handed him the baby. “I do want more time with her later,” she insisted.

“Between Brianna and our own forthcoming child, you will have a plethora of babies to fuss over soon enough.”

“What forthcoming child?” Loki grimaced at the odd chorus. Nicholas Fury and Raj Nassar had been standing slightly behind the group and Fury had now stepped up to Hel’s side as both the director and his daughter questioned his statement.

“Kara is with child. I learned this only after Brianna was born. If you,” he said to Fury, “had been at the bachelor party, you would have heard the news then.”

“Congratulations,” Hel told him, sounding sincerely pleased.

“Stark’s going to need to build a nursery,” Fury muttered.

“It’s already in the planning stages as is additional programming to his AI system. Apparently Jarvis will be getting a female counterpart to act as an all-seeing nanny for the children. We will still have living caretakers, of course.”

Fury gave him a disgruntled look. “Just be sure they’re cleared through our security.”

“Yes, yes, Dr. Nassar has already insisted upon it.”

Fury leveled a glare at the doctor. “You knew and didn’t think I might need to know?”

“I attended the party. It was a social occasion and not S.H.I.E.L.D. business.”

… …

“Who is that staring at Brianna,” Natasha hissed.

Last he had seen, their baby was being fussed over by the Queen of Asgard, with the All-Father standing by trying not to show his own softer side. He’d had to turn away not to laugh at the old god’s expression. Turning, he saw a tall, slender woman with inky black hair and dusky skin. “Oh, Hel.”

“What’s wrong? Who is she?”

“No, that’s Loki’s daughter, Hel, Queen of Nifflersomething or other, the one who tried to come for...shit, no fucking way,” he snarled and started pushing his way through the crowd, only to stop
when Nat grabbed his arm.

“Calm down; she’s just looking. Loki’s got Brianna, he won’t let anything happen to her.” Her words came easily, but Clint could hear the anxiety in his lover’s voice that anyone else would miss.

“You’re right. Loki takes his duties as godfather seriously. But let’s go over so you can meet Hel in the flesh this time.”

“I didn’t meet her last time; I just felt her energy.”

He shuddered. “Yeah, and that’s what scares the piss out of me.” Pulling away from her he marched over to Fury’s side and pulled the director back. “What is she doing here?”

Fury’s eye narrowed. “She’s on the guest list, Barton. What’s this about Hellbringer being pregnant? Why wasn’t that reported?”

“Raj Nassar knew.”

“Dr. Nassar doesn’t work for me.”

“Neither do we.”

“Fine, that goes both ways; if you have a problem with your team members’ guests, well, that’s your problem.”

“Gentlemen,” a deceptively soft voice interrupted. They both turned to stare at the frowning Queen of the Dead. “There is no problem. Hawkeye, make the mother of your lovely daughter known to me, if you would.”

“Um, yeah. Queen Hel, this is Natasha Romanov, known as the Black Widow. Nat, this is Loki’s daughter and the Queen of, um…” he floundered, not for the life of him could he remember what the damn place was called.

“Niflheim,” Loki supplied. “The realm of the dead who did not die in honorable combat.”

“Right, sorry. I didn’t want to screw it up and offend you, your, uh, Majesty,” he muttered.

“I take no offence, father of my sire’s goddaughter.” The woman’s smile was serene. “You both have a lovely daughter; it is a pleasure to have her in the family. I am pleased for you that she survived.”

“No hard feelings?” Nat asked.

“None. Father could have been less discourteous however; though I understand he was badly stressed.”

“I was in a full-blown panic,” Loki admitted. “I do apologize, Hel.”

“And I have accepted your apology, it is done. That said, should any of those who have your heart be eligible to enter my realm again, rest assured that I will welcome them and care for them in a way that honors you.”

Clint almost cracked up at the look of horror in Nat’s eyes. “I think she means in a good way, Nat.”

The goddess’s emerald eyes widened. “But of course. You would be welcomed in my personal
“Wait…Thor has, uh had another brother?” Nat asked.

“Indeed.” Hel shot a look at Frigga and Odin, both of whom seemed pretty unhappy about the conversation.

“That’s probably old news, Nat. There’s lots of history we don’t know.” He touched her back using a code they’d developed for missions to tell her where to not be obvious in looking.

“Oh, of course. My apologies,” she said smoothly. “Frigga,” Nat directed to the queen who had insisted they address her informally. “I think it’s about time for a diaper change, would you like to accompany me?” She reached out to Loki who promptly handed Brianna over.

“I would; thank you.”

“Absolutely. Kara, why don’t suffer through this with me so you can see what you’re in for.” Clint winced as Nat shot him a narrow-eyed stare. “You get out of it this time, don’t get used to it.”

Clint grinned. “Yeah, I know, I’m back on diaper duty after everything settles down, it’s cool.” They all watched the three women head off to the restrooms.

… …

Hel frowned. “Your lady trusts me not,” she said to the one called Hawkeye.

“Huh? Oh, no, it’s just that with her close call and all, well…you make us both kind of nervous.”

“I do not take lives, Clint Barton. I collect souls once life has left the body. So long as you and they live, I will not draw any of you to my realm.”

“I get that, really. It’s just kind of nerve-wracking to know that it almost came to that point.”

She nodded. “I am the stuff of nightmares to many, I understand.” Hel didn’t even realize that her chin was dropping down until her sire’s fingers slid beneath it and tilted her face back up.

“Don’t,” he said quietly. “Be proud of yourself and the purpose you serve, it is an honorable one.”

“It is a lonely one,” she retorted softly enough that the mortals could not hear.

“One day your loneliness will come to an end, Frigga has said so.”

“I pray she is correct, and yes, I do know that she usually is.”

“I don’t want to step on toes here,” the darker of the two men who had escorted her here said. “But could you explain something to me? The souls of all of the dead in your, uh, Realm; what’s the purpose of them being there?”

Hel frowned as she considered the question. “Education and rehabilitation, I suppose you might call it; or for the truly evil, punishment.” The mortal’s sole eye narrowed. “Most souls can be reborn, reawakened in new bodies. The greatest warriors, those who have died in honorable combat go to Valhalla where their physical forms are reconstituted as they were at their peak. There they feast and train so that they may be ready to fight in Ragnarök in the final days without the disorientation of rebirth and the need to begin training from scratch. The feasting and pleasure they enjoy there is to compensate them for not being given the opportunity to be reborn and spend their time amongst the living and to find their loved ones again. They are already at their pinnacle
and their might and heroism will be needed to save the Nine Realms from darkness.”

“Everybody else gets to be reborn in the hopes that next time they’ll end up in Valhalla?”

“No,” her grandfather, however infrequently he claimed the title, said. “Some souls will never be warriors, and should not be; healers, for example. If they die, when they are awaiting rebirth they gain in power and instinctual knowledge so that when they are reborn they become even greater healers. That will be one of the signs that Ragnarök is nigh...the healers in Hel’s Realm will be reborn all at once so that they may be of an age to serve and restore injured warriors to health when the final battles come.”

“So everything is about Ragnarök?”

“Everything is about the survival of the Nine Realms once Ragnarök comes, director,” Odin corrected. “There will be an end to many things; we hope to ensure that there is not an end to all things.”

“Does that answer your question, good sir?” Hel asked.

The man’s full mouth quirked in amusement. “I’ll wager that you’ve never been addressed in quite that way before,” Loki said before the man could respond.

“You’d win. Yes, Queen Hel, that answers one of my admittedly many questions. Thanks.”

“Should you have more, I will answer those that I can. You must understand, however, that there is much that cannot be said lest the Balance be endangered and all of the Realms fall.”

“Yeah, I know all about that kind of balancing act; that’s what our jobs are all about,” he said, gesturing to himself and the other mortal who’d met her at the egress.

“Interesting. Perhaps we should speak more on it.” She glanced at her sire, grandfather and the father of her sire’s godchild. “If you will excuse us, I’m certain you have others to whom you must give your attention this night.”

Though the archer waited until she and the two men had crossed a third of the room she could still hear his words. “Does the idea of those three sharing intel freak either of you out as much as it does me?”

Loki didn’t like the idea of Hel sharing anything with Fury and Nassar, but she was a woman grown and a powerful goddess. A smile emerged...a wicked one if he were honest with himself.

“Son? What brings about that look?”

He allowed the laugh to follow the smile and turned to Odin. “I think the mortals have bitten off more than they can chew; I do not believe they realize that despite Hel’s assertion that she does not take lives, that she is still quite dangerous in her own right.”

“Loki, does she do magic like you do?” Barton asked.

“Her power is more on the level of Angrboða’s than mine; she does not have my centuries of training or experience, but abilities, yes.”

“Can she change shapes like you and her mom?”
“First, never, if you value life, refer to Angrboða as Hel’s mother within her hearing…which is about as sharp as my own. Second, she cannot, at least not in the same way either I or Angrboða do, though she does have another form she takes when she sits in judgment. Third, regardless of her abilities you need not fear for Fury or Nassar. Hel has far greater tolerance and restraint than I shall ever have.”

“Except when it comes to being related to Angrboða,” Clint asked. Loki nodded tersely. “Okay, good to know.”

“Where in the Nine has Pepper got to? Is this thing never going to be over?”

Clint and the All-Father both chuckled at his tone. “You just want to get Kara out of that smokin’ dress,” Barton accused.

“You are becoming far too comfortable with me if you dare to even mention that you enjoyed the sight of my lady in that dress,” he teased.

“Nah, I’m just sure you know that Natasha would have my balls on a silver platter if I did anything more than notice. She’s a lot scarier than you are.”

Odin was laughing again, damn him. “I don’t find that at all humorous.”

“You should, my son. It means that you have this man’s trust, and he, above nearly all others, should be the last to give it to you. This tells me more than anything else could that we made no mistake in releasing your power to you.” The old bastard was still smiling. “Also, I am well acquainted with the lady Natasha and fully agree with the Hawkeye’s assessment.”

“There is that.” He eyed Barton who was still smirking. “And you are correct; I have wanted to get her out of that damned dress since the moment I saw her in it.” This time they all laughed.

… …

“I am so proud of you,” Pepper said. Tony looked over his shoulder at her as he dropped his cufflinks in their velvet lined cubby when they’d finally closed the doors to their bedroom. “You handled everyone perfectly.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. This was just weird. “Who are you and what have you done with my gorgeous but very particular wife?”

“Ha-ha, Tony. I’m serious. I’ve never seen you so…on it.”

“Pep, I’m always on it.”

Her exasperated sigh made him a heck of a lot more comfortable. “Fine; I guess you don’t want your reward then.”

Reward? “Uh, I wouldn’t say that.” He dropped his jacket over the back of a chair, sauntered over to rest his hands on her hips as he kissed one exquisite shoulder. “What did you have in mind?” Oh boy. Now that was a wicked smile. “Just remember that I do have to be able to walk tomorrow.”

Pepper’s laugh was husky and sexy as all hell. “Why are you still dressed?” Damn good question. He hurriedly shed the rest of his clothes and joined her by their bed. “Lay down on your stomach,” she ordered. Oh boy, this was going to be one of those nights. Nice. He obeyed, not saying a word, and was soon rewarded by her weight settling on his butt. Her soft hands caressed and massaged his back and then went to work on his neck. A moan escaped when her thumbs dug into the base of
his neck. “Quiet.” He pressed his lips together. Her command was softly spoken, it was just a reminder that when they played this game, he wasn’t to make a sound until she told him he could. Her thumbs worked down his spine until they reached the spot where her sex was pressed into his buttocks. The pressure left his back but her fingers still moved. He wondered why for a full thirty seconds before a slight gasp and wriggle enlightened him. The damn woman was playing with herself! He looked back at her and gave her a pleading look. “What is it?”

“I could do that for you,” he offered.

“No.” Her fingers continued working and he felt her arousal begin to pool on his skin as she writhed against him. Her breath was hitching and she lifted up a bit. Twisting a little more he saw that she was now thrusting two fingers into her canal. Tony groaned as she started riding her fingers. If Pepper kept this up she was gonna come all over his ass! Shifting, he tried to slide a hand beneath him to reach his throbbing erection. “Don’t even think about it,” Pepper warned with a gasp as her body tensed and then her thighs tightened on his hips as a gush of fluid soaked him. “Turn over.”

The second she pulled up enough for him to move he flipped over. Tony groaned when Pepper impaled herself hard and fast on his eager cock. “Oh, fuck, babe.”

“I’ll let that one slide,” she said, rocking hard on him. He had to press his lips together to hold back the slew of comments he wanted to make as she rode him like a jockey on a Derby winning colt. The pale globes of her ass, Pepper didn’t do real or airbrush tanning, slammed down on the tops of his thighs repeatedly as she used those deceptively slender legs to lift and lower herself as she fucked him. Yeah, she was fucking him and he was just taking it…and damn he loved every second of it. His gorgeous CEO was panting and whimpering by this point and her ride was becoming erratic. Good thing because he wasn’t going to be able to hold out much longer.

“Christ!” he yelled as she used her inner muscles to tighten her pussy’s grip on his cock. She was so far gone that the rebuke he expected didn’t come.

“Now, Tony. Fuck me,” she ordered.

“About damn time.” Grabbing her hips as her ass connected with his thighs he held her in place and flipped them over in the huge bed. He unceremoniously shoved her legs up and back and began pounding into her sex. A needy whine emerged from her perfect lips; it edged up into a scream as he entered the homestretch. “Ah, fuck, babe.” That scream became an outright screech as his thrusts became short and deep as orgasmic shudders wracked her body and he threw his head back with a triumphant yell as he came.

Tony barely managed to fall to Pepper’s side as he collapsed. They both laid there, panting and working to catch their breath for several long minutes before she turned her head to look at him. “I think that was the best one yet.”

He chuckled. “Maybe. It does seem to get a little better every time, huh?” She nodded and smiled that serene smile that drove him absolutely insane. Folding her into his embrace, he kissed it away and then pressed his forehead to hers. “Do I get the handcuffs next time?”

“I’ll think about it.” He groaned at her airy statement and gave her his best puppy dog eyes. “Don’t look at me like…okay, fine. Next time you get handcuffed to the bed, and if you’ve been really good, I’ll have a new treat for you.”

“Hot damn.”
“Don’t want to wait until your wedding night, hmm?” Loki asked as Kara sashayed past him wearing the bodice of her gown, a garter, panties, thigh high stockings and the kind of high heeled footwear that Darcy charmingly called ‘fuck me heels’. He frowned. “I hadn’t realized that your skirt was a separate piece.”

“Yep, that’s part of its charm. The person that chose it thought you’d love that part.”

“I see.” His eyes narrowed. As he had but one guess left, he wished to make the right one. His honorary brother-in-law wouldn’t have dared pick something so beguiling for fear of being in trouble with both Loki and Pepper. Dr. Banner had never exhibited much taste in clothing, nor interest in it. The same applied to Doctors Foster and Selvig. Captain Rogers…ah, no. Even had the man been given lessons in women’s fashions he would never have selected such a blatantly sensual outfit. That left…Bethany. Or perhaps Dr. Nassar. No, Raj Nassar would not dare, he knew his involvement with both S.H.I.E.L.D. and its council of Regents meant that he was already in Loki’s bad graces. “I did not realize Bethany had time enough to advise you on dresses.”

His lovely bride smirked at him. “She doesn’t.”

Damnation! “I’ll have to find a suitable way to thank Dr. Nassar then.”

“No, you won’t. First, you don’t get to blame anyone, you’ve guessed wrong three times. Second, it wasn’t him.” Loki stared at her, thoroughly confused now. “I’ll tell you what; I’ll let the person who recommended it know that you’ve utterly failed to guess their identity, and leave it up to them to tell you.”

“Must you put it quite that way?”

“Yes, I must. This is just too good. And if they do choose to tell you, you’re not allowed to retaliate. If you do, I’ll be really pissed. You remember what ‘couch man’ means, right?”

He sighed. “Yes, yes. Fine; no retaliation. They’ve gotten me fairly. I shall even bite my tongue and congratulate them.”

She turned on those ever so high heels and smiled; he couldn’t help but smile back. “So, what do you say we celebrate early?”

“I thought you’d never…” he was cut off by a knock on the door. “Damn. Jarvis, who is there?”

“Your parents, your Highness. They asked that I not announce them.”

“Well, crap. I guess I’d better get some clothes on,” Kara grumbled.

Darcy was half floating in their sunken tub. Bruce eased down into the hot water that she’d set just a little too high for immediate comfort and then slid down the bench to her side. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, just thinking.”

Was that a good or a bad thing? “About?”

She abruptly sat up and settled down on the bench. “I really think I kind of made you propose to
me. I mean, you’re such a great guy that you’d do that even if you didn’t really want to, and I want to but if you don’t, you know, that’s okay, right?”

He blinked as he tried to digest the torrent of anxiously spoken words. “No,” he finally responded. “It’s not okay. I really want to spend the rest of my life with you. I’d rather we get married, but that part’s up to you.”

“Oh.” Her pouting lips twitched and then curved into a happy smile. “I didn’t push you into it?”

“Honey, the only reason I haven’t already asked was because I was uncertain how you’d take it. I know you care about me…”

“I love you, I don’t just care about you.” The mock glare that accompanied that statement made him smile.

“Fine, you love me. I love you and I was worried that you’d say yes because you felt sorry for me and then be unhappy because of all of the uncertainties I face.”

Her nose scrunched up in that way he loved as she mulled it over. “Um, no. Look, I could have died back in New Mexico when Loki sent that freaky metal giant. Then I ended up traipsing around with Jane when S.H.I.E.L.D. sent us to Europe. Did you know that Loki sent people, S.H.I.E.L.D. people that he’d taken over for looking for us along with a couple of mercs? I was extra baggage to them. If the S.H.I.E.L.D. people that weren’t taken over that were guarding us hadn’t beat the other guys, they would have taken Jane and killed me, that’s two. I stayed here when the Big Bad came. If he’d won, I’d have been dead, that’s three. My life has been freaking uncertain ever since that bozo Odin banished Thor a couple of years ago and Jane ran him over with her truck. This…” she continued, gesturing at the Photoshop treatment she’d done for the cover of the FacePage that featured a vertically split image of him and his alter ego. “This is small time in comparison. I’m good with it.”

“Good. What kind of ring do you want?”

Darcy giggled. “Um, not as big as Peppers? Seriously, I like diamonds, but that’s a bit out there, you know?”

“Yes. Well, I couldn’t afford that one anyway. I asked Jarvis…that style starts at fifty-five thousand before you upgrade to a flawless two and a half caret diamond for the center stone, which, of course, Tony did.”

“Geez. Uh, I don’t think I’d want to have that much loot on my finger even before the upgrade. But I like the style, kind of…just not so…big. The only big thing I want on, or more to the point, in me is you.” She regularly left him speechless. Bruce sat there, shaking his head as his grin spread.

“Um, that was a hint, you know,” Darcy pointed out, stroking his hardening erection under the water.

“I did get that, Tony isn’t the only genius in the Tower, remember?”

“Sure, that’s what they all say.”

… …

Bruce had laughed and wrapped his strong arms around her, pulling her onto his lap. That ‘big part’ was pressing against her sex and sending shivers up her spine. “Never let anyone tell you that you’re anything less than perfect,” he murmured in her ear before kissing her thoroughly. Her eyes swam with tears as she let herself cling to him. “How do you want me?”
And damned if he wasn’t the most thoughtful lover she’d ever had on top of everything else. Darcy twisted so that she was straddling his thighs. “Like this,” she told him and reached down to guide his thick cock inside. A very inappropriate giggle emerged when she wondered if the others knew why their ‘big guy’ tag was so right even when Bruce wasn’t hulking out.

“What are you laughing at now?”

She wriggled as he thrust up and overfilled her. “Just thinking… big guy and, you know big guy,” she explained, tensing her inner walls around him.

“Hmm. That was my fallback in my late teens when I couldn’t get the girl using my intellect.”

“Uh huh. I can see it now. ‘I’ve got the thickest penis you’ve ever seen, would you like to copulate?’, ” she said using a nerdy accent.

“It worked.”

“I’ll bet.” Darcy moaned as his hands cupped her ass and encouraged her to lift up and push back down again. “Gawd, Bruce.” She shuddered and wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. “It isn’t the sex, you know. I really, really, really love you.”

“I know.”

Groaning, she pulled back and smacked his upper arm. “No more Star Wars marathons for you.”

… …

“Do not tread so quietly behind me, James Howlett,” the Asgardian goddess of Death said.

Logan froze. No one had called him by that name in over a hundred years. “That ain’t my name,” he growled. “Never really was.”

She turned and her emerald eyes focused on him. “That is the name your mother gave you, is it not?”

“Yeah, but I don’t answer to it.”

“There is a great deal of pain there,” she mused. “Logan is the surname of your natural father. You killed him, why would you use his name?”

“How do you know this stuff?”

A sad smile changed her cold expression to one of melancholy. Jean Grey had used that word for his expressions sometimes. “He told me so. Not all of the souls who pass through my realm believe in or worship my Pantheon. Sometimes they believe in nothing at all. The stronger of those souls find their way to my lands.”

He swallowed. “Did he know that I thought he’d killed my father?”

“Thomas Logan also thought he’d killed your father. I eased his mind on that.”

“Yeah, well, if he’s still there tell him I took Logan as his name as a kind of apology.”

“He left my realm some time ago and has been reborn. Once the dead lose their hate and bitterness they can move on.”
“Oh, got it.” Biting back a sigh he moved to the edge of the deck and looked out over the city. “Why are you up here?”

“Thinking. I do it best with the wind in my face.”

“Me too. This living in a skyscraper shit is gonna get to me. When I was with the X-Men their headquarters were in a kind of suburban area. Not quite the countryside, but compared to this it was the sticks, ya know?”

A soft laugh startled him. “Yes, I do. It is much like comparing Asgard to my Realm.”

“What’s it like, uh, Niflheim?”

“I am not certain I can explain it. Much of it is not based in a physical world. Those parts that are resemble a manor or castle in the midst of a wilderness with a village spread about it. Most of my Realm would seem quite desolate, I suppose.”

“And only the dead see it? Oh, and you.”

“My father has seen it. His child to be with Kara might be capable of traveling to and from my Realm as well, I do not yet know…but none else have survived the journey.”

“Sounds frigging lonely.”

Her sigh was kinda…musical. “It is; though of late I’ve been given hope that my loneliness will be eased sometime soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know, this took forever. Hopefully this update was worth the wait. An author by the name of Kristen Painter posted the proposed cover of her upcoming book ‘City of Eternal Night’ on Facebook a week or so ago. Imagine my delight when it occurred to me that it looked very much like I envisioned Kara dressed for the Rehearsal Dinner in this chapter. I’ve reposted the book cover to my Tumblr account (under KieraPSI) for you to see. I left in intact as the book cover in deference to the author…it would be rude (not to mention illegal) to use the artwork without plugging her book. I haven’t read any of her work, so am not personally recommending it. If I do read something of hers and like it, I’ll let you all know!
Sif spun as the door to her hotel suite eased open then lowered the shuriken Nyvorlas had taught her to throw as his face was revealed. "Next time, knock."

"I was fully prepared to use the door as a shield," he told her as he slipped into the room and closed the door behind his lean form. "Damned council had us placed on different floors."

"I'm not royalty. I'm certain they insisted that a floor be reserved for such."

"You will be royalty soon enough; their interference becomes tedious. They'd best hope Edansyr never gets himself killed nor decides to abdicate. Should I ever sit the damned throne every last one of them will be forcibly retired."

"Aren't there several sisters between you and the throne?"

"Technically. The council continues to vacillate regarding the succession. Currently they've decreed it shall be sons first, then daughters. It's the second time they've changed it in as many cycles. This time it is due to Tolthe's betrayals. They fear that a young Queen will trust the wrong consort. Foolish of them; my mother was not young when she took Tolthe to her bed."

"I don't see why Queen Elénaril does not simply ignore them. The All-Father ignores his council when it pleases him."

"In point of fact he does not; he finesses his way around them or woos them into making the decision he favors. I've seen him do so countless times. Your King is not only crafty himself but has a Queen with even greater ability to cajole and confuse. My mother has neither advantage. My father's death left her woefully unprepared to rule, and it shows."

Wonderful. She'd always despised political games yet now she found herself embroiled in the governance of not just one Realm but three; all because of one misbegotten, infuriating and much too attractive for her own good Álfar. Reaching out quickly as he paced by, Sif grabbed his arm, spun him around and slammed him against the nearest flat surface – the closed door to her bathing chamber. His upswept brows lifted as she captured his mouth with hers. Their kiss was fierce, as it always was. They'd not yet learned to find the softer side of their entanglement. It wasn't a relationship, not as she understood them. They simply had a burning need for each other that had not been quenched after nearly two months of lust filled nights and frustrating days. "Bed, now," she demanded.

Nyvorlas laughed. "Later." A gasp was ripped from her when he reversed their positions, lifting her with one arm while tearing aside the dressing robe she wore with the other. She hadn't even noticed him freeing his erection from his trews until she was impaled upon it. Groaning, she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled in as tightly as her position would allow and favored him with a slit-eyed glare. "I know, I'll pay for my impertinence later," he drawled and then began thrusting hard and fast enough to make her forget even her name.

"Shut up and bring me," she ordered digging her fingertips into his back. If he'd removed his shirt and jerkin, her nails would be leaving furrows in his pale skin. As it was he'd likely need to find an excuse for the damage to the leather when his servants went to clean it. His head dipped and he
sucked fiercely on the softness of her neck; bastard, that would bruise. "Marking me as yours again?" she asked breathlessly.

"Always." Each powerful thrust now slammed her against the solid door with a rather loud thud. Sif had heard people on other floors while quietly staring out of the floor to ceiling windows, surely they would hear this? She cared not as the tension and heat built within her. "Gods, Sif; you are perfect," Nyvorlas ground out as she began to tighten around him in her release. Burying her mouth against his shoulder to muffle her reaction she screamed her pleasure as he stiffened and plunged hard and deep within her wet heat, following her over the edge.

Breathing hard Sif looked up at him from where they'd ended up sprawled like broken dolls on the floor after riding out their orgasms. "One day we will make it to a bed," she insisted. A soft laugh was his only response.

... ...

Bruce stopped short at the sight of Tony sitting on the breakfast bar in the communal kitchen. "What are you doing up there?"

"Waiting for my waffles," the billionaire responded, nodding at the electric waffle iron that sat next to him on the counter. Tony held out a plastic box that was dripping water. "Blueberry?"

"No, thanks. You're cooking waffles?"

"Um, not really. Pepper made the batter and went back to get dressed. I'm just supposed to take out the waffles when it dings."

That made more sense. "Got it. Hey, can I ask you a favor?"

"You can ask. Whatcha need, Green Bean?"

"Green...you know what? Never mind."

"Wait, where're you going?" He heard Tony's feet hit the floor. "Aw, come on, Brucie, give me a break. It's not even nine and I'm out of bed, my witticisms aren't in gear yet."

"This is serious, Tony."

"Fine, okay, I've got my serious face on, hit me with it."

"I need two favors from you. First, I need you to lend me fifteen thousand dollars. Second, I need you to be my best man when I marry Darcy."

Tony blinked. "You sure you don't want a blueberry?" An electronic beeping started. "Hold that thought." He put the carton down on the counter and popped open the waffle iron. "Does that look done to you?"

"It looks a little light."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Tony closed the appliance and glanced at the clock. "Any idea how much longer I should leave it?"

"Not really."

"Damn. Okay, so, lend you money and be your best man; uh, no and yes."
"Why not and thank you?"

"I never lend money to anybody. Besides, you don't need to borrow money; you've got your own."

"No, Tony, I don't. I wouldn't be asking…"

"Jarvis, did I remember to send that email to Dr. Banner?"

"No sir, but Mrs. Stark remembered to do so in your name."

"Oh, cool. Bruce, did you read my email?"

No, he hadn't and with good reason. "I stopped reading your emails because you always send me porn. I don't want to look at porn."

Puppy dog eyes; why did Tony have to use puppy dog eyes? "I'm hurt. Sometimes there's actual important information with that porn."

"Tony…"

"Fine, fine, be a party pooper. J, resend that email from Pepper's account, okay?"

"Done, sir."

"Thanks. Okay, so Bruce, open Pepper's email and then do what she told you to do. If you still think you need fifteen grand after that I'll give it to you."

"I…uh, Tony?"

"Read the email."

"Your waffles are smoking."

"Son of a bitch."

… …

"Jesus."

Darcy opened one eye and frowned at the sight of Bruce staring at the HUD of his computer set up with a shocked expression. "Wassup?" she managed.

"You know that building material we came up with after Kara toasted the Aerogel?"

Building material? Oh, right. She yawned as her brain kicked into what passed as awareness. "Um, the stuff you thought could be used for construction and you wouldn't need insulation?"

"That's the one."

She waited for him to continue, but no, he just sat there staring. "Soooo, what about it?"

"Oh. Tony pushed through the patent application paperwork and even though the patent will be pending for quite a while we already had a buyer for the rights to manufacture the stuff."

"Do you have a mouse in your pocket or do you just like to dole out info one excruciating tidbit at a time?"
"We, as in Kara who accidentally created it, Loki who kept us all alive when she created it, Tony because he figured out how to replicate it in a manufacturing process and me because I discovered just what Kara had accidentally created and what applications it could be used for."

"Huh. So how much did you get for the rights? Um, geez, never mind, that's none of my business."

"No, it's okay. The initial rights to use the process went for six million dollars. They have to renew the rights every year based on a percentage of their gross receipts. Honey? You're literally marrying a millionaire...well, before taxes."

Her eyes popped all the way open. "You're shitting me!"

"No, I'm not. You sure you don't want an expensive ring?"

After chewing on her lower lip for a minute Darcy shuddered. "Nah, I'd be too paranoid to wear it. I mean, don't go all chintzy on me, but no way would I want one that cost as much as Pepper's."

"Or Kara's, I imagine. Those matched green diamonds are pretty rare, Tony said."

"Yeah, uh, no colored diamonds, 'kay? Not because they're pricey, I just like regular diamonds."

"Got it."

"And maybe we could do a private wedding?"

"You're our social director, isn't that your choice?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm the Director of Social Media, totally different thing. It's probably going to be up to...hey, wait a minute. I just had an idea."

"Uh oh."

"Hey! I have good ideas!"

Bruce grinned and crossed the room and pounced on the bed, tumbling her back against the pillows. "I'll agree that you've had some very good ideas," he said huskily as he hugged her close.

"Humph. Why don't we get married in Asgard? One of the gang can get a license for whatever state we're leaving from...that should do it. I bet Frigga would love it."

"Uh...you'd better have Pepper run that by legal, hon; that doesn't sound kosher."

"Fine, rain on my parade."

"Maybe we can do a quick Vegas wedding here then head over to Galisteo and go to Asgard for a private fancier one."

"Oh, now that sounds like a plan. I'll ask Frigga tonight if that would be cool with her." She frowned and then started giggling as a thought occurred.

"What?"

"Can you imagine Loki in Vegas? I bet he'd be hell on wheels playing poker."

"Hmm. Maybe, but I bet Kara would be just as good, if not better."
"Oh, we've got to get those two playing."

"We never did get around to poker on our game nights before Thor came to take Loki back to Asgard."

… …

Kara's stomach tightened with nausea as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Natasha was pinning up her hair in an elaborate up do that allowed one thick lock of hair to curl down the nape of her neck while ringlets adorned the sides. It looked kind of odd, but it went well with her dress. "That's perfect, Natasha," Frigga told the former assassin. Kara sighed. That meant that it looked like a traditional Asgardian hairstyle, she supposed.

"Kara? What do you think?" Nat asked her.

She smiled at the tiny note of concern in her friend's voice. "It goes perfectly with the dress and it will show off the necklace that Pepper described, too. Thank you." Nat nodded briskly and stepped to the side to replace the hair implements with makeup brushes. Oy. Another trial to suffer through.

"It's all for a good cause, Kara," her mother-in-law told her, evidently catching her rolling her eyes.

"If you say so. Even though I know we need to do it this way to help Loki's image, I still kind of hate that…" she trailed off with a shrug. It wasn't important.

"It should be all about you." Beth's tone was commiserating, but she felt annoyed. "It'll be the same way if Steve and I ever take the plunge; everybody's going to want a piece of it." Ah, that was what annoyed her. "Totally sucks, but you need to try to ignore all of the other stuff and just concentrate on Loki and how much a ceremony you actually know is happening means to both of you."

Wow, deep. "I'll try. Thanks, Beth." She glanced around the room. "Where is Sif?" she asked as Pepper rushed into the room. The Asgardian was supposed to be her Maid of Honor; they'd wanted to match up Asgardian to Asgardian with Thor being Loki's Best Man.

Pepper grimaced. "We have a problem. Nyvorlas threw a hissy fit when he discovered that being Maid of Honor meant that Sif had to not only be seated with but also dance with Thor. She's now refusing to participate."

"What? Oh for…that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Ridiculous or not, she's adamant. I wouldn't have thought she'd kowtow to a man, but there it is." Pepper was every bit as disgusted as she was.

"That isn't the issue," Frigga said soothingly. "It is because of how it would look to the Ljósálfar court attendees should the potential betrothed of one of their princes dance with another man. They would both lose respect."

"They couldn't have told us this earlier?" Kara's mind raced as she tried to think of anyone she knew that might fit into a dress designed for Sif's body type. Right…tall, slender and highly toned. "What am I supposed to do for a…hmm. Has anyone seen Hel this morning?"

… …

"Your genius astounds me," Loki said in as droll a tone as he could manage.

"Oh, come on, Lo, it'll be great. The ooh and ah factor alone is mind boggling."
"Tony, it is naught but cheap theatrics."

"Um, no; cheap it is not. That is arc reactor technology lighting that thing. Look; people are all enthralled with the idea of one of their own marrying not just a prince, but a prince of fabled Asgard. They've all read or heard about the rainbow bridge. The symbolism of this is going to make hearts melt. You need that."

He groaned. Stark was right, damn his bones. "I'll put up with it," he allowed. "Have you told Kara?"

"Pepper's handling it. Don't want your gorgeous bride falling off the thing in surprise when it powers up."

"If you value..."

"Hey, guys?" They turned to stare as Darcy leaned in the room. "Have you seen Hel?"

Tony shrugged. "Last I saw she was chatting with the living version of the Grim Reaper; that was about two or so, why?"

"The what?" Loki asked.

"Fury."

"Oh. I've seen her since. She was riding here with Sif and Nyvorlas," he told the girl.

"Crap. God only knows where they are after this shit hit the fan."

"What shit?" Loki glared at his honorary brother-by-marriage for echoing him.

"Well..." They stared at the girl in growing shock and anger as she told the tale.

… …

Kara was drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair, her expression tense. "You've got to calm down," Natasha told her. "The power level you're generating is making my teeth ache."

"What? You can feel...of course you can. Sorry." The bride took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "What was I thinking? I really didn't need all of this."

"Yes you did. You would have wondered for the rest of what promises to be a very long life just what you'd given up if you hadn't," Pepper told her. "Relax, it will work out; it always does."

"Says the woman whose reception was interrupted by a maniac from some boondocks country I'd never even heard of before," Kara grumped. "Nat, do you think it will work out?"

"If it doesn't, I know who to hold responsible for ruining it for you." She smiled dangerously and the other redheads blanched. "They'll be so busy worrying about Loki's revenge that they'll never see mine coming."

"You know, it could work without a fourth attendant," Beth said. "Steve wouldn't mind sitting this one out and he won't care if I have to dance with Thor." The blonde frowned. "Or Clint or Bruce; you know they'd be okay with it too if you or Darcy wanted to take over that duty," she added hastily. "Our guys are all mellow like that."

Kara snickered. "True, the only one who'd have a fit about his woman even temporarily being
officially partnered to another man is Loki and that's out of the question considering he's the groom, so no problem."

The door burst open and Natasha spun, pulling her weapons from the holsters concealed under her long skirt. "Whoa, it's just me," Darcy yelped. "Loki tracked down Hel and she's on her way. He sweet-talked her into doing it. Told her the only reason she hadn't been asked to begin with is that you weren't sure she'd be able to attend."

"That wasn't sweet talk, Darce. Hel had told him that she'd try to make it but wasn't certain she would be able to. That's why we were so surprised that she not only got here, but arrived a day early." Kara had barely finished speaking when the goddess that resembled a female version of Loki entered behind the only other brunette in the group.

"I am near as good at spotting untruth as my sire," Hel agreed. "Shall I try on the dress tailored for Sif?"

"You are a lifesaver," Beth said fervently.

Hel smiled. "There is a first time for everything." Natasha had to suppress a shiver at the goddess's wry tone.

…”

"Where is he?" Loki growled as he charged into the room followed closely by the Man of Iron… Iron Man, Odin corrected himself. "He will pay."

"Calm yourself," he ordered his younger son, barring the incensed boy's forward progress with an arm across his chest.

"I will not! This is Kara's day and he has nearly ruined it, and for what? Petty jealousy?"

"I have spoken to him about the issue, Loki. He had no choice, nor did Sif. Ljósálfheim's Royal Council would have forced him to cancel their betrothal ceremony had this event gone forward with Sif's planned participation."

"That's no excuse for leaving it until the day of the event."

"He did not know of this part of the human tradition until this day."

"Oh by Yggdrasil's Branches, father; Thor knew what was expected, he attended Tony's wedding."

"Your brother would not know a political quagmire if he were caught fast in one."

"He-ah, he would not. Damnation."

"Indeed. And Thor will not easily learn to spot these things, which is why you will be so necessary to Asgard once I step down." His mouth twitched as he watched Loki's anger visibly ebb. "You said nearly ruined; has a solution been found?"

"Hel and Sif are of a size or near enough; she has graciously agreed to step in."

"I am glad, Loki. I have no wish for your beloved's day to be other than perfect."

"We'll settle for it being other than a battleground at this point. The Stark's wedding reception was not nearly that fortunate."
"It's going to do what?" Kara asked him incredulously.

Pepper had delegated the big reveal to him. She had enough on her plate with the last minute change in the Maid of Honor. Tony sighed at the way his honorary sister's voice had raised to a squeak. Yeah, an actual squeak; who'd have thought? "Light up so it resembles the Bifröst. It'll be great."

"Oh for…Tony, that's so over the top it's tacky."

"Is not," he countered defensively. "It's awesome and it's symbolic. The marriage between you and Loki is creating a bridge between our two worlds."

The kaleidoscope eyes stared at him unblinking as she mulled it over. "Okay, I'll give you the symbolic, but it's still going to be tacky."

"Trust me."

She sighed. "I trust you and I even trust your taste in most things, but this is so-so grandiose I don't know if I'm going to be able to keep a straight face. If I end up getting the giggles as I'm crossing the damn thing it will be your fault."

"Look, just focus on Loki, waiting for you on the other end. You'll be so choked up you won't even notice the bridge. But try not to fall off of it." He frowned at looked around at the bridesmaids. "Um, that goes for all of you. Kara and Hel wouldn't be hurt much but I don't want to be defending myself from Cap, Cupid and the Hulk if any of you three," he continued in a louder voice, nodding at the human women, "get hurt."

"Cupid?" Natasha Romanov asked with a smirk. "Has Clint heard that one?"

"Nooo, and it would be really nice if he didn't?"

"You owe me."

Tony sighed. "Add it to my tab. It's a good thing I'm not dying any time soon, that damn thing is getting pretty full."

"Aww, Tony, you love it, admit it," Darcy told him. "You get to run around being generous and magnanimous and all that crap."

"Altruistic."

"In your dreams."

He grinned. Darcy was coming along in the banter department. Now if Spangles' girlfriend could just get with the program. "Pepper had that Bailey fellow bring your dresses to the theater last night. They look spectacular with it all lit up. You are all going to look like goddesses…uh, well, I guess two of you really are, but you know what I mean."

Kara snorted softly. "Tony, quit while you're ahead or at least while you're still in one piece. We've got to finish getting ready."

"Right…oh, wait!" He pulled the velvet covered jewelry box from the inside pocket of his tux. "Think Loki will let me touch you long enough to put this on you?" he joked as he flipped it open.
"Oh my God. Tony, please tell me that thing was borrowed for the occasion."

"Um, okay; it's borrowed?"

"Now try it without lying," she scolded.

"Sorry, kid; no can do. It's yours."

… …

Oh crap. This was not the simple necklace Pepper had described. Kara was glad she'd opted not to look at the thing when her friend had shown it to Frigga; there was no way she'd have been able to keep quiet about it. "It's too much."

"It will look amazing with your dress."

"You've already bought me one overly expensive necklace, why couldn't I just use that one?"

He had the nerve to laugh. "You've already been seen in that; same with the one you wore to my engagement shindig. Nope, you had to have a new one. You can't wear those dresses again anytime soon either. Everybody would think I was a cheapskate if you did."

"Oh for…damn it, Tony! Are you telling me the red and gold necklace was bought too?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Oh for pity's sake." She shook her head tiredly. "Fine, I give up. Put it on."

Her honorary brother grinned like a kid opening presents on Christmas morning. He really was generous no matter how much he denied it. Tony just loved giving things to people whether they needed them or not. He lifted the ornate arrangement of precious gems over her head as he stood behind her and she shivered as the cool metal touched her skin. The tiniest of clicks told her it was fastened even before he spoke. "There we go." Tony walked around to face her and if anything, his grin grew. "You look absolutely fabulous."

"You're just saying that because I could fry you in a heartbeat if you didn't make nice."

"Nah, you clean up real good, kid." He winked. "Seriously; you've always been beautiful, but today you are absolutely amazing." Glancing over his shoulder, Tony nodded at Pepper. "Pepper keeps saying that I'm not the luckiest son of a bitch in the universe; that Loki is. Today, everyone is going to know she's right."

Brushing a tear away before it could ruin the makeup that had been so painstakingly applied by Natasha, Kara gently squeezed Tony's arm. "Thanks, Tony. I think I'm pretty lucky too."

"No doubt about it."

… …

Thor grinned as his normally cool and collected brother paced the room in agitation. "Are they not ready yet?" Loki snapped for what had to be the fifth time.

"Relax, man. You want her to look perfect, don't you?" Clint said soothingly.

"Kara always looks perfect."
"Okay, but this time five other women have to agree that she looks perfect before they'll be ready to start. When's the last time you saw any five women agree on something?"

"Their opinion…” Loki stopped speaking abruptly and sighed. "Never mind."

Thor stood and slung an arm around Loki's lean shoulders. "I am proud of you, brother."

"Of course you are," he said dryly. "And you're wrinkling my cloak."

Chuckling, he leaned in close and spoke as softly as he could manage. "I know you wanted to say their agreement meant naught."

"Well that defeats the purpose of my not saying it; if you know, then all do."

"Loki, not saying it is the diplomatic thing to do, regardless of whether we all knew you thought it," Dr. Banner offered. "It wasn't so long ago that you would just have made a disparaging remark about the opinions of mortals having no value."

If Loki's glare could kill, Banner would no longer need fear his other. "It has been long enough since I learned better that you should no longer be much surprised."

"Yo Taz, chill," Tony Stark said easily as he breezed into the room. "Are you so nervous that you forgot that it's our solemn duty to tease the hell out of you on your wedding day?"

"You…” Loki relaxed with a sigh. "I had forgotten, indeed. Thank you Tony."

"You're welcome. The girls are ready to head out. It's time for you boys to all take your places and for me to join Pepper front and center. Hey, did I thank you for asking me to give away the bride?"

"We didn't ask, you insisted."

"Oh, right. Well, you're welcome." Thor guffawed at the face Loki made over Stark's audacity.

"Tony, who's got my kid?" the Hawkeye asked.

"Uh, Pepper and Jane. Raj Nassar's sitting with them and he's armed and dangerous. Heh, always wanted to say that."

Thor frowned at the thought of Jane holding little Brianna. Of course, Jane did not know…none of his friends yet knew. "They will keep her safe," he told the nervous father. "You may be assured that my mother watches her as well; she cannot resist the lure of any infant, let alone one who is miraculously Æsir."

"Yeah, there is that."

"Let us take our places, friends. Our ladies await."

… …

Sif gave the All-Father a nervous glance as they took their seats in the ornate theater. While he'd said that he understood why she could not be Kara's Maid of Honor, his disappointment in her was plain. Wonderful. This did not bode well for her hopes of him allowing Nyvorlas to reside in Asgard following their official betrothal and eventual marriage. Neither of them wished to dwell amongst the political infighting that embroiled Ljósálfheim since Tolthe's betrayal. She sighed. "It is not your fault," Nyvorlas told her.
"No, but it is an issue, one we do not need."

He shrugged. "They've dealt with worse. Be glad the All-Father knows we had no choice; we're not likely to be on the receiving end of Loki's wrath over it."

"That is the point. Loki will feel slighted, he will be wrathful, and we had just...ah, it matters little, I suppose. He has hated me for nearly eight centuries he may as well hate me for eight more."

Gray eyes stared at her from behind a lock of white-blond hair that had escaped its tether. "What makes you think he's hated you, let alone for that long?"

"I was cruel and unrelenting over what I've since learned was an accident."

Nyvorlas groaned. "Loki did not hate you; he resented your hatred of him. There is a difference."

"You have not been about for nearly a third of that time, how would you know?"

"Hmm. True. But he did not hate you the last we spoke before his fall from the Bifröst."

"Perhaps I use too strong a word. He certainly despised me."

"Sif, even I despised you at one time. You were an insipid waste of womanhood. We have all changed; I do not think Loki will carry a grudge over this."

"I hope you are correct; his company has been almost tolerable as of late." She grinned when her lover frowned at the statement. "I but jest; can I not do so? Or is such also regulated by your Council?"

"If they ever think of it they shall pass a law against it which is why I would prefer we reside in Asgard."

She shuddered. "And that is why I worry over how Loki and Kara take this. Without their approval neither Odin nor Thor would welcome our presence. They've come to mean too much to Asgard."

"It will be fine. Life with Kara has mellowed Loki, and as for Kara, she is always unreasonably reasonable."

"You'd best be right."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was supposed to include the actual wedding ceremony but it was getting far too long and promised to get even longer as the characters have taken over yet again. Rather than make you wait another week or more for it to be finished, I've chosen to split it into two chapters. Don't shoot the author!

As a reward for your forbearance I'll share that the reason it was getting too long was the unplanned arrival of at least five non-Avenger superheroes. I'll let you stew...ah, I mean speculate as to just who those heroes are and what they'll be bringing to the story while I finish up Chapter 14. Thanks for your patience.
Aleixandre snipped the final loose thread from the ruby and silver gown he’d had to adjust to a new body at the last possible moment. While this woman was of a height and weight with the original, that weight was distributed a bit differently. While the differences were slight, they made the folds of the gown lay just a tad bit off…enough to ruin the lines so painstakingly designed and sewn. No model stepped foot out of the dressing room in an Aleixandre Bailey Original in less than a perfect fit. He gave the slender form a critical once over as an assistant fastened the jeweled belt around the tiny waist. It accentuated the flared hips, greater on this woman than the last, just as it should. “You’ll do,” he declared with a satisfied grin. “Very nice indeed.”

“Thank you, Aleixandre,” the ebony haired beauty said in a gracious tone. Ha. How many designers could boast that they’d dressed not one literal goddess, but two? None but him, that’s how many.

He bowed to the goddess and hurried from the room to take his place in the auditorium. It was filled with people…mostly A-list celebrities, genuine royals, and important political leaders of this world and several others. Everyone would marvel over his creations. Better yet, it would all be caught on film. Ah, he would be the most celebrated designer ever! Eyeing the raised catwalk that led from the rear of the theater to the stage he barely restrained the urge to clap his hands together gleefully. “This will be magnificent,” he told his assistant.

Liza chuckled at his enthusiasm. “It will be something,” she agreed, smirking slightly. He put up with her sarcastic ways for many reasons; not the least of which was the fact that their love life kept him relatively sane and mostly grounded. She was always there to pull him back to Earth when he got too lost in his dreams and aspirations. “I do have to admit; the light effects did show off all of the embroidery and jewels to their best advantage. You should get a lot of custom orders off of this job; we’ll have to hire more help.”

“Mm. Yes, but I’ll listen this time and not hire before you check them out, I promise.” His last hiring spate, done without Liza’s approval, had not turned out well. One of the seamstresses was more of a prima donna than he was! That was simply not tolerable, regardless of their skill. This was his design company, he was the star…next to his creations, of course, and everyone else simply worked for a living. “Am I too picky?”

“No. Temperamental, yes; picky, no.”

“Ah good. Genius is supposed to be temperamental,” he insisted with a grin. Liza laughed as she was meant to; much of his posturing was sheer theatrics presented only to the clients. But it was fun, damn it! One didn’t have to be gay to be flamboyant or straight to be serious, and he had always been fond of shattering stereotypes. His eyes narrowed as a glow began to arise in the catwalk and a deep voice recounted the tale of the Bifröst, the fabled rainbow bridge between Realms. “Hush now, it’s starting,” he whispered, totally ignoring the fact that he was the one who kept insisting on speaking. Liza squeezed his thigh as she sat back and looked up at the slowly brightening bridge.

Deputy Director Hill was not having a good day. Upon arriving to head security for the wedding of
the millennium she’d been appalled to learn that her Asgardian counterpart was none other than that flirtatious ass, Fandral. Fortunately he was taking his duties seriously and other than a lecherous look and a flowery speech full of innuendo, he’d been strictly professional. It was disconcerting. She glanced up as an agent approached accompanied by two people in dark body armor; they looked familiar. A quick search on her tablet confirmed it; these were the members of the X-Men she’d been advised to expect. “Cyclops and Storm, I presume?” she greeted the pair.

“Deputy Hill,” the man with the red tinted goggles responded in agreement. “We have another three members with us for backup. What positions did you have planned for us?”

Another…oh boy. “Depends; who are they and what do they do…and don’t tell me it’s classified. I have to have some idea.”

“She’s right, Cyclops,” the woman told him. “Code names and high level is sharable. “Nightcrawler, bring your team to us,” she said into a comm unit. “Don’t be alarmed; you won’t see them until they arrive.”

“Got it; weapons down until ordered, people.”

A muffled pop that felt like altitude adjustment to her ears was her only warning before a being – it was hard to think of anyone with indigo skin, three fingered hands and a long pointed tail as a person – suddenly appeared in front of them, holding a team member in each arm. A slight tinge of sulfur scented the air. One of the passengers had blue fur covering an almost ape-like body and had a pair of wire-rimmed glasses perched incongruously on his nose. The other new arrival was a human-appearing teenager. “Nightcrawler has greater than human strength and agility and can teleport short distances,” Storm continued. “This is Beast, superhuman strength and agility; he’s also a genius, we insist you respect that. Finally, this is our trainee, Iceman. We thought he’d be helpful if there is a problem and your Jötunn guests need assistance. Once he ices up, he’d be impervious to their cold.”

“Handy. Iceman, other than Loki whom I’m certain you’ve seen on television, you’ll recognize our Jötunn guests fairly easily. They’re two and a third to three meters tall, cobalt blue, and have red eyes. Our guests, specifically, are each wearing a torc; gold for their king and queen, their bodyguard is wearing silver. Anything else means that we have a problem.”

“Uh, will that Loki dude be wearing one if he gets like them?”

Good question, Hill decided. “No, but he’ll still look like himself other than the coloring.”

“Got it.” The kid frowned. “My ice isn’t going to do squat to them, right?”

“Probably not; we’d want you to get the Jötunn guests to safety. Other than you, only the bride and groom can safely touch them.”

“Makes sense; and if any party crashers aren’t their kind, I can ice them or claim to have iced them and let the guests stay out of it so there’s no interplanetary kind of incident, yeah?”

“Exactly.” Smart kid. She turned to the Nightcrawler. “Teleportation could come in handy. Could you follow someone else who has that skill?”

The blue mutant pursed his lips and thought for a moment before responding in a distinctly Germanic accent. “Yes, but it depends on how far they go. My range, it is limited.”

“Hmm, theirs won’t be so it probably wouldn’t be safe for you to try it.”
“I will follow my instincts; they do not err in whether it is safe or not.”

“Sounds good. If someone extraterrestrial does teleport in or come in through a wormhole, check to see if they’re carrying some kind of item with a blue glow to it. If you could teleport behind them, grab the item, and then take it to a safe location, that will deprive them of both their means of transportation and some of their offensive capability.”

Nightcrawler’s grin was absolute wickedness; a decided contrast to the kind note that had been in his voice. “Excellent; this I can do.”

She nodded and turned to the one introduced as ‘Beast’ and to the two leaders. “We may also get local talent trying to make a name for themselves by crashing the party. While most have been lying low since the Battle of Central Park, it’s only a matter of time before they regrow their balls.”

“Wolverine told us of the enemies he fought there and how they were vanquished,” Storm said. “We apologize we were not able to assist.”

“You had issues of your own, we understood.”

Cyclops broke out an almost roguish grin. “Our issues have gone a bit underground as well. That exploding giant was a major deterrent.”

“It should be. That’s only the tip of the iceberg so far as our Asgardian allies’ talents are concerned. Ah, no pun intended.”

… …

Fury looked to a corner of the main stage where an Asgardian, or so he assumed by the clothing, stood and began speaking in a sonorous voice that carried through the theater without benefit of electronic augmentation. He decided it must be one of their ‘god’ abilities and settled back to listen.

“Back when this world was young, her people did not know that they lived upon a planet unique in all the galaxy. Indeed, they did not know that a galaxy surrounded them. What her people would later call a space/time anomaly enveloped their world from the day she was born. The star that warmed them had destroyed an older star during its birth throes. The energy of the destruction of both the elder star and her planets created a pattern of energy that saved portions of eight of the populated worlds that had orbited the dying star within a dimensional pocket not visible from without and had thrust that pocket far into the new planet’s future. If one could see the energy pattern with the unaided eye, one would liken it to the trunk and branches of an Ash Tree of enormous size. The survivors called that tree Yggdrasill, and this world, this still relatively young world that they named Midgard, sits at her roots.”

He leaned over to whisper to Nassar. “They’re giving us a goddamn space history lesson.”

“From their perspective, yes, it seems so. But watch your language.”

“Nestled in Yggdrasill’s branches,” the man continued, “are eight distinct Realms. Asgard, which rests at the top of her trunk where it splits into many branches, is home to the Æsir, called Æs who were great warriors and whose elite wielded powers so terrible they became known as gods. Vanaheim, closest to Asgard, is the home of the Vanir and the Sirens, both wielders of energy so mysterious they became known to young Midgard as mages. The twin, touching Realms of Ljósálfheim and Svartálfheim are called home by the light and dark Álfar, respectively. The Álfar wield the energies of nature most prominently and are called elves by the denizens of Midgard.
The other twinned Realms are Jötunheim and Mûspelheim, homes of those which Midgard calls giants for their great size. Jötunheim’s most predominant giants are those of Frost and are called Jötnar. Mûspelheim’s are those of Fire and are called Eldjötnar whilst Hill giants, the Leirjötnar, call both Realms home. They both touch and are separated by Niflheim, which had no living population survive the old star’s destruction but has become the home of our dead who have not entered Valhalla. Finally there is Dökkálfheim which sits on its own and hosts the Dökkálfrar, whom Midgardians call dwarves, artists with both metal and gem who can sense powers and can imbue their creations with great energies.”

“Please tell me someone is recording this fucker.”

Raj frowned at him, nodding at the baby sitting in his lap. “Again, watch your language or deal with Romanov later, she reads lips and there is a camera on the audience. The entirety of the ceremony is being filmed, or have you forgotten so soon? You did sign off on it.”

“For long and long again the only route to and from these Eight Realms to the rest of the galaxy lay through the Branches of Yggdrasil then through Asgard and then on to Midgard. Only those with great personal power and skill could travel the Branches until such time as those bent on doing evil discovered how to use Dark Energy to travel otherwise. Evil ones from all Realms tried to subjugate the young races of Midgard, and were finally stopped through an alliance between benevolent warriors and mages from Asgard, Vanahelmi, Ljósálfheim and Dökkálfheim. This alliance built a great Bridge made of pure power that resembled the phenomenon known as a rainbow. They called it the Bifröst. The solidified origin point of the Bifröst was established on Asgard as Asgard was the Realm that stood between the other Realms and Midgard. The bridge terminus could be anywhere the Gatekeeper sent it, though it was at that time most often sent to Midgard to aid the alliance in defending that Realm from evil intent.”

“If they’re defending us then why the fuck are we still getting visits from renegades?”

“Language, Nick. I shan’t ask again.”

“Today the peace brought about in the Eight Realms by this alliance still prevails, is adhered to by most and the alliance has added Jötunheim to its company. The number of beings who can call enough Dark Energy to travel without the Bifröst or who have enough personal power or skill to travel Yggdrasil’s branches has dwindled to a very few. Asgard still stands in protection of Midgard as sworn by Odin All-Father several millennia ago. Most threats to Midgard today come either from within her Realm or beyond her from the depths of the Galaxy. Asgard will still honor the pledge made so long ago, and today is pleased to use the Bifröst to visit Midgard in peace and to promote an alliance with her young Midgardian cousins.”

“There, you see?” Raj told him. He grunted in response.

“As these visits and this new alliance progress, the peoples of all the Realms will mingle and it is likely and fitting that couples shall meet and that love shall develop between them. Today we gather to celebrate the love of one such couple. Today will see the joining of a Prince of both Asgard and Jotunheim with his beloved lady born of Midgard in a ceremony of marriage by Midgardian Law. Welcome, friends, as bride and groom once connected by naught but the Bifröst make the most sacred connection of all. You are all bid to serve as witness to the marriage of Prince Loki Odinson, born Laufeyson, Prince of Asgard, Crown Prince of Jötunheim, to Dr. Kara Gunnarssen, known as the Avenger Hellbringer; born in the State of California, United States of America, of Midgard.”

… …
“They’re both inside,” Amora said to her sister. “Malekith’s plans be damned; we can take the two of them for ourselves. We’ll enchant them and we can go wherever we wish, take over the native population and rule as queens with our consorts.”

“A land with two queens? I think not; you will not rule me,” Lorelei snapped.

“Of course not. We need not settle in the same place. We will stay together only long enough to conquer two lands. With both Thor and Loki under our control that shouldn’t take long at all.”

“Fine; but what shall we do with Angrboða? She wants Loki for herself and I do not share.”

Amora smiled. “She thinks we still pursue the Svartálfar’s goal. I care nothing for Asgard or what the All-Father does. His time will end when it ends but he shall not take his sons with him. We have better uses for them. We will leave her…holding the bag I believe the mortals call it. She shall be blamed for the disappearance of Asgard’s princes.” She lovingly caressed the bright blue jewel that amplified her enchantments. “The fool believes that the amulet I gave her will block the new goddess’s fire. She’ll be ashes before she realizes her mistake.”

Lorelei gave her own amulet a suspicious look. “If you think to do the same to me I will command Thor to kill you with my dying breath,” she hissed.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Thor is somehow as immune to my enchantments as Loki is to yours so we need each other to keep them compliant. You alone are safe from my schemes, little sister.”

“Just keep that need in mind, sister.” Lorelei sauntered up to the nearest male on guard duty. “Hello, darling,” she purred into the man’s ear while stroking a hand along his arm. “I need you to do a little something for me. Who amongst the human guests will Loki and Thor not chance killing?” Amora chuckled to herself as she watched her sister’s siren abilities at work.

… …

Sonia pursed her lips as she watched the man leave the stage. She’d been requested to perform this wedding by President Palmer, the President responsible for her appointment to the Supreme Court of the United States. Her participation as a native born New Yorker in the wedding of the man responsible for so much destruction to her city was intended as a sign of forgiveness. Her instinctive reaction had been to refuse; so many people had died, been injured or had lost all they owned, but she’d reconsidered after being briefed on the full story. She shivered thinking about what might have happened had the rip in space been opened to its fullest potential and without the Avengers present to stem the tide of invaders, or if Loki and his people had left them to their fate when the terrible power who had forced the Asgardian prince into the initial attack had reached them. While she might still harbor some personal resentment, she would be pleasant and do the right thing here. “Are you ready, Justice Sotomayer?” the wedding coordinator asked.

“Oh course.” She squared her shoulders before taking firm strides to center stage where an antique bookstand held her notes for the ceremony. To be fair, she’d revised her opinion of the bridegroom during her meeting with him and his bride at the wedding rehearsal. Sonia had ended up having a good conversation with the couple. She looked at Loki now, dressed in his formal armor sans the odd horned helmet that sat beside a collection of other ornate Asgardian helmets at the edge of the stage as part of the décor. He appeared calm on the surface, but a tic in his lean cheek gave away his anxiety. He’d confided his doubts about the success of the ceremony the night before, noting all of the disasters or near disasters that had plagued them in recent months. “Relax,” she whispered. “You have this.” He flashed a surprised but grateful look and took a calming breath then glanced at his best man, the exceedingly muscular blonde introduced as Thor.
“Here they come, brother,” Thor said, mostly quietly. Loki, Thor and the other groomsmen turned to face the representation of the Rainbow Bridge, a truly spectacular construct. If the real thing was as much more beautiful as she had been told she’d give almost anything to see it. A redheaded woman dressed in violet and gold stepped lightly along the catwalk, her expression severely composed. One of the groomsmen, dressed in a late eighteen hundreds style tuxedo and cravat, updated only by it being made of leather, stepped forward to offer the bridesmaid his arm and escort her to one side. His cravat and handkerchief matched the violet of her dress. Another bridesmaid followed; this one had dark wavy hair and a rather prominent bust line. Her green and silver dress was echoed in the cravat and such of the groomsmen who stepped up to escort her. A blonde woman was next, dressed in blue and gold. Captain America, with the blue accents to his tuxedo, claimed her hand. The maid of honor, a tall woman who Sonia realized closely resembled the groom though with a dusky skin tone came next. Her deep red and silver was a good match with Thor’s red cloak and silver armor and they made quite the pair with their imposing height. Thor settled her on his brother’s opposite side, leaving room for the bride and returned to his place on Loki’s right.

… …

Peter made himself comfortable on the ledge of the Beacon Hotel that overlooked the theater where the much touted ‘Wedding of the Millennium’ was being held. He’d gotten a few good shots of the bride and groom leaving their vehicle and a whole heck of a lot of pictures of the off-world guests. One, a tall woman with hair as black as a moonless night had turned to stare directly at him as he took the shot. Something in her expression gave him major chills. “Gotta find out who that chick is,” he mused aloud. “And why her skin is that odd color. Never seen skin with that kind of undertone, it was almost blue…” he trailed off as a large refrigerated van opened its doors and a pair of literal giants stepped out, accompanied by puffs of fog created when the cold interior met the outside air. “Whoa.” He moved to a closer vantage point, shooting pictures of the cobalt hued men as he swung onto the theater’s roof. One of them reached a hand into the van and helped a somewhat shorter figure climb out. This one was female. She smiled up at the male wearing the gold thing around his neck and took his arm. “Huh; that must be the Jötunn king and queen,” he guessed. “And a bodyguard, maybe?” The three giants - because the woman had to be near seven feet tall since she dwarfed the S.H.I.E.L.D. security team that surrounded them - hurried into the theater. “Yep, these shots are gonna be gold.”

He’d just settled back on his ledge when a percussive pop sounded beside him. He relaxed when he recognized one of the X-Men that had been involved in the fiasco in DC a while back. “You are the Spiderman we’ve heard about, yes?” Nightcrawler asked in a German accent.

“Yes. Just hanging out, collecting pictures, this stuff is just too cool,” he said, holding up his camera. “Don’t want to rely on the canned stuff you see on the Net.”

“Do you suspect issues?”

“How? With all of that security? You’ve got to be joking.”

“I am not. We’ve been asked to stand by. If something happens, please to either help or get out of our way.”

Oh, crap; so much for a night of being an undercover paparazzi and making rent for the next few months. “Um, sure; if something goes down, you can count on me. I don’t know what I can do against aliens, but I can get civilians out of the way at least.”

“Very good, thank you.” Another pop and the mutant disappeared, leaving behind the distinct scent of sulfur.
“Yet another entry into the weirdness that is Peter Parker’s life,” he muttered to himself. A movement that seemed out of place caught his eye. An overly tall woman and an equally tall dude dressed head to toe in what looked like engraved metal had shifted in the shadows of a delivery door. Why hadn’t the S.H.I.E.L.D. team seen them? He narrowed his eyes as a tingling ran up his spine and the image wavered. “Aw man. Huh, some kind of cloaking device, maybe?” Crap. Since he wasn’t exactly a team player and had no way to warn S.H.I.E.L.D. or the X-Men, he was going to have to get creative.

… …

The bridal march began and Kara started down the now fully illuminated bridge. Damn, the girl looked spectacular, even in the funky dress. “What kind of outfit is that, anyway?” Tony groused to Pepper.

“Italian Renaissance, specifically Venetian.”

Of course she knew. Pepper always knew. “Thanks, babe.” He leaned over to kiss her cheek as she smiled at him. “That smile does me in every time, you know that?”

“Absolutely. Aren’t you supposed to be meeting Kara at this end of the bridge?”

“Oh shit.” He jumped up and headed up the steps to stand in place, glancing down to make sure both his gold cravat and handkerchief were folded properly. Kara reached him and took the arm he offered. Her hand was shaking. “You okay?”

“Nervous, nauseous. Not sure if it’s just wedding nerves or morning sickness or something else,” she whispered.

“It’s not morning, but I guess that doesn’t matter. Romanov got sick at all hours.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine.” He nodded and guided her over to Loki’s side and placed her hand in that of the equally nervous groom then stepped slightly back.

“Friends, family and honored guests; we are gathered today to join two people in matrimony. While this would be a momentous occasion for any couple, who they are makes it a momentous occasion for all of our worlds,” Justice Sotomayor began. Tony couldn’t help the slight grin. Pepper hadn’t had to dip into her bag of tricks for this one. This Supreme Court Associate Justice had been brought on board by Ambassador Haakun and President Palmer. “Who gives this woman to be married?” the justice asked.

Tony stepped up. “As her honorary brother, I do,” he said.

She nodded and turned her attention back to Kara and Loki. “Marriage is the most important of all relationships. It should be entered into reverently, thoughtfully and with full understanding of its sacred nature. Your marriage must stand by the strength of your love and by the power of your faith in each other. Just as two threads woven in opposite directions form a beautiful tapestry, so your two lives when merged together will make a beautiful marriage. If there is anyone present who has just cause as to why this couple should not be united let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

“I have just cause,” a woman’s oddly toned voice spoke up from the rear of the theater. Tony looked towards the slight auburn haired woman and was instantly mesmerized. He shook his head slightly, trying to clear it.

… …
Loki groaned as he recognized the voice. “Lorelei,” he muttered to Thor.

“Men, plug up your ears immediately, her voice is hypnotic,” his brother announced loudly. For once Thor’s loudness was a boon as the other Avengers immediately followed his advice as did quite a few of the men in the portion of the audience that he could see. Stark was swaying slightly and shaking his head before slowly following suit.

“Why, Thor; I think I’m insulted. You automatically assume I’m here to enchant these mortals?” Lorelei asked. Her words, fortunately, fell on deaf ears as Thor had followed his own counsel. The Siren stepped out on to the representation of the Bifrost, escorted by James Rhodes. Damnation; there would be no attacking her at this distance without endangering the man. The Air Force colonel looked besotted. Fortunately he was without the Iron Patriot armor so wasn’t a dangerous opponent and could be put down gently if it should come to that.

“Other evidence to the contrary, my brother is not foolish,” Loki told the thrice-be-damned woman. He didn’t waste his breath in an attempt to appeal to Rhodey; it would have no effect with Lorelei’s magic in play. He checked on Logan. The mutant had his fingers in his ears and his expression seemed more annoyed than usual.

Kara was seething as she touched his arm. “She’s shielding,” his bride whispered. “And I can’t use fire in here at all, let alone with Rhodey so close.”

“I know, love.”

“Very bold, Lorelei,” Hel spoke up. “You attempt your mayhem in front of not just one goddess, but three.”

The bitch laughed. “All of whom are powerless in this situation, Queen Hel. I may be bold, but I am not stupid.”

“Where’s your sister?” Loki interjected. “You didn’t escape from Asgard alone.”

“Very clever, darling; but then, I always did love that about you. You are going to be the perfect husband,” she mused. “I see your taste still runs to redheads.”

Kara’s eyebrow rose questioningly. “Nice try,” he told the ginger-haired Siren. “Kara is aware that she is the first redhead I’ve ever found attractive.” And if she hadn’t been aware, she was now, he thought. “What do you think you can do here? We are already wed by Asgardian law. Nothing you do or say will change that.”

“I can take you, hold you, and once Ragnarok comes, it will not matter what happened under Asgardian law as Asgard will be no more.”

Lorelei’s voice had never worked on him without touch and even with it she had to struggle constantly to hold him. Thor wasn’t that fortunate. He considered the women in the audience. Frigga had claimed Brianna and was preparing to defend the baby. Good choice. None of the men about could be trusted. Sif was standing and moving away from Nyvorlas. Excellent strategy as the damned Alfar hadn’t blocked his ears, nor had any of Ljosalfheim’s council members in attendance. So far as Loki knew, none of them were immune to a Siren’s voice. Lorelei had continued to stroll across the bridge toward them and was now passing Logan…and Rogue.

“Marie? Are not those gloves a bit warm in here?” he asked casually.

“You know, I think they are.” Lorelei had barely turned to see who had spoken when Marie mimed someone giving her a boost up to Logan who pulled one hand from his ear, lifted her up one
handed to the bridge and then quickly replaced a finger in his ear.

“A mortal child, how quaint,” Lorelei drawled.

“They call me Rogue, ma’am,” Marie said with a polite smile, holding out a bared hand. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Loki smirked as Lorelei took the girl’s hand, thinking she’d be able to control her. While that was only rarely possible with the females of the longer lived races, the Siren likely thought it was worth the effort to test her power on a human girl.

“Don’t…” Rhodey began just as Rogue took a firm grip on Lorelei’s hand. “…touch her!”

“Why…” Lorelei broke off with a scream as her power began to be absorbed. Several things happened in quick succession. Rhodey collapsed as he was freed from Lorelei’s thrall, Rogue pulled her hand free and sat down abruptly, her eyes wide, and Sif leapt up onto the bridge to deliver a roundhouse punch to Lorelei’s jaw that rendered the Siren unconscious.

Sif leaned down and pulled an amulet from around Lorelei’s neck. “Amora is definitely involved,” she said, holding it up.

… …

Amora hissed as she watched her sister drop to the bridge and drew back hastily. It was time to implement her backup plan. Hurrying over to where she’d left Angrboða and Kurse hidden by a cloaking spell, she glanced around at the black clad human agents and armored Æsir running for the entrance to the building. Her own cloaking was holding. “Lorelei has failed. We’ll have to allow them to complete the ceremony and then take Thor and Loki as they emerge.”

The Jötunn sorceress’s smile was unnerving. “Good; I never have cared for sharing.”

“I kill Thor soon?” Kurse asked.

“Yes, yes; you get to take down Thor soon. But don’t kill him here,” she added. “You can kill him slowly when we get to our haven.” She gave Angrboða a knowing glance. As soon as Thor and Loki were secured, the two of them would unleash their power upon Kurse to give him the final peace the suffering fool deserved.

… …

He froze as a third blurred figure joined the first two. Another blonde, still tall, but this one was less than six foot. This wasn’t good. Pulling out his digital camera Peter set the flash and held it around the corner of the building, out of sight of the three suspected off-world villains. Clicking repeatedly, he aimed it in the direction of the S.H.I.E.L.D. command vehicle and waited for someone there to recognize the old Morse code while he kept an eye on the bad guys. It seemed like it took forever before a pop sounded and he smelled sulfur again. “What are you doing, Spiderman?” Nightcrawler asked.

“Can you see them?” he asked, nodding towards the shadows.

“I see noth…ah. I see shadows move, yet nothing to make those shadows.”

Peter looked again. Yep, the three blurred figures were making very visible shadows. “Ha, gotcha, you creeps. Okay, I can kind of see the actual people. One of them came out from the theater. They’re dressed a lot like the folks from Asgard and two of them are wearing necklaces with glowing crystals in them. I figure they’ve got some kind of alien powered invisibility thing going on.”
“Are they blue?”

“Huh? Oh, the crystals? Yeah, electric blue.”

“Wait here.” With the mutant’s accent it kind of sounded like he said ‘vait’. Peter grinned behind his mask at the bad war movie scenarios that popped into his head. Another pop and the mutant was back. “We are to wait and stop them only if they move. I cannot take the crystals if I cannot see them. The Asgard warriors will patrol past and then Storm will follow and call a bit of lightning to the sky. Fandral, the one that looks like Errol Flynn, thinks it will startle them and make them look for Thor. If they become visible, I go for the crystals.”

“And if they try to run, I’ll web ‘em to hold them in place.”

“Very good.” To Peter’s ears it sounded like ‘goot’ and he grinned again. He tucked his camera away and waited.

… …

Nick nodded as he listened to Hill’s report. “We need to go ahead with the ceremony. They’ve got a bead on Amora, but we need to make her think she’s in the clear so our security forces can take her out,” he told Nassar, Odin and Thor.

Thor sighed. “I had hoped that just this once things would go my brother’s way.”

“They still can, my son,” Odin said. “He will wed his lady by Midgard’s law and the others will be captured. All will be well.” They all glanced over to the side where Lorelei lay bound, blindfolded and manacled, with the muzzle that had been used on Loki securing her mouth until something more specific to her power could be retrieved from Asgard. Sif lounged, somehow alertly, beside what Nick had been told was a half-Æsir, half-Siren, holding her sword at the woman’s throat.

“I’ll talk to the Justice,” Nassar offered and headed up to the stage.

“And I will reassure Loki,” Thor added. “Father, would you…”

“Your…friend’s child is fine. You know that your mother will not allow harm to come to the babe.”

Thor nodded and headed after Nassar while Nick stared at his polar opposite. “What’s up with the kid?” he asked. The Æsir were hiding something, and he didn’t like it.

Odin frowned back at him. “Nothing that need concern you; what Frigga has seen will not occur in your lifetime.” That wasn’t reassuring, but Nick decided it could wait for another day.

… …

Sonia smiled at the audience with all of the confidence she could muster, which was, considering her history of firsts, quite a bit. “Well, we all knew today would be exciting. Now that the interruption is over, let’s return to our purpose here.” The wedding party resumed their places, but they all looked tense. Captain America had a hand on the shoulder of the gentleman with the green accessories and was murmuring to him in a soothing tone. The man was taking deep breaths and had his eyes closed. After a bit he nodded and straightened, managing a smile for his friends. Her jaw tightened when she realized that the man was Dr. Banner and that he’d likely come close to unleashing his Hulk persona. President Palmer was going to get an earful over this one. “I assume no one else has any cause as to why this marriage should not take place?” Thankfully, no one spoke up. “Let’s begin with your vows,” she said softly to the couple. “Prince Loki?” she
The ebony haired alien turned to his bride. “I Loki, take you Kara to be my wife, my partner in life and my one true love. I will cherish our union and love you more each day than I did the day before. I will trust you and respect you, laugh with you and cry with you, loving you faithfully through good times and bad, regardless of the obstacles we may face together. I give you my hand, my heart, my love and all that I am and possess, from this day forward for as long as we both shall live.”

His bride’s eyes were a bit teary and Sonia smiled to see it. Her smile grew when she noticed that the prince’s eyes were suspiciously wet as well.

“I Kara, take you Loki to be my husband, my partner in life and my one true love. I will cherish our union and love you more each day than I did the day before. I will trust you and respect you, laugh with you and cry with you, loving you faithfully through good times and bad, regardless of the obstacles we may face together. I give you my hand, my heart, my love and all that I am and possess, from this day forward for as long as we both shall live.”

Sonia nodded. “May I have the rings?” Thor and the maid of honor handed her the wedding bands and she held them up for everyone to see. “A ring is an unbroken and never ending circle that from the earliest times has been a symbol of eternity. May these rings symbolize a commitment of love that is also never-ending. As often as either of you look at these rings, I hope that you will be reminded of the commitment to love each other which you have made this day.” Handing the ring set with green and white diamonds to the prince she instructed: “Place this ring upon your bride’s finger and continue your vows.”

“As a ring has no end, neither shall my love for you; wear this ring as a symbol of our love and the vows we’ve made this day.”

Then Sonia handed the heavier ring to the bride. “Place this ring upon your groom’s finger and continue your vows.”

Kara smiled and wiped away a tear before taking it and turning to the prince. “I accept your ring and give you mine, also in token of our vows and as a symbol of our love everlasting.”

“By the power vested in me by the government of these United States of America, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Sonia smiled as the theater erupted in cheers though a shiver ran down her spine as she glanced to the side where the auburn haired woman lay bound and gagged.

Finally, Loki thought. Kara was his by the laws of both of their worlds. He pulled back from the sanctuary of her kiss with a relieved smile only to notice that Thor was weeping unabashedly.

“Congratulations, brother,” the sentimental oaf offered. “I would congratulate your bride, but she married you and knowingly this time.”

He snorted softly and shook his head. Only Thor would dare. “Good point,” Tony said from behind Thor’s bulk. “I can’t believe I actually let her do it, twice no less.”

“Gentlemen, play nice,” Justice Sotomayer chided.

“They’re just attempting to lighten the mood,” Loki told her. “Unfortunately, our troubles did not end with that one,” he continued, nodding toward Lorelei. He glanced around. A pair of
S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, one male, one female, was waiting at the edge of the stage. When he gestured
toward the woman they nodded. “Please, go with those agents. They’ll see you safely to the
reception and provide protection there.”

“Thank you. I hope everything goes well and that you’ll be able to celebrate shortly,” she replied
with a motherly smile and pat on the arms for both he and Kara. “Be safe.”

“Can I fry Amora this time?” Kara asked.

“Tempting, but considering the age of these buildings, not wise, my love. Tony, I assume Happy
has your suit?”

“He does.”

“You, me, Thor and Wolverine, then.”

“I’m coming too.”

“No, Kara; you are not. Thor and I are already armored, Tony can armor easily, and we have plenty
of backup outside. You and Rogue will stay within along with Dr. Banner, Steve and our
goddaughter’s parents to protect our guests. Who has our…” he trailed off as Logan hopped up on
the stage with a small case and began handing out comm units. “Excellent. We’ll keep in touch so
that you shan’t need to worry.”

“Fine,” Kara groused. “But I really want a piece of her.”

“I know, darling. Gentlemen, shall we go?”

He’d only taken two steps towards the array of formal helms when his daughter blocked his path.
“Angrboða is here,” she informed him.

“Of course she is.”

“I expect to return her to my Realm this time.”

“You’ll find no objection from me. Shall I leave her to you?”

“I cannot take her life with my powers, it is against the rules.”

Hel was telling him to kill rather than capture Angrboða. “As you wish, my daughter.” She stepped
aside and he reached for his helm and met Odin’s eyes. The old man was lifting his own helm to
his head. “Father?”

“I intend only to stand ready to protect those inside, my son.” The calmly spoken words did nothing
to settle his unease as Gungnir shimmered into being in the All-Father’s hand.

“You expect a battle within.”

“Your mother is concerned. Tis best to be prepared for anything.”

“Damn. Very well. I’ll do my utmost to ensure the preparation becomes unnecessary.”

“I know you will.” Odin clapped him on the back as he passed, but his smile was strained. Loki
began to worry.
The above account of the legend of the beginnings of the Nine Realms and the Bifröst is my own creation. Neither the existing mythology or Marvel canon supported the Movieverse in my opinion, nor did it support this story. Therefore, this is MY canon, so there. Call it ‘Artistic License’. If Marvel would like to borrow it, they may do so at no charge, though it would be nice if they’d give me a job writing for them! :wink:

Yes, I’ve left you with another cliffhanger. I know, I know, but it was either that or make you wait at least another two weeks for an update and then that update would have been close to 20,000 words. Be grateful I left the cliffhanger at this point rather than at a point in the next chapter that would have been a real doozy. There are already six pages and 2,400 words written in the next chapter with a LOT more to add. I beg for patience!

Please see my Tumblr account under user KieraPSI for wedding related pictures including dresses, tuxes, jewelry and such. Enjoy!
“They’re expecting the bride and groom to emerge,” Nick Fury told them. Thor considered the options quietly while the others argued with the director.

“Hey, Lokes, you could put Thor in a dress,” Stark finally suggested.

He glowered at both his brother and the Man of Iron. “One time was enough.” Still frowning, he turned as Hel caught up to them. “Niece, I thought you would stay with the others.”

“The rules do not allow me to protect them, uncle. However, I can play bait. Father can glamour me to look like his lady.” She met Loki’s eyes and his brother echoed his own frown. “Grandmother strongly suggested such.”

“Then we’d best follow her suggestion,” Loki agreed. A green shimmer washed over Hel and an image of Kara in full armor replaced the visage of the Queen of Niflheim. “Shield yourself well, my dear. I like this not.”

“What’s the plan?” Wolverine asked.

“Do the X-Men seriously go into every battle with a plan?” Stark asked. “I mean, if so, maybe Cap should move over to their team, he loves plans.”

“I also love plans, Tony,” Loki said. “Shall I go with Steve?”

“Ah, no. Besides, you can’t. Your parole thing specifically assigns you to us.”

“No matter. Stand still, both of you,” he said to Stark and the Wolverine. Loki’s signature green shimmer of magic enveloped both of them and images of Stark and Rogers in their tuxedos replaced them. “Logan, speak not. I can’t spare the energy to alter your voice. Let them think you are the Captain until you get close enough to use your claws.”

“Got it.”

“So I can say anything I want then?” Stark asked.

Loki rolled his eyes. “As if there were any force in all the Nine Realms that could stop you.”

Thor chuckled as Fury snorted. “Okay, stop being comedians,” the one-eyed human ordered. “An outsider spotted Amora, some woman that Fandral ID’d as Angrboða, and a male figure wearing rune engraved head to toe armor in the shadow of the delivery entrance. The limo has been brought around to that side of the exit we’ll be using. The rest of us are going to escort Loki and our pretend Kara to the vehicle while the teams outside get ready to take out the enemies.”

“We have a problem with that plan,” Loki said. “The armored figure is a Svartálfar called Kurse. As best we were able to determine, he’s impervious to, well, anything and particularly to magic. He almost took out Slingard, Hellbringer and Iron Man with relative ease. Kara’s fire couldn’t touch him, nor could my magic. Stark’s tech was overwhelmed and his Arc Reactor failed.”

“Leave him to me,” Hel spoke up. “His armor keeps him falsely alive; he should have come to me
centuries ago.”

“His armor repelled my sorcery, Hel. Yours is not as strong.”

“I need no sorcery. If I can but touch one bit of his skin, his soul will be sent to where it belongs instantly.”

“Problem,” Fury interjected. “What part of covered head to toe did you not understand?”

Thor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “We shall need to get some bit of his armor off of him.”

“Genius; I’ll find out if Hill has a can opener,” Fury drawled.

… …

“Shit.”

Fandral’s lips twitched as he tried to not laugh at the normally proper Maria Hill uttering a crudity. “There must be some way to get the armor off that does not involve magic or traditional weapons,” he told her.

“Yes; as Fury suggested, a can opener. I doubt he’s going to stay still long enough to let us use one on him.”

“Ginsu scissors,” one of the other agents muttered.

“Not helpful, Ramos.”

“Sorry, Deputy,” the younger woman returned.

“What is a…” he began.

“Never mind, she was joking.”

“Kind of.” Agent Ramos frowned fiercely. “Wait; what about that mutant who teleports? Could he maybe teleport a piece of the armor instead of the whole being?”

Maria’s jaw dropped slightly. “It’s worth asking.” She turned to stride over to the strangers who had been identified as ‘X-Men’, though one of them was a woman.


“Okay,” Maria said as she returned to them. “Nightcrawler isn’t certain he can do it, but it would be worth a try. He’ll teleport just a few yards away so that if it doesn’t work as planned he’ll at least have separated the armored man from the females making them easier targets. If that happens, the Spiderman will try to trap him in place with his webbing to at least slow down his movements so that more conventional methods of dealing with him can be attempted. Hopefully the women will be visible by then so Nightcrawler can teleport back and take one of the necklaces while the Spiderman tries to snag the other necklace with his webbing.” She looked at the two X-Men who were now approaching. “You have something else?”

“Yes,” the one called Cyclops said. “As soon as Storm gets their attention I’ll get into place. If just a piece of armor is moved, fine, I’ll turn and target the man directly in his current position. If the entire man is moved, I’ll target him there; I doubt the people that ensorcelled his armor ever
experienced something like my optic blast. But if that doesn’t help, Beast will go in and hold him. He’s the least likely to be affected by anything magic. By that time Wolverine should have arrived and I seriously doubt if that armor will hold up to his claws.”

Maria smiled…ah, she did have such a fetching smile when she was feeling vicious, Fandral thought and had to firm his resolve to follow Loki’s advice and not chase the woman in order to win her. “We have our can opener,” she said into her communications device.

… …

Thunder rumbled and lightning briefly lit up the sky as Nick strode out of the building and glanced around. He had a really bad feeling about this. There didn’t seem to be anyone in the doorway that had been reported as the refuge for the off-world enemies, but he’d trust the reports that had been received. Jasper Sitwell and several of his top strike team agents converged on them. “Storm’s little display didn’t draw them out. Apparently they knew Thor was still inside,” Sitwell reported.

“Amora was likely in the theater when Rogue took down Lorelei,” Loki surmised. “Angrboða and Kurse must be her backup plan; she never was much for family loyalty. While Amora can’t enchant Thor, Angrboða has managed it in the past.” The elder of the Odinsons grimaced. “She did so to all of us, brother,” Loki continued in a conciliatory tone. “T’was no weakness of yours.”

“Even so, t’was embarrassing.”

“Enough,” the image of Kara said. “This was before I was born and I’m quite tired of hearing you both grumble about it.”

Nick smirked. Not quite how the real Kara would put it, but Hel, even though she was centuries old, was still not born until after the incident in question, though she was conceived during it. “It’s all part of becoming a man,” he told them. “A boy doesn’t learn to be a man before he’s had his heart broken or his ass metaphorically handed to him by a devious woman.”

Thor made an odd harrumphing sound. “This one did both.”

A noise that sounded like a woman speaking but had no discernible words caught their attention. “The armored guy is moving!” a young and unfamiliar male voice reported over the comm. “The women are holding back, but their hands and the crystals are all glowing. He’s headed straight for Thor. I’m going to web him so that Nightcrawler can see him to try his teleport trick. Be ready to back off or duck.”

“Stay close, Nicolas Fury,” Hel ordered. “I like this not.” He frowned at her, not liking it either.

From the ledge of the hotel across the parking area a stream of something rope-like flew at a point just before the god of Thunder. It began to widen just before it hit an obstacle with a slightly wet splat and spread out to delineate a tall figure. The figure bellowed out Thor’s name and hefted a weapon that looked like a cross between a Guan Dao and a scythe. “Die, Odinson!” he screamed.

Nick watched as Thor raised his hand and his damned hammer flew in from nowhere. “Not today, Svartálfar,” the god returned.

A blue figure that looked like a demon of some kind popped into existence behind the charging behemoth and grabbed hold of him. Both figures disappeared only to reappear a few yards away. “Cyclops!” the Nightcrawler, Nick supposed, yelled as he disappeared without the dark elf.

A red beam coming from the X-Men leader’s eyes struck the rune covered armor…and dissipated. More webbing hit the armor, this time covering it completely and attaching to the wall of the
building and the ground. “No good,” Cyclops called out. “Beast, keep him there. Wolverine…”

“Yeah, I’m there,” Logan said from behind Nick and dodged past, heading for the mess, his magic-fueled disguise dissolving as he ran.

“No!” A shrill voice screamed and Nick saw the Nightcrawler reappear near the X-Men’s Storm, holding a necklace with a gem that reminded him of the Tesseract and Loki’s spear. The mutant was grinning ear to ear, exposing disturbingly pointed teeth. A blast of green power came from the doorway where, presumably, Amora and Angrboða still hid, aimed for the mutant who simply disappeared again. Storm threw herself to the side to avoid it.

Gold energy shot out from the doorway; the beam seemed much stronger than the green had and Nick flinched as it struck a greenly glowing shield that suddenly appeared as Loki stepped forward. “Now or never,” a voice said from behind them, he glanced back at Agent Rumlow, the strike team leader accompanying Sitwell. Just as he opened his mouth to question the comment searing pains shot through his chest and abdomen followed by the soft echo of silenced weapons firing multiple shots. He looked down at the bloody exit wounds as he sank to the ground while Rumlow and Sitwell disappeared into the running mass of agents that were converging on the battleground.

“Loki!” a woman’s voice called out, the sound fading as it continued. “Help him; it is not yet his time!”

As his vision also began to fade, he saw what looked like Hellbringer’s face morphing into that of Hel, goddess of the Dead. She was pressing something against his stomach and looked real concerned. “Ah, fuck,” he gasped. “This ain’t good.”

… …

“Fury’s down, inside job,” a voice hissed urgently over the comm on his private frequency.

Raj pulled Beth and Rogers aside. “We’ve got problems. Someone inside S.H.I.E.L.D. attacked Nick; he’s down. I don’t know more than that. We can’t trust any agents in here.”

“We can trust Romanov and Barton,” the Captain argued.

“They’re Avengers, not agents,” he reminded. “Tell the others, quietly. I’ll go alert the Asgardians. This could all go to hell very quickly.” The couple casually strolled over to where Dr. Banner stood with Darcy, Pepper Potts, and James Rhodes. He turned and headed over to Frigga who was still holding baby Brianna. Convenient as Romanov and Barton hovered nearby.

“What’s gone down,” Romanov asked in a clipped voice. Of course she had noticed his tension. The only other person he would describe as the ultimate spy other than Fury was an expert at reading facial expressions and body language.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. is compromised.” He held up a hand as Barton opened his mouth to speak. “We’ve expected this; it’s another reason we so easily accepted your resignations. We knew it meant you could be trusted.” While updating the four of them on the situation, he continued to listen to the open line on the comm and met the eyes of the two former agents as the ongoing action was described. “This is both the best and the worst time for this to have happened. With the off-world intruders fermenting chaos, we might be able to finish this and save the Division’s reputation. If everything else had been going well, S.H.I.E.L.D. would be difficult to save as an organization.”

“If it is so corrupt as to attack its own leader, perhaps it should be disbanded,” Odin rumbled.

“He’s been attacked by the infiltrators because they know he is incorruptible and his people are
loyal to a fault.”

“Where is this coming from?” Barton demanded. “Why is now the first we’ve heard of it?”

Raj grimaced. “Communications monitoring has been suspected since we first discovered the problem. We didn’t know how high or how deep the infiltration went.”

“Do we know who?” Romanov asked.

He nodded. “Hydra.”

“Sookin syn,” she hissed. Glancing down at the King and Queen of Asgard she demanded; “You have to get Brianna out of here.”

“Rest easy, Natasha,” Frigga told her. “I shall allow no harm to come to her, I swear it.”

“As do I,” Odin agreed.

“Thank you.” Raj lifted an eyebrow as she lost the relieved expression and glared at him. “What can we do?”

“Keep an eye on all of the agents inside. Prepare to drop them on my order.”

“How do we know you’re not one of the infiltrators?” Barton snarled.

“You don’t; however, Beth and Steve do. Beth helped to save your daughter’s life; can you trust her?”

“Shit. Fine. What are you going to do?”

“Get to a computer with secure access and shut down all Council access to S.H.I.E.L.D. and visa versa. It takes someone with clearance for both to launch anything critical.”

“Did I hear you ask for secure computer access?” Pepper asked as she and Rhodes joined them. “I can link you in through Jarvis; that’s the most secure access on the planet.”

“Perfect; thank you.”

… …

Olivia forced down the fear that rose when Director Fury fell and ducked behind one of the huge Asgardians when she realized that the shooters were Sitwell and Rumlow. “Holy shit, Madre de Dios!” she gasped. “Hey, I’ve got to get to Thor and warn him, we’ve got traitors,” she said to the big warrior.

The armored man glanced down and nodded. “Come,” was all he said as he pulled her behind the shield he carried. He strode quickly across the strange battlefield until they reached Thor’s side. “My prince, this agent has dire news.”

Thor frowned at them. “Thank you, Skógi. What is it, Olivia?”

Olivia looked around; only Deputy Hill was near enough to hear and she gestured the woman over. “It was Jasper and Brock,” she told them. “I saw it from my angle. Deputy, what’s going on?”

“Damn it,” Maria hissed and adjusted her comm unit. “Sitwell and Rumlow are our shooters. Anyone on Brock’s strike team is likely Hydra as well; those teams are too damn close for it to be
otherwise. They’re either in or dead.” She paused, listening to a response. “Got it. Thor, we’ve got to get Fury to a safe location while I clean this mess up.”

“Loki, can he be moved?” Thor asked his brother who was on his knees beside the bloody body of her director.

“No, Kara,” Loki said after touching one bloody finger to his comm. “I need you out here, Fury’s energy is dropping rapidly and nothing I can do will replace that.”

Olivia heard the goddess over her own earpiece. “On my way.”

“Deputy?” Olivia asked Hill. “What are my orders?”

“Keep yourself alive; take down Sitwell and Rumlow or any of Rumlow’s team members if you see them.” Maria looked up at Thor. “I’m sorry, but your renegades just lost their priority.”

“Understood. I’ll deal with them myself.”

“What the hell?” Logan yelled as he joined the party. “Did I hear that right?”

Summers nodded. “Yeah, someone shot Fury; one of their own.”

“Actually,” Hank said as he struggled to hold onto the armored figure. “It appears they have been infiltrated at the highest levels by the World War Two era group called Hydra. If you don’t mind, Logan, this fellow’s going to get free shortly – I can’t hold him much longer.”

“On it.” He extended his claws and stared at his own hand. “Guess Loki dropped the illusion when shit got real.” A quick glance over the armor didn’t reveal any obvious seams or joints. “I hate magic,” he muttered and tried to plunge the claws directly into the metal. Tried being the operative word. “This ain’t good,” he said as the adamantine skidded across the armor and the impact shuddered through his body while the armor didn’t so much as show a scrape. He tapped his comm. “No go on the can opener,” he reported. “Shit’s impervious.” The armored figure bellowed and almost threw Hank off so Logan grabbed the bastard and held on as well. “Anything the Asgardians can do?”

“Loki’s busy trying to save Fury,” Maria Hill responded. “Hel says she’s not able to touch him so long as the armor protects him and the others with any magical ability are inside. Thor is going after the women; he says they’re more dangerous.”

“Where the hell is Stark?”

“As soon as Loki and Kara stabilize Fury, Stark is airlifting him to the egress for a trip upstairs.”

‘Upstairs’ had recently become the Avenger’s jargon for Asgard…courtesy, of course, Stark’s snarky nicknames for anything and everything. “That bad, huh.” He looked at the X-Men. “It’s just us.”

He glanced up as Bobbie slid over to them on a slick of ice he’d created. “Guys, Spidey says back off for a sec, he’s gonna web him up good and then I’ll take a shot at freezing him, maybe that’ll hold him until we’ve got something better.”

“Spidey? Geez. Eh, what the hell. Hank, let’s ring this jerk’s bell but good and then back off, okay? Hit him on three and then jump away on five.”
“That works for me,” a young male voice said over the comm. Must be this spidey putz.

“One, two, three,” Logan wacked the armored head as hard as he could and Hank did the same. It really did sound like a bell, he realized with a grin as he continued the count. “Four, five.” He and Hank jumped back and the same rope-like stuff he’d seen flying through the air and struck the figure. This time it stayed rope-like and trussed the guy up from neck to feet.

“My turn,” Bobbie crowed and then both the kid and the target frosted over. Usually Iceman let up after a coating of the stuff, but he kept laying it on. The ice got thicker and thicker as they watched.

“Uh, kid, I think you’re overdoing it.”

“No way. He’s gotten out of everything else so nothing’s too much.”

“Agreed,” a voice said in his ear. Loki, sounding distracted. “It won’t likely kill him, unfortunately. But it may buy us time we’re sorely in need of. Have the Spiderman coat the ice with his webbing as well, that will help it to hold.” A rustling sound told him that Loki hadn’t turned off his mic. “The generic energy to the meng mein and solar plexus chakras, Kara. We’ve got to get his strength up or he will not survive the trip. I don’t dare take him on the branches, not with Amora free. I cannot carry him and fight her at the same time.”

Amora free? Logan turned to look towards the spot where Thor was holding a shrieking blonde female just in time to hear the god bellow in pain as the woman turned blue and grew a good half meter taller. “Shit, Bobbie, go help Thor. She’s Jötunn and he’s gonna have frostbite bad if he tries to hold on to her. Priority is to get that damn necklace off of her,” he added when he realized the Spider guy hadn’t been able to snag it.

“On my way!”

“Yeah, she just kind of batted my webbing away,” said Spider told him as he wrapped the frozen armored guy in ever increasing coils of rope-like web.

“Don’t worry about it; if that’s the chick Hellbringer mentioned, she’s got sorcery skills. We’re probably lucky that Kurt got the necklace off the other one.”

“Didn’t keep her in place.”

“There’s some kind of portal thing that Amora can use. This one, not so much. If Iceman gets the necklace, she’s stranded, and so is this guy.”

“Don’t think any of our prisons are gonna hold them.”

“Yeah, well, that’s Asgard’s problem.”

… …

Kara winced as Thor bellowed in pain. She looked away from her work in time to see Angrboða in full-Jötunn form and Thor’s hands rapidly turning black from frostbite. “Fuck,” she hissed.

“Language,” Loki said calmly. “Look, the boy got her amulet. Angrboða goes nowhere.”

“Good, I owe her a piece of my mind,” she told him as she continued to pour energy into Nick Fury’s comatose body. The blood flow had ebbed, but she wasn’t too certain if it was because the wounds were healing or if he was running out of blood. She so needed to get to Asgard and train in real healing. Nick’s energy was as restored as she could get it so she did a quick scan. “Oh thank
God…and don’t you dare say ‘you’re welcome’ or I’ll smack you,” she warned her husband.

His grin was fleeting, but it was there. “Fine. Iron Man, get him to the egress. Heimdall knows what has happened, he’ll have healers there ready to tend to the man and if necessary, take him to Asgard for further treatment.” Standing, he arranged the leather-clad body in Tony’s armored grasp.

“He won’t know I helped, will he?” the billionaire asked.

“Not unless we tell him.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way. I wanna be able to pull it out of my ass the next time he gives me shit.”

“As you wish, now go.” Kara heard the repulsers whine as Tony took to the air. “Kara, what do you?”

She smiled and continued walking until she reached the cornered Frost Giantess. “Hey, bitch; remember me? You just ruined my wedding and I don’t appreciate it.” While Angrboða gave her a contemptuous glare Kara turned to the side and then pulled a move of Natasha’s that she’d learned in her self-defense class; a spin and kick that, backed now by fully Æsir muscle, sent the Jötunn flying into the steel doors of the delivery entrance. An absolutely horrendous boom caught everybody’s attention. “Oops. That was a bit loud.”

“I will end you,” Angrboða grated as she clawed her way back to her feet using the buckled door as support. Purple blood oozed sluggishly from her cheek.

“Hel, you still want her to go home with you?” Kara called out.

“Yes.”

Nodding, Kara prepared to turn the woman into a bonfire. “Hold up there, kid,” Logan said from behind her. “You can’t just kill someone in cold blood, it ain’t right and it’ll haunt you.”

“The Wolverine is correct,” a deeper, more sonorous voice said. She turned as Odin approached, Gungnir firm in his grasp, Slingard and Helblindi behind him. “Angrboða of Jötunheim,” the All-Father continued. “You are a fugitive from justice, guilty on multiple counts of treason, terrorism, and espionage in no less than Four Realms. Three of those Realms have convicted you of your crimes and have sentenced you to death. With the authority of two of those Realms…”

“Three,” Nyvorlas interjected as he approached, dragging a chained and muzzled Lorelei behind him with Sif holding a blade to the Siren’s neck. “I have that authority for Ljósálfheim.”

“With the authority of all Three Realms upon which you have a death sentence,” Odin began again.

“And with the permission of the one that you’ve invaded tonight,” Maria Hill said. She shrugged as they all looked at her, many with raised eyebrows. “Just got off the line with President Palmer and with the U.N. Secretary General.”

Odin nodded and then gave his granddaughter a questioning frown. “Do it,” Hel told him serenely.

“I hereby fulfill that sentence.” Kara winced as Gungnir was thrust into Angrboða’s chest and then drawn down through her abdomen and ripped out near her hip, spilling her organs out of the huge wound. The Giantess screamed and Odin spun, quickly for such an aged man, and the great spear slashed out and through the straining blue neck, decapitating the woman. Clapping her hand over
her mouth Kara turned and buried her face in Loki’s armored chest.

He soothingly rubbed her back while holding her tightly with his other arm. “What shall we do with the remains?” he asked somberly.

Kara peeked out and saw Hel nod at Helblindi. “Slingard will return them to Jötunheim,” he said. Her body will be burned there as are the remains of all convicted traitors.”

“If you plan on wearing her head, please wait until you get home,” she said faintly, remembering the horrific sight of Býleistr’s head hanging from her brother-in-law’s belt.

He smiled; not a reassuring sight. “I did not take her head, sister-by-marriage, so such would be unseemly. You have naught to fear in that regard.”

… …

“This is nuts,” Kara muttered as they took their places at the high table in the hotel’s ballroom, all cleaned up and back in their wedding clothes thanks to Loki’s power. “Everyone’s acting as if nothing happened.”

Loki smiled and squeezed his love’s hand. “Most of them simply see it as excitement. They did not experience the gore of the battle.”

“Five turncoat S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were taken down inside the theater; that was bloody.”

“By three quick bullets and two quickly snapped necks. Natasha, Clint and Steve were very efficient. The other members of that team surrendered easily.”

“I don’t trust that.”

“Nor do I, or Hill and Nassar, for that matter. The coup isn’t over, but it will have gone back underground and may be even harder to dig out. It did put an end to a controversial weapon delivery system they’d intended to launch with new Helicarriers. Though Nassar now has his work cut out for him trying to discover who amongst the Regents are with this Hydra organization.”

“I can’t you help with that?”

He tapped his chin thoughtfully as he considered what he already knew of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s council. “I did not see any hint of this when I used them for my purposes during the invasion. Do you know if there are any levels between Fury and the Council of Regents?”

She shrugged. “Probably. Super-secret organizations love layers as much as politicians or any other bureaucrats. It gives them openings for plausible deniability. I’ve never had any knowledge of or access to them if there are. Raj would know and maybe Nat and Clint.”

“We’ll ask later. For now, let us enjoy the celebration. Kurse and Lorelei are on their way to the dungeons of Asgard, Angrboða’s soul awaits Hel’s judgment in Niflheim, and Nick Fury receives treatment from Lady Eir. Everyone else we care about or feel allegiance to is well and deserves this party. The X-Men and their Spider-friend will keep watch outside for Amora.”

“Fine; I think we’re missing something, though.” Loki frowned at her pronouncement. He agreed but had no inkling what it might be.

… …
“Come on, Thundercat, you can do this. You just have to say something nice and supportive.”

Thor glowered at Stark. He knew that much, it was more a question of what to say that would not offend the mortal…human guests. He stood and lifted the absurdly delicate and rather small glass filled with the sparkling beverage they called champagne. The conversation in the room quieted and all eyes turned to him. He glanced down at Loki whose lips twitched. His brother’s eyes were sparkling with amusement as well. Trying not to sigh he looked out and caught his mother’s gaze. Frigga gave him a reassuring smile and nod. He nodded in return. “Friends, I am told that it is the best man’s duty to propose a toast to the bride and groom. I am not an orator; that was always my brother’s specialty.” Frowning again, he gathered his thoughts. “Loki and Kara,” he began. “Both of you hold a piece of my heart and I am proud to call you brother and sister. The trials you have gone through exacted a far greater price than any should have to pay to find their other half. My wish for you both is that the happiness you experience in your life together far eclipses the pain and difficulties that you have overcome thus far.

He sat down, giving his brother a nervous look. Much to his relief Loki smiled warmly and whispered, “Thank you.”

Their father stood next; Loki tensed beside him. “It is written,” Odin began with his gaze on the couple. “That when children find true love, their parents find true joy. I toast both to your joy and ours, from this day forward.” He raised his glass high. “Skál!” he called out and threw back the contents of the glass.

“Skál!” was shouted back by many in the audience as they too drained their glasses. Someone had advised them of the salute, Thor decided as servitors hurried about the room dispensing more of the bubbly drink. He shuddered apprehensively as Stark stood.

The billionaire gave the crowd a cocky grin; his specialty. “Sorry everyone, or maybe I’m not; but this one’s going to be an inside joke.” He turned to the newly wedded couple. “To cats and dogs, living together…”

“Stark…” Loki growled under his breath.

“…and every other eighties movie cliché about complete opposites making the best of couples. You two have shown ‘em how it’s done and done damn well.”

“Acceptable, barely,” his brother hissed, but with a smirk.

“You know you love it. Nothing boring would do for my favorite reindeer.” Loki gave what was obviously a feigned indignant huff at Stark’s soft response. Thor sat back, shaking his head ruefully. He’d never understand the odd friendship the two had forged, but it gladdened his heart that they shared it.

… …

“No offense, but I’m not a joiner,” Peter told the woman with the dark skin and white hair. “I kinda like being independent.”

“The financial support alone is worth the…”

“Yeah, no. I do fine, thanks. Money is cool and all, but I’m not a team player.” How many ways was he going to have to tell them this before they got it through their thick skulls? Sheesh. A wicked grin stretched the mask covering his face. “Besides; the Avengers look like they have a lot more fun and they’re based here in the City.”
“The Avengers haven’t invited you into their ranks, kid,” the stuffy guy they called Cyclops said. “We have.”

“And he declined, politely,” Nightcrawler said in his clipped accent as he put a hand on Peter’s back and drew him away. “Life outside of the X-Men is hard for many of us,” he continued after they’d cleared some space between them and the other X-Men. “It makes it difficult to understand why anyone would refuse the opportunity of such a refuge. I assume you mask yourself because you can fit in among the normals?”

“Exactly. My family and friends don’t even know.”

The blue mutant shrugged. “I traveled with a circus for years to blend in; I envy you the ability to do so on the outside.”

“It has its moments.” Making a quick decision he pulled off a glove and held out his bare hand. “I’m Peter, Peter Parker” he said quietly so that no one else could overhear. “I trust you to keep that to yourself.” He shook the oddly shaped hand that was placed in his.

“Kurt Wagner and of course I will. Take our card; if you change your mind or run into something you can’t handle, call us.”

Peter took the business card for ‘The Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters’ that Kurt handed him and tucked it into his camera pouch. It couldn’t hurt, and who knew? Maybe something big might go down and he’d need them. Nah, but he’d keep the card just in case. “Sure, thanks Kurt,” he said.

“My pleasure, Peter.”

... ... 

“Princess Kara did much of our work for us,” Hrútr remarked as he pulled yet another piece of metal from the mortal’s battered body.

Eir nodded. “This one would not have survived, else.” She fed more energy into the already cleared wounds and hummed in satisfaction as the flesh began to knit. “His age will be a factor in his recovery, though he seems quite fit.”

“I don’t believe we can do aught about the appearance considering the scarring must have happened many years ago,” Bothildr told them as she pressed an herb infused cloth into the skin around the mortal’s old eye injury. “But the eye itself is still largely intact; we should be able to at least partially restore its vision.”

“Do it,” Eir decided after considering the matter. Normally they would not treat an old injury, but this man had narrowly survived an attempted assassination, he would need every advantage he could get to avoid the next. And there would be a next attempt according to what Heimdall had reported.

“How fares Nick Fury?” Councilor Haakun asked as he strode into the room.

“He’ll live. An extensive recovery period will be needed.”

“His people will be relieved.” Eir nodded agreement as she examined the pink lines of the newly closed wound. “We’ve been asked to keep him here for the duration of his recovery. The assassins will try for him again when he returns.”

She sighed. “And if he is aught but fully recovered, succeed. Yes, we will bring him back to full
health, and perhaps just a bit better than he enjoyed prior to the attack,“ she added with a nod to Bothildr as the apprentice began sending energy into the patient’s left eye.

Clint nudged Natasha and she frowned at him. “What?”

“Should we still go through with it?”

She looked around the room. Just over one hundred people were crammed into the room that purportedly had a dining capacity of eighty for banquets. These were the elite, heads of state or their representatives, friends of the Avengers, a few select members of the military and scientific communities and a small handful of media representatives. All people they’d have had to notify anyway. “Sure.” Her smile turned nasty. “If there are any Hydra moles here, knowing we’re taking each other and our family obligations seriously will make them think twice about even considering harm to Brianna.”

“Agreed. You wanna do it, or should I?”

“Go for it; you had your speech prepared.”

Hawk gave her a rakish smirk and stood. The leather old-style tux looked fabulous on him...if you discounted his weird affection for the color purple that he’d chosen for the accessories and therefore for her dress. “Uh, ladies and gentlemen, this is more of an announcement than a toast.” He stepped around the head table and walked to the center. “As most of you know, Natasha, The Black Widow, had a baby girl about six weeks ago and I’m Brianna’s father. We weren’t intending to have a baby, not with our line of work, but decided it was kind of fated; I think because we’ve been spending so much time around our off-world friends.” Several of said friends chuckled or at least smiled. “Anyway; Loki and Kara have done us the total honor of agreeing to be Brianna’s godparents. Literal on the god part, you know. Because of this, the folks in Asgard have decided to treat her as kind of an honorary princess and we’ve heard a lot of vows that they will defend her with everything they’ve got.”

Odin stood. “A godchild of my son I shall consider my honorary granddaughter. As such, she will be loved and cherished by all of Asgard. Any who seek to do her harm will suffer our wrath.”

“Um, thank you, All-Father. But really, that’s not what this is all about. While they were planning their wedding here, Loki and Kara have been dropping subtle and more recently not so subtle hints that the parents of their godchild should be married.”

“You’re going to get married?” Tony asked. “Damn, Pepper and I started an epidemic.”

Her Hawk snickered. “Yeah, ah, no. Um...actually, we’re announcing that we eloped.” Shocked gasps filled the banquet hall as he pulled a plain gold ring out of his pocket and slipped it on his left ring finger. “We tied the knot about two weeks before Brianna was born; kept it pretty quiet, only had two witnesses, that kind of thing. Anyway, Loki and Kara, you can lay off of the hints now and Tony, we’ll hit you up for an expensive wedding present later.” He came back to his seat with a big grin as cheering and laughter broke out around the room.

Loki stood. “Well, that probably tops our announcement. My family and our close friends are aware of this, but few others.” He looked down at Kara, who stood and leaned into him as he slipped an arm around her waist. “Kara and I will be welcoming our first child into the world in a bit more than eight months. We will need to go to Asgard before the baby’s birth as he or she will be a mix of races and we know not what complications we might encounter. I haven’t been told if
our child is a boy or girl and quite frankly, I don’t care either way.”

“Me either,” Kara agreed. “Just so long as he or she is healthy.”

Natasha looked over at Queen Frigga who was beaming. She’d bet her entire stash of Kauffman Luxury Vintage Vodka that the goddess knew the sex of her grandchild and had known it before the kid had even been conceived. “Hmm, possible young love between our kids in our future?” she suggested to Kara in a low teasing voice.

Thor knocked over his glass, soaking champagne into the tablecloth. “No!” he said vehemently. The big god blushed as the entire table turned to stare at him. “They...they will be raised together, it would be unseemly,” he stammered. Natasha stared at him as the others shook their heads and turned back to their meals. She didn’t buy that explanation for his outburst. Not for a minute.

... ...

“Marie, you okay, kid? You haven’t said a word in hours.” She stared at him with wide eyes and pointed to several of the waiters who had been hanging around and then at her throat and ears. “Aw, crap. You got that crazy chick’s power? So that’s why those punks were all over you.” The kid nodded emphatically. “Huh.” He looked around the room and grinned. “We should go outside and talk to Cyclops.” Marie shook her head. “Come on, don’t you want him taken down a peg or two?” Her eyes narrowed. He sighed. “Fine. Remember that the next time you want me to do you a favor.”

“Problem, Logan?” Kara asked as she and Queen Frigga returned to the hall from a restroom trip. Why the hell couldn’t women visit the facilities alone?

“Nah, well, Rogue picked up Lorelei’s power so we ended up with a couple of besotted waiters before she figured it out, but that’s it.”

“He wants me to go get Scott all besotted,” Marie told the woman. Logan turned to stare at the girl...no, the young woman. Had she always been this beautiful?

“Uh oh.” He didn’t look at the woman who was speaking; no woman could measure up to his Rogue. “I’ll go get Loki.”

“You keep that piece of trash away from my Rogue,” he snarled at the Avenger’s back.

“Calm down, Logan, it’s good. Loki’s a friend, remember?” Oh yeah. A friend. He nodded and leaned his chin on one hand. “You’re gonna let him take a look at you, okay?”

“Anything you want, beautiful,” he agreed.

“Oh boy. I wish I thought you’d feel that way if I didn’t have that woman’s mojo.” He didn’t know what she meant by that, but it sure sounded great when she said it.

“Logan?” He snarled when the damned green-eyed god touched his shoulder. “Easy; I’m a happily married man. I agree your Marie is a fabulous lady, but I concede to your claim.” Loki frowned and held out a hand that glowed the same color as his eyes. Rogue’s eyes were brown, a soft gooey chocolaty brown; they were so gorgeous. “How long does your absorption last, Marie?”

“Usually an hour for every minute of contact, sometimes a bit more if the other person isn’t human...or human mutant.”

“Damn. It’s been nearly three hours, how long did you touch?”
“Almost five minutes all told, I had to grab her again a couple a’ times. I’ve been tryin’ to keep quiet since those guys started hovering over me,” she gestured at the waiters who stood nearby.

Logan grunted. “They got no business being near you.”

“Logan ran them off earlier, before he heard me talk.”

“Ah.” Loki shrugged. “Well, I don’t think there’s much I can do for him. I believe it will wear off when the power leaves you.”

“You don’t need to do jack, buddy. I’m fine; you can get lost.” Logan had no clue what the bastard was talking about, but he wanted him outta there and now. The only reason he hadn’t disemboweled the piece of crap was because Rogue had claimed him as a friend.

“Logan, honey; take it easy. Loki’s just tryin’ to help me. You want me to be okay, right?”

“Of course!” She didn’t need anyone else to take care of her, damn it.

“Maybe we ought to go?”

“That’s probably for the best. I’ll have someone escort you to Avengers’ Tower...someone female. Let me find out who is available.”

“Thanks. Logan, let’s go to the Tower, okay? We can watch a movie and have some popcorn, that sounds like fun, right?”

“Sure, Marie; anything you want, gorgeous.”

“Oh, you are gonna hate yourself in the mornin’ sugah.”

... ...

“So, Necker Island and then Vanaheim. We’ll be staying at Fensalir, mother’s retreat there.”

“It was nice of Sir Richard to clear the island for us since Hawai’i was a no-go. He’s giving all of the scheduled guests a free week’s stay another time, besides refunding their deposits. That’s a pretty hefty wedding present,” Kara informed him.

“Yes, yes, nice chap and all of that. It’s not so much a gift as a bribe. He wants a trip to Asgard.”

“Oh, come on, Loki. Everybody and their brother wants a trip to Asgard. It’s still nice and we’re under no obligation to take him there. Still, he is a nice guy and does a lot of charitable work. His employees seem to actually like and respect him too; you don’t see a lot of that outside of Stark Industries. For that matter, even in Stark Industries. Tony’s people like their jobs and respect Pepper. Tony they kind of stare at and shake their heads in disbelief.”

“I stare at Tony and shake my head in disbelief. He is often unbelievable,” he told her in as dry a tone as he could manage. Loki smiled when his teasing drew a snicker from her. “You need to toss your bouquet before we can go.”

“I know and here comes the wedding planner to make sure we don’t escape before we take care of the rest of the wedding business.”

“Your highnesses,” the woman greeted. “Princess, if you could come this way?”

“I suppose.”
Loki looked out at the fairly small group of single women. Darcy, Beth, and Jane were among them as was Eleanor Valois. She’d been invited and had brought one of her fellow FDNY officers as her guest. She and Thor hadn’t been able to get together often at all with her schedule. Olivia Ramos spent more time with his brother, mostly because S.H.I.E.L.D. found it beneficial to have someone on the inside. Olivia had been called back to duty and was outside where Maria Hill was still working with Fandral. He smirked, wondering how that was going for the unlikely pair. Though if the cock-sure dandy followed his advice, they might yet become a couple. “Don’t influence this, Loki,” his mother said quietly.

His eyebrows shot up. “I had no such intention.”

“Of course not.” He glanced down at her and smiled. She knew him so well. “You will only be fighting my influence and if you do it will go neither your way nor mine.”

This time his jaw dropped. “Really? And who have you…ah, Darcy?”

“I like them, Loki. Both individually and as a couple.”

“Hmm. His reserve does complement her outrageousness.” A chuckle escaped as he watched the bouquet sail through the air and land squarely on Darcy’s head. “Nice aim.”

His mother sighed. “I was aiming for her arms as well you know. I believe the humans have a term which I shall borrow for you. You are a brat, my son; but I do love you so.”

He laughed out loud. “Ah, mother. I love you as well.”

… …

“Were you responsible for that?” Kara asked after Loki had removed her garter and tossed it almost directly into Bruce’s face.

“I was not; nor was I responsible for Darcy catching your bouquet.”

She frowned at him. He was telling the absolute truth, so why didn’t she believe…ah. “Do you know who was?”

“You are shrewd, my love. Yes, but I shan’t tell. It was someone who cares deeply and sincerely for their welfare, let us leave it at that.” She opened her mouth to respond and he placed a finger on her lips. “No, love. Let it go; I know you’ve guessed but do not voice it. That way, should either of them ask Heimdall, he can honestly say he does not know either as the person responsible hid their part in it.”

“Fine. Let’s get out of here; I really need to get this dress off; it’s beautiful, but not at all comfortable.”

They escaped into the dressing room set aside for this very purpose. Aleixandre Bailey was there, along with his assistant, a very down to earth woman who’d been introduced earlier as Liza. The two sprang apart when she and Loki entered and Liza’s lips were tellingly swollen. Huh, the guy was straight after all…or at least bi. “Hey, ready to get your gorgeous creation hung up properly,” she greeted them.

Bailey smiled. “You more than did it justice, Princess,” he gushed. “Even with your pregnancy in evidence.” At slightly more than one quarter into her term, her tummy had begun to bulge, but the full skirts of the Venetian style gown had hidden it completely. “I have your traveling outfits ready for you,” the man continued, nodding toward the dress rack which held a casual but elegant
patterned and billowy dress as well as a pair of khaki slacks and a deep green island-style shirt. “One of your lovely hovering jets is waiting for you down the street, I’m told, in that vacant lot.” He leaned in and lowered his voice. “I heard that the mayor made them hold off on the new construction scheduled for it just so you’d be able to use it.”

“Well, good thing he was invited to the wedding then. I’d hate to owe him for the favor.” She stood still as Liza and Aleixandre unlaced, unhooked and then lifted the dress over her head. Loki gasped as her underwear, or almost lack thereof, was revealed.

“What in the Nine are you almost wearing?” he demanded.

“One of Pepper’s bridal shower presents. None of the strapless bras worked with the dress, the cups showed with every one of them we tried.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Loki was practically salivating at the sight of the cupless bra and thong in metallic gold lace. “You were wearing that the entire time?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“Yep.” She snuck a look at the designer who was studiously not looking at her exposed breasts. His assistant wore a smirk worthy of Loki himself.

“Sweet Yggdrasill.” He shook his head with a rueful expression. “Thankfully I was not aware of this; it would have been torture, else.”

“Which is why you weren’t told.”

“Good call. Out,” he ordered, turning slightly to Aleixandre and Liza. “Now.”

Kara snickered as they both paled and fled at Loki’s sharp tone. “Don’t want an audience?”

“Never. You are mine and your…this…this is for my eyes and my body alone.” She shivered as his hands closed possessively over her breasts and massaged them almost worshipfully. “Pepper chose this?”

He sounded so incredulous. “Yes; wait until you see the others she gave me…and yes, we did hide them from you on purpose. They’re packed in my bags for our trip.”

“Blessed woman; remind me to express my gratitude.” He’d backed up, pulling her along with him until they reached a chair. “Sit.” She obeyed and smiled as he dropped to his knees before her and took one nipple in his mouth and began sucking strongly on it as he held her steady with a firm hand.

It was her turn to gasp and her legs opened reflexively to allow him to edge closer…and not coincidentally give his other hand access to her sex. His fingers brushed aside the narrow ribbon of lace that masqueraded as the thong’s crotch and then slipped into her dampening folds. “So are we going to consummate this right here and now?”

“Oh yes.” His mouth moved to her other nipple, worshipping it languidly as his fingers nimbly prepared her now wet canal for entry. “Here, now, hard and fast, my darling. This…” he gestured wordlessly to the under-things. “It is so slutty and elegant all at once; irresistible.” He flicked the tiny hoop that still adorned her navel. “I should have expected such from Pepper; she did convince you to get this.”

“True. Maybe I should let her make all my underclothing and accessory decisions?”

Loki grinned. She’d never known what a lascivious expression was before; now she knew. He
pulled her to her feet and turned her around to the nearby table. “Lean,” he ordered as his armor and leather disappeared to wherever he stored things when they weren’t home. She bent over the table and leaned as he’d directed, spreading her legs wide and bracing herself on them, using the table only for balance so they wouldn’t collapse it.

“Yes…” she hissed as he thrust in, as promised, hard and fast. His one hand cupped the swell of her belly and she could feel his pride and love for the life growing there. The other hand held her hip, pulling her back into his groin as he began a swift, forceful rhythm. Kara whimpered as the heat and pressure built deep within. By this time Loki didn’t even have to search for the right angle to give her the greatest pleasure; he knew it as well as he knew his own name. Sometimes when they made love he would tease her by just missing the perfect spot, drawing out the suspense and the pleasure. Not this time. Each powerful thrust hit home, setting her nerves afire. Building her lust, building her response, bringing them both to the peak. She screamed and he yelled as they hurtled over it, together, and her canal was flooded with his come. “Uh oh,” was all she managed to say as she felt a wash of panic and the door to the dressing room was flung open.

… …

“Oh, crap.” Steve turned around and blocked the entrance to the room where Loki and Kara had gone to change; and apparently to do, uh, other things. “It’s okay, people. Turn around, go back to the party.” The other Avengers stared at him a moment before understanding dawned on their faces. Only Stark had the gall to laugh. Of course.

“Whoa, Lokes doesn’t waste any time, huh?” the annoying so and so cackled as he strolled back towards the banquet hall. “Not sure what his hurry is; it isn’t like he didn’t already knock her up.”

“Tony, don’t be an ass,” Barton said, shoving the billionaire along so that he stumbled slightly.

Bruce, or rather, the Hulk was standing there, looking confused. “It’s okay, big guy,” Steve told him. “They’re fine, you can, uh, stand down.” In spite of his embarrassment, his lips twitched as he fought back an inappropriate chuckle. Oh, not at the couple who were quickly dressing if the rustling sounds behind him were anything to judge by. Seeing the green behemoth dressed in a leather turn of the century style tuxedo that fit perfectly thanks to the Asgardian amulet whose chain just barely fit the huge neck tickled his funny bone something awful. Banner’s other stepped back and leaned against the wall, thankfully not making it collapse, as he began to revert to his human form.

“Sorry, Steve,” Loki said quietly from behind him. “It’s safe for you to look now.” That last was said with a distinctly wry note in the god’s voice. “I should have thought to make the room soundproof.”

“That would have been good, yeah.” He glanced quickly back and saw, much to his relief, that they were both fully dressed. “Or at least post a guard, or something. That really wasn’t, um, cool?” He wasn’t sure if he had the slang right.

“That’s the right word, Steve. Thanks for reacting so quickly,” Kara said. Her face was as pink as his own likely was.

“Yeah, no problem. Well, kind of a problem, but it’s okay.”

“No, it is not,” Loki said, much to Steve’s surprise. “I was inconsiderate. I knew everyone was on edge from this night’s events. I—we apologize.”

“Profusely,” Kara added.
He sighed. “Apology accepted.” Steve watched for a minute as they headed down the hall to the car that would take them to the QJ. Oh, crap. “Hey, wait; I’m supposed to be flying you guys because we don’t know who’s compromised!” They stopped. “Let me get Beth, she’s coming with us and then we can go, okay?”

They nodded and he turned to see Bruce Banner leaning against the wall, bent over with hands on his knees. “What happened?” the man asked.

“Um, false alarm; Loki and Kara were, uh, um…”

“Getting frisky?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Okay. Have I mentioned that I love this thing?” Bruce said, holding up the amulet that now dangled almost to his navel.

“I think we’re all pretty happy with it too.”

… …

Frigga sat down next to Hel who was picking at her slice of cake. “You interfered,” she said mildly as she soothed the restless infant she once again held. “Had you not applied pressure to his wounds Nick Fury would have died before Loki and Kara could have saved him.”

“I am forbidden to use my power to save or take a life. I can use mundane means, or not, as I please.”

“Why did you do it? Your solitude could have ended this very night.”

An atypical tear tracked down the dusky cheek. “It was not yet his time.”

“Hel…”

“His time will come soon enough, grandmother.” Her green eyes, so like her sire's, met Frigga’s earnestly. “It was not yet his time and time is something I have much of. He is still needed here.”

“He will be needed here even after his time has finally come,” she said gently.

“I know it; and I will help him continue his influence. But for now, he is still needed here physically. I would not deprive this world, which has given my father such joy, of a hero they desperately need simply to assuage my own loneliness such a small bit sooner.”

“Your grandfather and I are so proud of you, darling girl.” Hel’s eyes narrowed skeptically.

“It is true,” Odin said as he joined them. Lowering himself painfully into the chair on their granddaughter’s other side he laid a hand on her shoulder. “You are wise and selfless; and stood strong under circumstances that would have made many crumble.” Frigga knew her husband spoke of Angrboða’s execution. “Is he the one, then?”

“He is…grandfather.”

Odin nodded. “He is a good man. I hope his heart recognizes yours.”

“As do I.”
Kudos to BlooAngels who gave us an alternate version of the takedown of Lorelei for the last chapter in the reviews. I laughed my ass off. Go read her review on the FanFiction.net site; you’ll laugh too!

Yes, some of the plot from The Winter Soldier snuck on in here. I’m still totally AU after The Avengers, but I will continue to slide in some of the plot points I like.

The X-Men’s headquarters is called several different things in the comics and I can’t find what it is called (and can’t remember) in the films so I’ve combined the comics’ ‘Xavier Institute for Higher Learning’ and ‘Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters’ into ‘The Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters’. Also, I went with brown eyes for Rogue because that’s the color in the movies and I’m loosely following movie rather than print canon. Besides, there are too few people with brown eyes in this story, considering the large percentage of brown eyed people in the world.

Yes, Nat and Clint decided to add a detour to the story. Again. I had no clue they’d gone and eloped until Clint stood up to make the announcement instead of offering a toast. Sigh. Oh, and if you’re keeping track, ‘sookin syn’ is Russian for ‘son of a bitch’.

Next up: The Honeymoon - and a lot of other loose ends tied up…or maybe made looser yet if the damn characters take over on me again!
The Next Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beth ushered Natasha and Brianna ahead of her as she entered the QJ.

“What’s up?” Kara asked the former assassin.

“You’re giving me and Bree a ride to the Tower.”

“Okaaay, I didn’t know we were going there. Steve, why are we stopping at the Tower?” Kara asked as Steve took off.

“We’ve got to pick up a few things before I take you guys and Beth to the island.”

Loki looked up from the tablet he was making notes on. “And Beth? What’s going on, Rogers?”

Steve frowned at him. “Oh, come on, Loki. She’s the ace in the hole while Nassar goes straight down the enemy’s throat. As his designated successor, Beth has all the codes to everything. They don’t know it, but her prints and optical scan can unlock anything his can, which is pretty much everything. She needs to stay safe. Keeping her safe, and you two safe is my job.”

“We can protect ourselves,” Loki snapped.

“Sure, but Frigga doesn’t think it’s a good idea for Kara to use her gifts so much while she’s pregnant,” Beth said soothingly. “Just think of Steve as your backup to protect her.”

“And your goddaughter,” Natasha added.

Kara tried not to choke on her surprise. “This is our honeymoon,” Loki grated. “We’ve never had one, lest anyone forget. A couple is supposed to leave their friends and family behind and enjoy each other without other responsibilities. I know I’m not wrong about this, or if I am I’ve been misinformed by no less than six humans and all of the research material I could locate online.”

“That’s why I’ll be there,” Steve explained patiently. “Beth will take care of Brianna; she’s got all kinds of training, just like a S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent’s, and I’ll protect them. You two can protect each other, but I’ll kind of be doing the perimeter guarding so you’ll have a heads up if something’s coming at you. That way you can enjoy yourselves without having to be on edge twenty-four/seven.”

Loki sighed. “Nothing goes aright, no matter what I do.” Kara rubbed his shoulder as he turned to her. “Am I so thoroughly cursed as that, love?” he asked plaintively.

“We’ve just got the world’s…well, the universe’s worst timing.” He groaned and dropped his head back on the cushioned headrest. “It’s okay. We’re together, right?”

“I just want one damned thing to go as it should for you,” he muttered as she felt his on again, off again depression spike. “You’ve given so much, not just to me but to all of the Realms, including this one. Is a damned relaxing honeymoon too much to ask?” His jaw set and he turned again to glare at Natasha. “Let Rogers take them to safety while you point me towards this Hydra. I will end every last one of them.”
“Sorry, Loki; it doesn’t work like that. No one knows who they are; they make S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secretiveness look like our ops are detailed in daily press releases. It’s all compartmentalized; each individual only knows his or her immediate co-conspirators. If we knew who was on top, we could clean house easier, but finding that person will be all but impossible.”

They landed on the back face of Avengers’ Tower and Loki all but threw himself out of the QJ and then marched over to the edge of the building. Kara watched him with a frown as his full armor replaced the casual outfit provided by her dress designer, including his forest green cloak and the horned helm. “Heimdall!” her husband yelled with both hands raised in the air, one fisted and one holding the scepter that Odin had freed from Thanos’ influence. Yes, yelled, even though he knew damn well that the Gatekeeper would hear him even if he whispered. “I would know who the leaders of Hydra are, every last damned one of them. They have given insult to my family and to my friends and They. Will. Pay!”

She swallowed as he stalked back to her side, green eyes still blazing with anger and frustration. “Loki, it’s going to be okay; we’ll figure this out.”

“They must pay,” he told her, his voice gentle though she could still feel his banked rage. She shivered, hoping he would calm down and be able to think things through more reasonably after they’d gotten settled on Necker Island.

… …

“That’s the last of them,” Maria said to Agent Ramos as she turned from the Bifrost egress in Central Park. Her eyes narrowed as a certain blonde womanizer came into view. “Why are you still here?”

He gave her what she supposed he imagined to be a winning smile. “The All-Father has commanded it, my lady. He feels you are in danger and need trustworthy allies and that such would be difficult to find on Midgard. My brothers-in-arms will be joining us on the morrow.”

“Your…Hogun, you mean?”

“And Volstagg; my apologies, but you might wish to stock the larder well before he arrives.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose as her headache began to spike. “I don’t need this.”

“Begging your pardon, Deputy, but I think we need all of the help we can get at the moment.”

“Ramos, I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“No, ma’am, you didn’t. But you need it just as much as you need the Asgardians. We’re ass deep in alligators and our objective is to drain the swamp.”

“Damn it. Okay, fine. Ramos, you and Fandral get our people together and head back to base. I’ve got to go see the Man Upstairs.”

“I fear that cannot be, my lady,” Fandral interrupted. “Until my liege or Director Fury order otherwise; where you go, I go.”

She groaned. “I really don’t need this shit. Ramos, contact the Bus.”

The young agent’s eyes widened. “I-I don’t know what you…”

“Can the crap, Olivia. We’ve tracked your work; you’ve been into everything up through level
eight. Your backside is still intact because we trust you. I’m giving you a field promotion to level seven. Now go contact the Bus and tell the driver what’s going down, she needs to be aware. Tell her I’ll leave it to her discretion as to who to bring in on this. She’ll know why.”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you really need to talk to the Secretary of Defense?”

Maria turned on her heel without answering and headed for her armored vehicle; the lothario trailing barely a step behind. “Things are getting real, Fandral. If I have to deal with any of your flowery flirtatious crap I will shoot you, understood?”

“Indeed, my lady.” She shot him a glare and he quailed satisfactorily.

… …

Hydra’s top contact within S.H.I.E.L.D. was pissed. Low level minions had acted prematurely, and while they may well have rid him of Nick Fury, they’d also put the Division on alert and Project Insight on hold. He’d need to convince the President’s Cabinet to insist that it go forward. A brief nod to the Marine Guards at the formal entrance and he was in the business area of the White House. Secret Service Agents lined the walls leading to the Cabinet Room. The Marines on formal duty at its doors came more stiffly to attention at his approach. His pale blue eyes narrowed at them; they were his, but they damned well shouldn’t be giving any sign that he was any more to them than the Secretary of Defense. A grim smile was called to his lips as he strode into the room and took his seat in time to have to rise again as he heard “Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States,” announced.

Josiah Palmer gave the gathered official his official ‘troubled’ stare as they all sat back down. “Can someone here tell me how in hell Hydra managed to infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D.?” he asked in a deceptively calm voice.

Alexander forced a casual shrug. “Not even S.H.I.E.L.D. is immune to corruption, Mr. President.”

“This happened on your watch, Pierce. I’m not happy.”

“Nor am I.” That was the literal truth, actually. He was anything but happy with the damned impatient fools who had risked ruining everything with their off-schedule assassination attempt. The only thing that might spare their lives would be Fury actually dying from his wounds. Hydra did not tolerate mistakes.

“Effective immediately, all U.S. Military cooperation with the Division is on hold; additionally, all Division projects must be put on an indefinite hold until any coconspirators are rooted out.”

“I respectfully disagree, Mr. President,” he said in as diffident a tone as he could manage. “One of these projects could provide the means to end the menace.”

“Or compound it. I’m sorry, Alexander. I know Project Insight is near to your heart with your family having been on the wrong end of a terrorist hostage situation, but the risk is too great.”

“I understand, Mr. President.” He understood that two relatively low level miscreants had cost Hydra dearly and he was not amused.

… …

“Welcome to Necker Island,” the outdoorsman type guy with the long silver hair greeted in an accented voice. This must be the ‘Sir Richard’ he’d been briefed on, Steve decided. “Captain Rogers, a pleasure,” the man continued, holding out his hand.
Shaking it briefly, Steve nodded. “Sir Richard, it’s good to meet you. Have you been updated on our situation?”

“I have, nasty bit of work. I sent those members of the staff I don’t one hundred percent trust with my family’s lives off to other properties; your people should be safe here with those that remain. Additionally I have some security features I’ll review with you…” he trailed off and looked at Steve’s companions. “And with the rest of your party, of course as none of you are truly civilians save the baby, from what Dr. Nassar has led me to believe.”

Beth stepped up and held out her hand. “Thank you for taking the extra steps on security,” she said in an authoritative tone that Steve had never heard from her, well, unless she was doing something medical. His lips twitched as he tried to keep a straight face. He really kind of liked hearing that kind of strength in a woman. Peggy had had that kind of inner authority.

“Oh, only too glad to help.” He looked past them to where Loki and Kara stood. Loki had his goddaughter cradled in one arm; he’d settled down during the flight once Beth had insisted he hold Brianna while she sat with Steve in the cockpit. “Hello,” he greeting the gods with a smile. “Not a promising start to your honeymoon, Prince Loki; but we’ll do our best to see that you have a chance to relax whilst you’re on holiday here.”

Loki stepped forward and took the billionaire’s extended hand. “It is not, but we thank you for your hospitality. This is my wife, Kara Gunnarssen and our goddaughter, Brianna Merida Barton.”

“Ah, the archer’s daughter, good name for her. Aren’t you a beauty, wee one?” He nodded to Kara. “Dr. Gunnarssen, one of the scientists I have on staff with Virgin Galactic tells me we have your abilities to thank for solving a major issue we’d been having with our space vehicle engines. That new insulation is dealing quite nicely with some concerns we’ve had on overheating.”

“Glad we could help. You should be thanking Tony Stark and Dr. Banner, though; they recognized the potential and developed the commercial uses for the material.”

“Oh, I have. Trust me; commending Stark’s brilliance in public is generous thanks in my book. Few people out there have an ego that surpasses mine, but he does manage.” Steve choked back a laugh over the breezily delivered statement. “Don’t get the wrong impression, Captain,” Sir Richard told him with a smile. “I’m one of his few ardent admirers and trusted friends in our set; but I do enjoy deflating his ego as much as he does mine. It’s a fine game of one-upmanship. Which reminds me, he owes me a case of Jameson’s over our last wager. Ah well, he’ll get to it eventually.”

Steve relaxed. Stark had told him that their host was a friend; it seemed Branson felt the same for him. “Can we get everyone settled and then take a look at security?” he asked.

“Absolutely. This way, all.”

… …

Nick opened his eyes and glanced around the quiet room. His vision seemed off somehow. Wait; there was more of a peripheral view on the left. It was somewhat dimmer than his normal vision, but the field was extended somehow. With effort, he closed his right eye and kept his blinded left eye open. Scratch that; formerly blinded left eye. He could see! Granted, it was almost in a tunnel vision form, but still, he could see out of the motherfucker; something he hadn’t been able to do for longer than he wanted to remember. What. The. Fuck.? “Good to have you back in the realm of the living, Nicholas Fury,” a soft voice said.
That Asgardian goddess of Healing was walking towards him. What was her damn name? Oh, yeah. “Glad to be back, Lady Eir,” he responded. “I take it I’m in Asgard?” That would explain the Science-Fiction meets Steampunk look of his surroundings.

“You are; considering the, ah, environment in Midgard, the All-Father felt that you would not survive long enough to be successfully treated there.”

The…aw, shit. Traitors; he’d been shot at close range by two of his own. Sitwell and Rumlow were trusted on almost all levels. Hell, Rumlow headed a S.T.R.I.K.E. Team. That this was bad news was the understatement of the entire motherfucking decade. “Did they get an ID on my attackers?” he asked. If not, getting a message to Hill was a priority.

“Yes, two of your trusted agents, I fear. Fandral has remained in Midgard to protect your deputy and several of his comrades will join him in the morning. You know of this group called the Hydra?”

They’d confirmed it was Hydra? Well, shit; he’d hoped this was some new organization. He supposed them being destroyed along with Red Skull back in Cap’s time was too good to be true; but finding them hiding in plain sight right under his…oh, fuck me, he thought. “Hill has got to shut down a project; this is vital. They’ll target the Avengers with it if she doesn’t get it shut down.”

“Relax, Nicholas; Maria Hill is a capable woman and is aware of these things,” a new feminine voice informed him. Well, not so new; Queen Frigga had been alive for over five thousand years from what Thor had told him. “All will be well. I am asked to tell you that, and I quote, the Chairman’s protégé is being taken to safety by several of the Avengers while the remainder and the Chairman deal with the threat.”

Not that this information told him a hell of a lot. Only Nassar and now, he supposed, some of the Avengers knew who Nassar’s successor was. That rankled, but it was probably for the best. He’d die before he gave that vital a piece of information up, but an Avenger? They would not only not give it up, those bastards would survive doing it and make the one trying to get that Intel pay for the insult. “Great, that’s just…fine.” He tried to swing his legs off of the bed and failed miserably. “If you don’t mind, I need to get back to it.”

“What you need to do my friend, is recuperate. You would not survive another attempt on your life so close on the heels of the first. Lady Eir and her healers will have another go at healing your left eye and also teach you how to use it again. You will require physical therapy to regain your speed and flexibility once your chest and abdomen finish healing. Just because you are not currently in pain does not mean that you are well. Should Eir stop the practice that holds that pain from you, you would be screaming in agony. Rest and be calm. You may think on things that your people need to know and we will see that the information is delivered, but that is all you may do for the nonce.”

Frigga swept out of the room without a backward glance. “Goddamn,” he swore softly.

… …

Considering most of the world thought of this only as a rich man’s vacation resort, the island had adequate security, Loki allowed. Much of it was Stark Industries latest and greatest, confirming that their host was indeed on good terms with his brother-in-law, as Kara insisted he begin to refer to the relationship as she had decided to refer to Tony simply as her brother. He and Rogers had completed a sweep of the island, setting the perimeter security to its highest settings as they went. When they’d returned to the resort buildings, he’d advised Sir Richard of the magical
enhancements he’d made so that his trusted staff would not be inadvertently harmed by any of it. The bungalow set aside for their stay was luxurious, even by the standards to which he’d become accustomed with Stark’s over the top taste. A tray of fine cheeses, chocolates, small fruits, and a bottle of chilled champagne awaited them on a side table. “Are we secure enough here to drink it?” Kara asked in a teasing voice.

Turning to her with a smile he allowed himself to enjoy the picture she made in a scanty outfit. “Now that one was chosen by Natasha,” he decided.

She pirouetted so that he could see it from all angles. It was in what he’d been told was a ‘baby doll’ style though its sheer muted gold silk was fitted more closely than was traditional by a golden kirtle. It seemed vaguely Greek, or perhaps Roman. His lip curled slightly before he decided that regardless of the intent, he would consider it Roman. Just because.

“Oh obviously.” Her slight baby bulge was emphasized by the kirtle and in his considered opinion it made Kara look even lovelier than she was ordinarily. The fact that she appeared to be a fertility goddess with her pregnant belly and already swelling breasts might have had something to do with it; or perhaps it was because the child within her was his. “You look…amazing.”

“Eir sent a note along with your mother. She said we don’t need to take any special precautions yet so long as we don’t put excessive pressure on my abdomen. Normal conjugal activity as she put it won’t be an issue.”

Loki chuckled as he pulled her into his arms and nibbled on her graceful neck. “Since when have we ever been normal, my love?”

“Humph. In bed is where we’re the most normal that we are about anything.”

“Never, Kara. You’re always extraordinary.” He tightened his embrace as his eyes drifted shut. “I am the most fortunate man in all the Nine Realms to have your love.”

“Yes, you are.”

He laughed heartily this time. “What? You’re not even going to argue the point for form’s sake?”

Kara’s sunny smile warmed him, body and soul. “Oh, so I should be ungracious and refuse the compliment?”

“Refuse, no; demur modestly, yes.”

“Sorry, modesty has never been one of my qualities.”

“Hmm, true; you were born to be a goddess, love.” He let his hands drift under the sheer material to caress her equally silky skin. “We should enjoy ourselves before something or someone else interrupts us.” Glancing at the locked door he couldn’t resist a slight smirk. “Should Rogers come barreling through again I’ll turn him into the Capsicle Tony often calls him.”

“You will not; be tempted, yes, actually do it, no.”

“That,” he growled softly in her ear, “depends upon at what point he interrupts us.” She giggled as he slipped his hands under the elastic band in the thong-style panties to caress her mound. “Anticipating, love?” he asked as his fingers dipped into her folds to find them already quite damp.

“Always.” Sliding a finger into her slick canal he curled it in and pulled up firmly enough to draw her up on her toes. A guttural moan encouraged him to add a second finger and repeat the action.
“God, Loki, you always know how to make me want you so bad.”

“And here I thought it was good.” Her head tipped back as she gave him a censorious frown. “Ah, no teasing, yes, I know.” He continued to work her quim with two fingers and pressed his thumb hard against her clit. Kara’s pelvic muscles clenched and her fluids soaked his hand and her thong as she came. “So responsive, my love,” he praised. Pushing the now soaking crotch of her thong aside, he bent her forward to lean against the back of the loveseat that faced the bungalow’s bay window and looked out over the empty beach as he pressed his now throbbing erection deep inside with one smooth thrust.

Kara groaned as her sheath held him tightly, shivers running through her body as he brought them to the edge. Repositioning his hands, he held her hip firmly with one and gently cupped her belly with the other. It was far too early in her pregnancy to feel any movement from their child, but somehow holding Kara there made him feel more a part of her, particularly during lovemaking. That sense of completion intensified when she moved to lean on her forearm so that she could place her hand atop his. “Love you so much,” she gasped.

He reveled in her whimpers and moans and enjoyed the rasp of the hastily repositioned silk garment as it stroked his staff with every thrust and withdrawal. Somehow taking his lady always seemed to be an exotic experience no matter how often they enjoyed each other. Her sweet body was tensing beneath him and he picked up his pace so that he could bring her along over the edge and join her in sweet satisfaction. His fingers moved back to her swollen quim and danced across her clit until she cried out and clenched hard around him as a violent orgasm rushed through her sweet body. “That’s it, love. Come hard for me.”

“Loki!” Kara shrieked both hands on the loveseat’s edge now as she braced herself. He continued to pound her convulsing quim until his own finish came. “Yes! God that feels so good; I love to feel you come in me.” His sweet wife was sobbing now as his body finally stillled and he gathered her close. He helped her to turn in his embrace and smiled as she clung to him, her breathing still erratic. “Take me to bed?”

“Of course, my love.” She tucked her face into his neck as he lifted her bridal style and carried her to the bedroom. Thankfully he’d pulled the bedspread and top sheet down earlier so he was able to set her down on it without any awkward balancing. “I’ll wager you’d like to snuggle now, hmm?”

“You win. Again.”

“Always, darling wife.”

… …

“Iron Man, what have you got for me?” Steve’s expression on the satellite image from Necker Island was set in his no-nonsense military tightwad mien.

“Iron Man? Seriously Stevarino, do you see me wearing my damn suit?” Tony looked down at the black cords and the AC/DC tee shirt he was wearing as emphasis. “This is all off the grid, so keep the jargon and shit out of it, ‘kay?”

The uptight perennial soldier sighed. “Sorry, Tony. This Hydra thing has, uh…punched all my buttons as Dr. G would say.”

“Pushed, not punched. But yeah, I get it. Jarvis is running probabilities. Hill has opened up all of their files on Sitwell and Rumlow so that we can go back over all of their movements and contacts since they first signed up with S.H.I.E.L.D.; we’ll get a match somewhere that doesn’t otherwise
add up. Then we’ll expand it to find out who else doesn’t add up along with them.”

“I want to nail those bastards, Tony; they—they took everything from me. Not just my life, but my friends and—and Peggy. I mean, you know I love Beth, but…you never forget your first love and for me that first love was lost less than three years ago.”

“I know it, buddy.” If anyone had told him three years ago that he’d be calling Captain Perfect ‘buddy’, he’d have told them they were smoking some seriously weird shit. “Look, I’ll keep you posted. By the way; ask Beth if she knows anything about Tahiti.”

“The island?”

“Nope, don’t think so. It’s a S.H.I.E.L.D. thing, came up about three years ago after they unearthed something weirder than Asgard in the Arctic Tundra and then it popped up in the records immediately after Loki escaped the Helicarrier. Wait, wait a minute. Son of a bitch; there were runes and such around the place they excavated. They thought they were old Norse, but…Hey, J, increase magnification on that, would you? Thanks buddy. That’s what I thought. Ho boy.”

“That’s what?” Rogers prompted.

“Oh, sorry. These runes that the scientists found, they aren’t Norse, they’re Æsir. I’m going to send you a feed; I can recognize the things, but they didn’t give me translating capability for their written language. See if Loki can tell us anything when the lovebirds surface for air.”

“Do you seriously think that’s going to be anytime soon?”

“Yeah. The Diva’s pissed; I caught his rant to Heimdall on the Tower’s security feed. He’s not gonna let this go. I figure him and the missus will enjoy some quality time and then he’ll be looking for vengeance.”

“Come on, Tony; he’s been handling everything really well.”

“I know; there hasn’t been much more than a whiff of the crazy since the Battle of Central Park. But seriously, I know the guy. He’s personally insulted over his wedding being ruined - his word, not mine. I thought it made it memorable.”

“Like that Doom guy made yours?”

“Uh…okay, I get the point. Regardless, he’ll want to be in on tracking these bastards down and delivering his own personal brand of justice.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to Beth about Tahiti but I’m waiting for Loki to come to me; no way am I going near that bungalow for anything other than a real emergency.”

“Don’t blame you; discretion, valor, and all that stuff.” Tony clapped his hands together and peered at another screen Jarvis had popped up for him. “Okay, I’ve got more analysis to do and you’ve got security to, uh, secure. Let me know if anything comes up on your end before next check-in and I’ll do the same.”

“Will do. Rogers out.”

He frowned as the connection closed. “Well, no shit, Sherlock.”

… …
“Who?” Melinda May said into the comm.

“Olivia Ramos; Deputy Hill ordered me to bring you up to speed.”

Ramos, why did that…oh. “Joaquin’s daughter, the hacker.”

“The Agent, level seven,” the girl corrected. “Well, I was level six, but shit just got real as Mr. Stark puts it, so Deputy Hill had to up me since she knew I could be trusted.”

That neatly explained why Melinda hadn’t seen her on the approved list. Perhaps too neatly?

“What project am I specifically prohibited from discussing?”

“T.A.H.I.T.I., of course. Speaking of that, Hill wants to know if everything’s okay so far with, well, you know.”

“You’re not on a secure line, are you?” she asked dryly.

“It’s as secure as we can make it; unfortunately the fox has been guarding the henhouse so nothing is certain anymore. Director Fury was the victim of an assassination attempt. We’re still not sure if he’s going to make it. Sitwell and Rumlow were the shooters, so that means…”

Her eyes closed as she swallowed. “Rumlow’s entire S.T.R.I.K.E. team is in on it. Do we have motive?”

Silence was her only answer for several long minutes. “Hydra’s resurfaced and they’re part of it.”

Every curse word in every language she knew flew through her head. “What about my passengers on the bus?”

“There’s only three we’re positive are in the clear: the new recruit, the old man, and you. We’re pretty sure the geeks are okay, but not one hundred percent.”

That left…Ward, the most dangerous of the bunch aside from her, though she wouldn’t count the old man out in a fight with the bastard. “Understood. I’m going to have to bring the old man in on it; he needs to know. It might take time to get him alone and out of any kind of surveillance range. You’re sure about the recruit?”

“Positive; one of the few bits of Intel we’ve gotten out of them or the S.T.R.I.K.E. team is that there’s a collect or terminate order out on her. They think the recruit’s the only one alive with a shot at digging them out if the hold on her access is lifted. Sitwell saw her in a restricted area on base; that’s when the order got placed.”

“And you couldn’t do it?”

“I’m damn good, but the recruit is way above my league. I have a heck of a lot of trouble hacking Stark; she’d probably slide right into his systems.”

“Understood. I’ll let the old man know; we’re going to have to improve security here. Unless something big breaks, don’t contact me again; I’ll call you when I know anything.”

“Roger that, or contact Iron Man if I’m unavailable or in an emergency; he’s the go-to guy with his connections upstairs.”

Upstairs? “I don’t recognize that codeword.”

An aggravated snort made her blink. “It’s a euphemism, not a codeword. Think about it. Ramos
out.”

She clicked off the comm and double-checked to ensure the convo hadn’t been recorded in any way. Upstairs? What was ‘upstairs’ that could have anything to do with Tony Stark? She clicked on her tablet and did a search on Stark. Google’s top entry was a story about the LoKara wedding with its off-world guests being attacked. Upstairs…Asgard. Her mouth twisted as the silent multi-lingual curses began to fly again.

… …

Loki popped another grape into his mouth as Kara watched. His expression was pensive. “What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“This…Hydra,” he admitted. “Have they truly been about since Roger’s time?”

“Probably longer. No one who would know has ever really talked about it. They tend to be obsessively loyal, or maybe more afraid of what Hydra would do to them if they did say anything helpful when they’re captured. I’m just glad Odin had insisted that Thor come back and retrieve the weapon you brought back from your sojourn with Thanos. If S.H.I.E.L.D. still had it, I’m sure Hydra would have made grabbing it a priority.”

Loki visibly shuddered which made her wonder what the damn thing could do that she didn’t already know about. “Mother’s idea; she must have seen it falling into enemy hands if it remained here. Though she could not, of course, say such. She told Odin it must be at my trial as evidence.” He snatched a strawberry off of the tray and rolled over to her side of the bed and dipped it in her glass of champagne then held it to her lips. She cooperatively took a bite. “If she had not, it would still have had Thanos’ influence. The Battle of Central Park would likely have gone poorly if Hydra had stolen it.”

“Oh my God. Can you just imagine if they’d used that as a cover to take out Fury? Oh we’d be in such deep crap.”

“So poetic, darling.”

“Sorry; words fail me when I’m contemplating disasters of epic proportions.”

“Even so.” He finished off the remainder of the strawberry and tossed the leaves into the trashcan across the room. His aim, of course, was perfect. “I feel…uncomfortable lolling about here while an enemy is on the move.”

“If they need us, they’ll let us know. Tony isn’t that self-sacrificing.”

“No? He did fly that weapon through the portal to the Chitauri mother ship.”

True. “But there was no one else to call for help. Everyone had their hands full.”

“Ah, there is that.” He ran his palm over her hip and down her thigh. “I suppose there is nothing for it but to enjoy, then.”

She tried for an offended expression; judging by the lift of an eyebrow, she’d failed. “What a shame. Poor Loki; left with nothing to do but play with his wife.”

“Hmm. Did you bring your shower present from Darcy?”

… …
“Shit. And I thought I was paranoid.”

“With all due respect, sir; you are not a covert organization,” Jarvis told him.

“Too true. I still can’t believe the sheer volume of oversight they do on even their highest level operatives. How the hell did Bird Boy and the Spider live like this?”

“By totally ignoring its existence,” Natasha said from behind him.

He gave Jarvis’s video aperture a disappointed frown. “How did she get into my workshop, J?”

“If you recall, you gave all of the Avengers access during times of declared emergency and you did declare the situation an emergency at twenty-three: forty-five: seventeen last night.”

Shit. Yes he had. “Don’t confuse the issue with facts, J. You should still have warned me she was heading in here.”

“Of course sir,” his AI said in his usual wry tone. “Then you might also wish to be advised that Master Archer is crawling through your vents.”

“Is he headed this way?”

“He’s checking accessibility in case building security is compromised,” Natasha informed him.

“Um…”

“I know; but he’ll feel more comfortable if he’s checked it personally rather than asking Jarvis for a full report.”

“Okay.”

… …

Maria Hill avoided looking over her shoulder as she headed for the elevator. The man upstairs hadn’t been available last night, so they’d dozed in her quarters…her in her bed, him sprawled in her reading chair, until morning. She could hear the obnoxious fop who had been trailing her since breakfast, she didn’t have to look at him. “Alexander Pierce is not only essentially in charge of S.H.I.E.L.D., he’s this country’s Secretary of Defense. Um, a minister of war, I think might be more translatable.”

“Yes, the first title made little sense.”

“Fury trusted him; I say trusted, past tense, because we now trust virtually no one. Pierce has too much control in too many areas. I don’t like it.”

“Did you trust him, my…Deputy,” the less irritating than usual man substituted her title at the last second, a courtesy that relieved her immensely. Maybe working with him wouldn’t be a cluster-fuck of epic proportions after all.

She sighed and stopped to wait for him to reach her side. Fandral’s handsome features were strained. Good; at least he was taking it all seriously. “No. I tried to; I tried to trust him and the World Security Council…our Council of Regents, they sometimes call themselves. But their reactions when I gave the testimony Nick insisted on after the Invasion of New York…” she shook her head and grimaced. “They were all so pleased to see me figuratively throwing him under the bus. You can’t trust someone who has no loyalty to the people who have done their jobs and done
them well under extreme circumstances for decades.”

“I understand. So, I shall consider this man as a potential hostile.”

“Consider everyone as a potential hostile. Even I could be part of Hydra.”

“Surely not?”

That earned a smile from her. “No. If I had been I’d have either been helping Sitwell and Rumlow or I’d have arranged for them to die in custody for their failure. But seriously, Fandral. Right now I trust Olivia Ramos, I trust the Avengers, I trust you and your people, and I trust a few others you haven’t yet met. When they do come in, I’ll let you know who they are. There aren’t many.”

“Not the X-Men?”

Another sigh escaped despite her best intentions. “More than I trust S.H.I.E.L.D. as a whole; but at the moment, that’s not saying much.”

She tried not to flinch as he grasped her shoulder. “I am sorry, Maria. No warrior should have to so greatly distrust their comrades. You risk enough on a regular basis without that.”

Of all the…he actually understood. “Thank you.”

Fandral’s smile was tinged with sadness around the edges as he pointed to the elevator. “Shall we?”

… …

“Isn’t she adorable, Steve?” Beth asked as he checked the still quiet security monitors.

He glanced over his shoulder to where his best girl sat holding the infant in her arms. The morning sun’s rays lit them up, giving them an ethereal look. His breath caught at the beautiful picture they made and he wondered if Beth wanted kids. It wasn’t something they’d talked about yet, maybe when things settled down. “I guess she takes after Natasha.”

Beth chuckled as the baby grabbed her finger in one tiny fist. “The shape of her eyes is like Clint’s, but yeah, little Bree favors her mom big time, don’t you, button?”

“Button?” He just didn’t get the nicknames people used for kids. Never had. That was something that hadn’t changed from his earlier life.

“As in as cute as a button.”

“Oh.”

“Whoa, that’s quite a grip.” Beth tugged her finger free and stared at it. “Strong for a baby, but I guess that’s Nat’s, uh, whatever she’s got going on that nobody seems willing to share with me even though I’m supposed to be the team’s physician.”

“It’s something similar to the serum they used on me; just not quite as successful, from what I understand. Lots of people were trying to recreate it after Dr. Erskine was killed in the Hydra attack. That’s how Dr. Banner got stuck with the Hulk. He was trying a version of it, too.”

“Wow. Does Raj know all of this?” Steve nodded at her question. “Hmm, nice of him to share. Seriously, if I’m supposed to know what he does, he needs to share more. Idiot probably thinks he has plenty of time. That didn’t do his predecessor any good. She died pretty young.”
“There’ve been women Chairmen before?”

“Yep. More than men since the second World War, actually. Oh, you didn’t know. My Great-Aunt Margaret was the first female Chairman. S.H.I.E.L.D. was pretty much her baby.”

“Huh. I thought Peggy Carter and Howard Stark were the ones who…” he trailed off as he noticed the odd look on her face. “What?”

“It’s just been years since anyone but close family has called her Peggy. She went by Margaret since before I was born. Said something about being called Peggy hurt too much.” Beth shrugged. “She never explained why.”

“Peggy Carter was your Great-Aunt?” he managed in a strangled tone.

“Yep.” He bit his bottom lip at her casual confirmation. “Steve? What’s wrong?”

He looked at her; really looked at her. Make the blonde hair a rich dark brown and wow; she even looked a bit like Peggy. And she was frowning at him; her lips were moving, but he couldn’t really focus on what she was saying. “I-I’m sorry. I’ve got to take a walk,” he told her as he all but ran from the room.

Fandral checked the angle of his stowed sword as the elevator reached the top floor and loosed the strap that would allow it to be drawn more quickly. While he doubted it would be necessary, preparedness was a warrior’s best friend. The doors swished open and Maria Hill stepped out before him, one hand lightly on her holstered weapon. “Mr. Secretary,” she greeted, confusing him a bit until he remembered the man’s official title.

“Deputy.” Alexander Pierce proved to be an elderly human, easily at the end of his seventh decade if he’d learned to judge such things aright. His hair was a sandy blonde gone silver and creases delineated his cheeks and jowls; he seemed fit and active for his advanced age. “I don’t recognize this agent,” he said dryly.

“This is Lord Fandral of Asgard. The All-Father insisted on providing me with a bodyguard after the attack on Director Fury. He trusts me and does not wish to deal with humans he doesn’t know.”

It was a good explanation and said nothing of their distrust for this man, Fandral decided. He gave the official a slight bow. “Tis unfortunate we meet under such circumstances, good sir,” he said jovially.

“Why you? Why not Thor?”

Fandral straightened, giving the human a hard look. “I am no random courtier, sir. I am the leader of the Warriors Three, boon companions of Prince Thor. We and Lady Sif are his honor guard and accompany him on most campaigns. Unfortunately my prince’s presence was required in Asgard to secure the off-world prisoners we captured at Prince Loki’s wedding, else he would be here himself.”

“You captured? The way I heard it, the X-Men and some freelancer captured them.”

“It was a group effort, I assure you.” He had to fight to keep his tone pleasant by this point. The human’s disdainful observations were hitting far too close to home.

The human shrugged and walked over to a wall that was covered with electronic devices; monitors
of various sorts showed information and pictures. “The President has demanded we hold up on launching Project Insight,” he told Maria. “I believe it is exactly what we need to root out our traitors.”

Fandral thought it telling that the man did not name the traitors. By not saying ‘Hydra’, he absolved himself neatly of any accusation of lies or detection of lies by conventional means. A quick glance proved that Maria noticed this as well. Her firm jaw had tightened, imperceptibly to anyone who had not spent as much time admiring it as he had. “I have to agree with the President,” she replied. “And so did Director Fury. Before he was taken for treatment he shared that with me.”

Fury had done no such thing, Queen Frigga had; but Alexander Pierce, Minister of War and possible member of this Hydra organization did not need to know that. “He was quite adamant about it,” he said aloud. “With traitors so highly placed amongst your agents, it would be a disaster of the highest order.”

“I neither asked for nor need your opinion, Lord Fandral,” the human grated. “It doesn’t matter at the moment. I need to convince the President that we should go forward. I’ll expect your support on that, Deputy.”

“I respectfully decline that support, Mr. Secretary. I do not believe it to be in either S.H.I.E.L.D.’s or the world’s best interest. I also believe that the council would agree with my decision.”

The human gave his Maria a baleful look. “We shall see about that Deputy. I’ve called them in; they’ll be here to meet in person in three days.”

… …

Peggy’s grandniece. Why hadn’t he seen it before? Maybe he hadn’t wanted to? Steve shook his head as he stared out at the blue waters of the Caribbean. Though some of the lightness could be from the morning sun sparkling off of the waves, he could still see the difference between this warm clear ocean’s hue and that of the cold Atlantic that he was used to seeing. “Peggy’s grandniece. Isn’t that just swell.” He hadn’t gone to see Peggy yet; he’d been told that she really didn’t recognize anyone anymore. It wasn’t senility, not like he understood it; it wasn’t even the Alzheimer’s Disease that was talked about so much these days. She was just old and tired and didn’t seem to notice what was going on around her. He wasn’t sure if staying away was just selfish or kinder to both of them. Maybe he’d ask Kara, she was a head doctor, she might know.

“Captain Rogers,” Jarvis’s even tones greeted over his earpiece. “Please return to the security building. Mr. Stark has news and video you need to see.”

“Okay, thanks. Do Loki and Kara need to see it too?”

“Unfortunately they do, sir. I have already taken the liberty of informing them.”

“Huh. Better you than me. I’ve had enough of Loki’s attitude. If I give him any more bad news he’s likely to do something more than glare at me.”

“It is his honeymoon, Captain. I believe his highness has the right to feel testy.”

Testy. Yep, that was a word he hadn’t heard since he woke up. “Right you are. I wouldn’t appreciate it either, I guess. Thanks, Jarvis. I needed the reminder.”

… …
Yes, another Bowie reference in the Chapter Title. What can I say? I’m obsessed.

For those keeping track of time, the wedding occurs shortly before Lorelei meets the Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., and yes, SPOILER ALERT; that does mean that she will be escaping Asgard. Again. Sitwell and Rumlow jumped the gun with their shooting of Fury; the Winter Soldier wouldn’t have been sent after him for a good three or more months yet in Movieverse time. I don’t think I’m including him in my story…but the way my muses work, I never know. I do not intend to do so at this time. TTFN!
Loki and Kara were waiting when he made it back to the security office. Steve had to hide a grin at Loki’s distinctly grumpy expression. He expected that Kara would have been just as grumpy if she weren’t cuddling her goddaughter. “Sorry for keeping you waiting; I was halfway around the island on a sweep.”

“Partial lie,” the god muttered. While Steve still didn’t like the use of that word as a title, he’d finally come to terms with the fact that they weren’t trying to supplant his God by using it and didn’t mean to belittle his beliefs. It still kind of bugged him, though. “No matter; you did not call this meeting in the midst of our honeymoon.” The emerald eyes shot a baleful look toward the screen that showed Stark sitting on a table in his workshop fiddling with some kind of tool.

“If I hadn’t called you in on it, you’d be pissed that I was excluding you.” For once the billionaire’s tone was matter-of-fact with not a trace of his usual sarcasm. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. The timing of this crap sucks. At least you’re surviving your honeymoon without any damage.”

Loki huffed “Your damage was reversed and you ended up far better off.”

“I’ll give you that, but it was a sucky way to spend a honeymoon.”

“Granted,” was the grudging response. “What did you need so badly to tell us?”

“The Avengers Initiative is nowhere near the top so far as security levels are concerned.”

Steve found himself chuckling. “That surprised you?” he asked.

“No, but something else sure did. My brother-in-law has one less body to the body count and if I understand his sentence correctly, a total of one hundred and nine years to serve instead of the original one hundred and ten.”

“I know how many I coerced or killed.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know how many S.H.I.E.L.D. managed to resurrect.”

Steve sighed. “Tony, you’re talking a Biblical miracle here, the kind that has only been accomplished twice in our history and both involved the same man, the Son of God.”

“More evidence that he was as much an alien as Loki here,” Tony argued. Steve shook his head and raised a hand to make a point but was interrupted before he could open his mouth. “Think about it, Cap. Back when they were looking for you in the ice, they found someone…something else; the remains of an alien body, frozen solid, but torn in half. They never did find the bottom half but the top? S.H.I.E.L.D. put it on cryogenic life support at a secret lab and started studying it. They’ve been making serums from it and one of those serums, something they called GH-325, can totally regenerate damaged human tissue…even after the human is dead.”

“Impossible.”

“No,” Loki said quietly. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Steve, than are dreamt of in your philosophy; or in your science or religion for that matter.” His brows lifted as they all turned
to stare at him. “The Bard of Avon was a wiser man than even he knew.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, “and trust me; his ego was great enough as it was.”

“You knew Shakespeare?” Steve had to asked and then shook his head. “Never mind; that’s not important right now. Stark, who is alive that isn’t supposed to be and why is it so important.”

“Good question. I’ve got a more important question for our resident shrink, though. Kara, do you believe in souls and if so, how long after a body is dead does the soul hang around?”

… …

She handed Bree back to Beth and sat down hard on a chair in front of one of the monitors. “That’s two questions,” she said faintly, trying to gain some time to think.

“What’s the answer?”

“We don’t have any answers, Tony; all we have are theories. The most widely held theory is that if the deceased is ready to die and doesn’t have any kind of imperative holding them here, the soul leaves this plane in very short order, minutes or hours at best. However, if the deceased is heavily invested in something going on here, the soul may hang around indefinitely.”

“So, assuming the soul was still hanging out, if the body was healed and revived say, I don’t know, three days to a week later, could the soul reenter it, or would we have a body wandering around with no soul?”

“I think it would have had to reenter if the body is up and functioning. From my studies a body without a soul can’t revive. Well, the heart can beat and the lungs breathe, but brain activity remains minimal, just enough to power the involuntary nervous system. No higher brain activity and no accessing or use of memories seems to be possible.”

Her husband gave her a horrified yet fascinated look. “Kara, are you telling us that you went around studying soulless bodies?”

“No, I’m telling you I went around to where they had people on life support and told them whether I could feel a soul attached to the body. Well, I called it emotional or active life energy; I didn’t want to get into a religious debate with anyone. It was information families could use to help them decide whether to continue life support for a loved one who was unresponsive or to just let them go.” She shivered and Loki moved closer so that she could wrap her arms around him and lean on him. “It was pretty horrible. More so when there was a soul present and the doctors would tell me there was no way the body could heal enough for them to ever wake up.”

“Stark,” Steve said in his stern voice, the one that made Tony snicker and Loki smirk. Okay, so it made her chuckle a bit too. “Answer my question; who isn’t dead that’s supposed to be?”

“Your ultimate fanboy, Phil Coulson.”

… …

Melinda stared at the tall agent as he leaned over Skye’s shoulder, reaching down to correct her grip on a weapon. She hadn’t had a chance to get Coulson aside for a private convo yet, and it didn’t look like that opportunity was coming any time soon. Agent Ramos hadn’t mentioned John Garrett or his partner in her warning; what were the odds as to whether they could be trusted? Garrett was Ward’s S.O. when Ward first joined the Division, so they weren’t every good. The bickering voices of Fitz-Simmons floated down the hallway from their lab. She rolled her eyes and wished the two would just get a room and get it over with. That thought made her wince over her
rendezvous with Ward, though she kept all evidence of it internal. “Don’t trust him with her?” Coulson’s even voice asked from behind her. She ruthlessly suppressed a flinch and forced herself to turn slowly.

“We need to talk.”

“Fine, let’s go for a drive.” He turned and led the way to where Lola was secured in the Bus’s Back Bay. She buckled her belt and waited until they were a good mile away from the Bus and had exited the vehicle and swept it and themselves for listening devices. “You’re not complaining,” he noted.

“No. It’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you.”

He nodded. “Who or do we know?”

“We know what and that would be Hydra. What we don’t know is who is a part of it, at least not with any degree of certainty. Hill suggests that you and I are clean, Fitz-Simmons likely so, and Skye as well.”

“Did she know we’ve been in contact with Garrett and Triplett?”

“Yes.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, the clearest sign of discomfort he was ever going to see from her. “You’ve been watching, you know I’m reporting to someone.”

“Hill?”

“It was Fury, but Hydra made a move at the LoKara wedding; Fury may not survive; he’s in Asgard’s hands now, literally.”

Coulson’s eyes clouded; that was understandable. Fury had recruited him back in the day. “Who did it?”

“Rumlow and Sitwell.”

“Damn; they’ve compromised S.T.R.I.K.E. teams then.” He looked off into the distance in the general direction of the Guest House they’d inadvertently destroyed. “At least they won’t have access to the serum.”

“Nor do we.”

“Nor should we; it’s a dangerous substance. I’ve been lucky. Hopefully Skye will be as well.” He turned back to face her. “If either of us stops being that lucky, you’ll need to take us out.”

“I’m prepared for that eventuality.”

His mouth quirked into a rare smile. “I know it.”

… …

Grant looked over to where John was stretched out beside Trip, the partners reviewing files on a tablet that had a Stark Industries logo on its back. John looked up and lifted an eyebrow. Grant blinked twice to acknowledge the order. “Got it now?” he asked Skye, letting go of her slender hands.

“Yeah, sure. What’s my target?” He pushed the muzzle of the weapon to point down at the ground as she turned to face him.
“Never point a weapon at anyone you…”

“…don’t intend to shoot. Right. I remember; it’s just that my hands didn’t.”

He didn’t sigh; he wouldn’t sigh. “And that’s the point of all the practice time. Your hands must remember. Muscle memory will save your life when all else fails.”

“Wait, there’s a point other than you being a sadistic S.O….” she trailed off with a smirk and he knew she was implying that she should be adding a letter ‘B’ to the end of that.

“Funny. Seriously, Skye; you almost died once. I refuse to see that happen again on my watch. Now pay attention. You’re being attacked; you’ll recognize your attacker by a yellow emblem on his chest and there’s no way to avoid the attack other than by taking him out.” He stepped back to give her room. “Go!” He watched as she dropped down to make herself a smaller target. “Good.” She scuttled sideways to duck behind the trunk of a fallen tree after checking there was nothing yellow behind her. “Better.” Popping up her head at different points from behind her shelter she located the yellow flag and squeezed off a shot that went about two yards wide.

“Damn it!”

This time he did sigh. “You didn’t target…”

“I did target, but then something bit me!”

Grant walked over to the fallen tree and looked at the area around her crouched form. She’d taken cover on an anthill. John Garrett was laughing uproariously. Trip was shaking his head and hiding a grin behind the tablet. “What happened to being aware of your surroundings?” he managed to ask mildly.

“It’s just ants; I didn’t think they’d be a big distraction.”

“They’re fire ants. Their bite is painful, particularly since you’re rarely bitten by just one when you disturb a nest, and some people are sensitive to their venom, it can be deadly in quantity for those with allergies to it.” She opened her mouth, whether to complain or protest, he didn’t care which one. “It doesn’t matter. If your first shot is no good, take a second or a third, however many it takes to bring your target down. Your life depends on it; got it?”

She glared up at him and then turned to put the remainder of her clip directly into the target, obliterating the small piece of cloth. “Got it,” she muttered and then started rubbing her left leg. “Geez, that itches.”

“Get lover boy to piss on it for you,” John called out, still snickering. He was tempted to empty his own clip and wipe the bastard’s gleeful expression, and maybe his whole face, off of his head. Loyalty only took you so far.

Skye was giving him an aghast look. “Never mind that,” he told her. “We have diphenhydramine in the first aid kit.”

… …

That annoying nondescript agent lived thanks to a serum made from the remains of an unknown alien species; interesting. At the time, he hadn’t particularly been trying to kill the man, if he had, nothing could have brought him back. He’d served his purpose, the attack on him uniting the disparate group that had found their inner hero to defeat his army. Unfortunately the agent’s survival made for one more potential enemy at his back. While the Avengers had forgiven him and
many of the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. now accepted him, a man he had personally and quite literally stabbed in the back could not be expected to do either. The far too insightful nondescript agent, he remembered; the one who had somehow known that he ‘lacked conviction’. If only the man had understood why, his near death could have been avoided. “What’s wrong?” Kara asked him. She doubtless felt the unease running through him and was sensitive enough to know it wasn’t related to the unknown alien.

“Another with cause to hate me,” he told her softly.

“It’ll be fine. I’m more worried about this alien serum thing; not to mention pissed. If they had something that could regenerate human tissue that thoroughly, it means that S.H.I.E.L.D. was purposely going to sit back and watch me die while they potentially had a cure even though it was their fault that my nervous system was breaking down.”

His eyes narrowed. “That hadn’t occurred to me. Should he live, Nicholas Fury owes us answers.”

Stark had heard the whispered exchange; he likely had Jarvis amplifying the conversation. “Nicky owes us a hell of a lot more than that,” he said as he hopped off of the work table. “He’s going to be kissing our asses for years to come to make up for it, the bastard, or to steal his favorite term, motherfucker.” Loki smirked as his brother-in-law squared his shoulders and stared out at them from the monitor. “Regardless, according to Olivia, neither Coulson nor Agent May, his team’s second in command, are compromised. No such guarantee on the rest of his people. Should either of them contact us we’re to give them all cooperation. Anyone else, if we can’t clear it with Hill or with Coulson or May, we’re to consider the person a hostile. I’m sending you the files on their team; be sure to take a look at the video so that you can recognize all of them.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Rogers said into the silence that followed. “Anything else we need to be aware of?”

“Not at the moment. Getting this to you was a priority as Coulson’s team is extremely mobile. They have a refitted Boeing C-17 Globemaster III military transport aircraft that they refer to as The Bus. According to the specs, it has additional engines, vertical takeoff, landing, and hover capabilities and a range almost as awesome as my private jet, so they could get more than halfway around the world without refueling.” Tony stared at the floor for a minute. “The kid was really worried about one of the team members, a Specialist named Grant Ward. He’s about your height and build, Lokes, but has the Boy Scout’s look going…brown hair, though.”

Steve sighed. “I wasn’t a Boy Scout.”

“It does not matter,” Loki told the captain. “I’ve no clue what one is…and am not interested in remedying that lack,” he added hastily as Tony looked ready to explain. “Is Specialist a euphemism?”

“Pretty much,” his brother-in-law agreed. “Romanov and Barton were Specialists; basically one person S.T.R.I.K.E. teams.”

“Assassins.” The word was bitter on his tongue. He’d dealt with assassins in Asgard. Not something to be placed at the All-Father’s door; he wouldn’t have blamed that on Odin even when he’d blamed him for everything else. It simply was not the All-Father’s style, but Tolthe had sent a good half dozen after him in retaliation for the prank he’d played on the Álfar centuries ago. The consort had halted his vendetta only after the bodies of the last five had turned up in Álfheim after suffering creatively gruesome deaths.

Tony had the grace to look uncomfortable. “Yeah, but they’re a lot more than that. They retrieve
Intel and items of interest more often than they take out living targets. The object is for them to get in and get out with the least amount of fuss and without being noticed if at all possible. Regardless; the guy’s dangerous. The only advantage you’ve got, well, besides the whole gods and super soldier thing, is that Agent May is even more dangerous than he is and she’s aware he might be Hydra.”

“Wait; Melinda May?” Kara asked. Bethany was frowning and nodding as though she’d also made a connection.

“Uh, yeah. You know her?”

“I treated her; she has issues, severe PTSD - and that’s common knowledge within the Division, I’m not breaking doctor/patient confidentiality. Agent May mounted a solo rescue mission against orders and succeeded. She pulled out more than half of the captured Agents and killed dozens of enemy personnel singlehanded.”

“They call her the Cavalry,” Bethany added. Loki frowned, another reference that made no sense.

Kara smiled and nudged him. “In old movies called Westerns, the mounted army troops were called the cavalry. When the good guys needed rescuing, traditionally it was the cavalry that rode in to save the day.”

“Ah, I see.”

“She’d taken a desk job even though I’d cleared her to return to regular duty; I didn’t understand why.”

“Fury was holding her in reserve for Coulson’s team?” Bethany guessed.

“Could be; obviously Raj has told you more than anyone ever told me.”

“I knew Coulson was alive; I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, it required a level seven clearance and you guys are only at level six.”

“What level are you?” Tony asked. The genius looked miffed; his ego was likely not pleased at being classified lower than Coulson’s survival.

“Higher than seven,” she deadpanned. “But I was given the impression that he was just badly injured and that they’d lied about him dying. Raj didn’t tell me about this GH-325. If he knew about the serum, I’m going to be as pissed as you guys and for the same reason. Loki, if you don’t mind, I’d like you or Kara to be there when I ask him about it; I want to know the truth; we all deserve it.”

“It will be our pleasure.”

“Give Nassar that sharky smile and he’ll tell you anything,” Tony said with a wry grin. “You’ve still got it, bud.”

His eyebrows rose involuntarily. “What in the Nine ever made you consider that I’d lost it?”

“All the lovey stuff with Kara.”

He huffed in annoyance. “Have you lost your snark because of Pepper?” The idiot’s jaw dropped. “Just so.” Silence fell. “If there’s naught else, this meeting is over; we’ll take a look at your video and then we have a honeymoon to return to.”
“We need to get Natasha Romanov here,” Maria told him as they left the building. “Pierce is up to something with the WSC, I feel it in my bones. He wants Project Insight to go forward too badly to leave it to their discretion.”

“Are you a seer, Deputy?” Fandral asked, careful to use her title. He was doing his best to give her naught to worry about concerning him. The slight twitch of her lovely lips told him she appreciated his effort. “The seers in Asgard feel things they say are bone deep before they have an actual vision.”

“No; this is something we call intuition. Many people have it; women are more usually credited with it, but many men have it as well. It’s basically just a gut feeling as to whether something is about to go very badly or very well.”

“I see; like a warrior’s instinct whether to attack or dodge an incoming attack without a physical cue. Ah, what is this WSC?”

“World Security Council; the Council of Regents, remember?”

He nodded. Odin’s council had been called many different things over the years. When he’d been a boy it had been known as the Council of Elders. Now that many of the councilors were truly of an age to be seen as elderly no one dared refer to them as such. “My apologies; your use of letters to represent words doesn’t translate in the all-speak and the different names for the same group causes further confusion. The form of address is a matter of diplomacy, I gather?”

Maria stopped and gave him a considering look. “You’re deeper than I thought,” she muttered as she turned away. He hoped that was a good thing. “We’ll have to find a public or throwaway phone to contact Romanov; he has my phone tagged and I’m likely under surveillance. I want to have her stand in for one of the WSC councilors; we have technology that will change her appearance.”

Continuing to follow her slim form Fandral pondered their options as he looked about. They were moving into a building that seemed to be full of small shops. “Will your Minister of War not have technology of his own able to penetrate your technology?” he asked. Her disgruntled expression told him it was possible. “We should contact Loki instead; he can place a glamour on Lady Natasha. None of your technology will penetrate it.” He grinned. “Neither our technology nor the sorceries of others can reveal the truth behind his disguises. It is yet another reason he is our god of Lies.”

“That’s better yet; the fewer people we need to trust at this point the safer we are. Let’s find a phone and call Natasha.”

“One more interruption and I shall give into the temptation to wreak havoc on them all,” Loki grumped as they returned to their bungalow.

“Loki, it’s o…” Kara trailed off as he spun to face her with a glare. “So it’s not okay; but we can deal with it, please?”

The heat drained from his expression and he wrapped her in his embrace. “I hate not being able to give you the life you deserve,” he said, quietly this time.

“You’re giving me the life I want: a life with you. That’s all that’s important to me.”
He touched her barely rounded tummy gently. “Hmm; is our child not important?”

A quick glance showed that he couldn’t even keep the teasing note she felt out of his expression. “You know that’s important too. But I wouldn’t have a baby if it weren’t for you. Now can we get back to our celebrating before we get interrupted again?”

“Absolutely.” He lifted her as though the almost four hundred pounds her near Æsir-density body now weighed meant nothing and tossed her onto the bed. She’d barely caught her breath when he landed above her, his knees straddling her hips and his elbows and forearms resting on each side of her upper arms while his long fingered hands pressed her shoulders down into the comfy mattress. “You have gotten off far too easily, darling. A newlywed bride should be on her back with her lovely legs spread for the duration of her wedding night. You were given the opportunity to sleep.”

“What? We’re ignoring all of the other positions you’ve introduced me to?” she teased in return.

“Oh, far from it.” In the blink of an eye he was off the bed and scooping up a notepad and pen from the writing desk by the near wall and was scribbling furiously. “Let us see; the position you called ‘missionary’, check. Bent over a piece of furniture also gets a check.” She leaned forward to read the paper and saw that he was actually making a list and checking items off with a sweeping flourish. “Ah; here’s one we haven’t gotten to.” The pad was tossed on a nightstand and her clothing disappeared from her body. Grabbing her hips he lifted her up and deposited her on her knees. Loki’s clothing was gone by the time he’d knelt behind her and pushed her legs apart with one of his. She waited for the expected sensation of either his cock or his fingers pressing into her sex, but it didn’t come. Instead she felt the tip of one finger, slick with what she assumed was some kind of lube, pressing into her anus.

“Um, Loki? I don’t think…”

“Don’t think my darling wife. I haven’t had you this way; since we’ve just been married on this world, I think it appropriate that I take you in a way I have not.” She wasn’t an anal virgin; the bastards who had stolen her literal virginity when she was not quite thirteen had taken that from her as well, but unlike her vagina, she hadn’t even tried to play with herself in that area. It had never been appealing even in the abstract. As Loki’s forefinger pressed deeply inside Kara realized she would need to reconsider that opinion. Her husband’s fingers were as long and lean as the rest of him, and she felt just a slight stretching at the entrance; there was nothing of the pain she’d read about or remembered, it even felt kind of good. The slick digit pulled out and she frowned slightly then gasped as two fingertips breached the tight orifice. Slowly, ever so slowly he pressed them in and this time a slight burn accompanied the invasion. “It’s all right, darling,” his velvety voice soothed. “Relax for me.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He chuckled and began rubbing the small of her back gently with his free hand. A slight whimper escaped her as the thicker base of the digits passed the sphincter ring. “You’re fine, love. It will ease in a moment.” Kara shuddered as he pulled his fingers apart, stretching her opening slightly and increasing the discomfort.

“You’re not going to fit,” she insisted as he pulled the two fingers back and added an outright painful third after dripping what felt like lube inside. Okay, so it wasn’t very painful, but it still classified.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Kara; but I will indeed fit.” She heard herself whimpering again as he spread the three fingers apart to stretch her even further.
“I don’t like this.”

“This hasn’t really started yet. I liked your Buffy the Vampire Slayer show, did I not?”

“You love it, but what does that have to do with anything?”

Loki sighed and she felt his fingers pull out of her and the crown of his cock pressing against the stretched opening. “I insisted it was ridiculous and that I would hate it.”

True; but that had nothing to do with…”Owww!” she yelped as he pressed all the way in. He held himself still, allowing her to adjust to the intrusion.

“Come now; it didn’t hurt that badly.”

He was right, but she wasn’t going to admit it. “I don’t see you on your knees having something the size of my forearm buried in your backside.”

“That toy Darcy gave you is nearly that size; perhaps I’ll allow you to return the favor.” She stared back over her shoulder at him; shocked that he’d suggest such a thing as him being that far from in control. Loki grinned at her expression. “The key word there is allow, my love. It would happen only if I desired it.” Good point; even the most zealously controlled kind of people would be able to rationalize it that way. “What I desire right now, however…” he trailed off and she felt the aforementioned toy being pressed into her vaginal canal.

“Oh my god.”

“Mmmm, I do love you calling out to me in such a reverent tone.” She ignored the comment, too transfixed at the sensation of being full to the point of bursting to tease him about his obsession over being titled a god. “Do you like that, darling?” Loki asked in a smug voice.

She wasn’t sure how much she liked having his cock in her backside yet, let alone having both orifices stuffed full. “Too much,” she finally managed to gasp. The toy was eased out immediately. “Going too fast for me; sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Kara; you’re so very sensual that I forget you have relatively little experience other than what we’ve enjoyed together. Is this all right?” he asked, caressing her backside.

He’d withdrawn and thrust in shallowly as he spoke; while the sensation was strange and there was still a slight burning at the entrance, it was…interesting. “Um, yes.”

… …

“Good; tell me if it begins to be painful.” Kara nodded and Loki withdrew and thrust in tentatively a few more times until the tension left her back muscles. He really should have taken more time preparing her for this, but once the notion had struck, he hadn’t been able to resist. Settling into a gentle rhythm, he forced himself to remain patient while she adjusted to the new sensations. A grin emerged as a slight hitch in her breath told him that the activity was beginning to arouse her.

“Better, love?”

“Yesssss.”

“Ready for more?” He knew she was, but he wanted her to not just admit it, but ask for it. He thrust in deeper this time, angling to strike sensitive nerves from behind.

“Oh my god, Loki!” she moaned. “Do that again.”
He smirked and obliged, chuckling softly as she groaned and wriggled back against him. “See? You do like it,” he told her as he continued taking her sweet backside at the angle guaranteed to turn her into a shuddering orgasmic mess in short order.

“Nobody likes a smart-aleck,” she muttered and then shrieked as he began pounding more forcefully. “Hurts some.”

“Enough that I should stop?”

“Noooooo.”

This time he laughed outright. “You may not like a smart-aleck, darling,” he told her. “But you love this.”

… …

“What are you doing here?” he asked the shadowy figure in his darkened study. Alexander Pierce did not fear his tools; he used them. At least that’s what he insisted to himself as he casually strolled into the room and placed the file he was carrying on his desk.

“I came here to handle a problem, but the problem is missing,” his visitor’s husky voice replied. The man would never have a normal voice again; vocal chords didn’t tend to recover from long bouts of constant screaming. “I don’t know what to do.”

He ruthlessly focused on the operative, ignoring what he knew the man had gone through to achieve his current state of...perfection. “Yes; your target was stolen from you,” he said gently. “The men responsible will be punished for that. I’ll need you to lie low and await new orders. We’re confident the problem will return in fairly short order.”

“It will be more difficult; he’ll be far more aware of the danger he is in.”

“I have confidence in your ability to handle it. You’ll bring us that much closer to our goals.” He kept his voice encouraging. The operative had been out of cryogenic suspension for too long this time and wasn’t stable enough to push.

“I can handle it; but there will likely be more collateral damage than originally estimated.”

The operative was staring at the floor, his demeanor uncomfortable. Crouching down so that he could meet the soldier’s eyes, Alexander smiled reassuringly. “The more chaos you create, the more the people will demand we...protect them. No need to worry about it, is there?”

There was a slight hesitation before the man blinked. “No, sir.”

He stood and walked into the kitchen. “How about I get you a glass of milk?” A nod was the only answer. Good enough. If only Hill and her pet Asgardian were so easy to handle. Oh, now that could be interesting. “Forget about laying low; I have a new assignment for you while you’re waiting for our original problem to return.”

… …

Kara was actually pouting at him. “What is your problem? You had a lovely orgasm.”

“My problem is that you were right and now you’re going to be insufferable about it. I can feel the smugness just oozing out of you,” she grumped.
Loki had to laugh at that. “Surely I’m allowed a touch of smugness for knowing what you’ll like? That’s only fair, after all.”

“Humph. That’s a truckload more than a touch.” He ignored her protests and pulled her into his lap and cuddled her against his chest. She settled in quickly enough, proving that her annoyance was mostly at herself. “It’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair, my love?”

“You’re always right about sex.”

That set him off laughing again and she glared at him as she was jostled from her comfortable position. “Ah, Kara; I’ve had a thousand years of experience with sexual relations and a very intense relationship and connection with you. It would be quite strange were I not right.”

The pout eased with a soft sigh. “I suppose so.” She rubbed her soft cheek against his collarbone. “I’m kind of achy though. Please tell me that won’t happen every time?”

He debated lying, briefly, even though it would do him no good. “Not to this degree. If it ever stopped being a tad uncomfortable at the start you’d have other issues. But I promise it will not make you anywhere near as sore in the future.” Loki grinned as she sighed once again. “On the other hand, you’ll have a far more impressive orgasm next time as you won’t be so ill at ease with it.”

“Good.” His darling wife snuggled in more closely. “Let’s take a nap before lunch, okay?”

“As you wish.”

… …

Nick glanced up as a dark haired figure entered his small room. He hadn’t though that Hel frequented the halls of Asgard. At least he assumed it was Hel; the healers had his head locked into place as medicines worked through his bad eye and he couldn’t turn enough to bring the figure into full focus with his good eye. Asgard had a lot of blondes and redheads, even a few varying shades of brown hair; but inky black was rare and Hel was the only one he knew with it that wasn’t back on Earth. The woman moved a bit further into the room and he could now confirm it was a woman and make out the dusky shade of her skin. It was definitely the Queen of Niflheim. “Your Majesty,” he managed without putting any of his usual belligerence into it. “What brings you here?”

Hel stepped around the bed he was confined to so that he could see her clearly. “I merely check on your recovery, Nicholas Fury.”

“Uh huh.” He was no god of lies, but he knew a whopper when he heard one. “You wanna try that again?”

A slight smile curved her lips. “It is the truth, so far as it goes; I did warn you there would be much I could not reveal in full when we spoke.”

She had, but why did he get the feeling that wasn’t the case here? “I don’t think so, but I’ll put it down to a woman’s privilege and let it go. This time.” The smile deepened, huh, and the Queen of the Dead had a dimple on the left side of her mouth. Nice. Why the fuck did she have to be so damn attractive? He grimaced as the memory of his first reaction to her appearance popped into his head. She was a darker-skinned female version of her dad, Loki. Shi-it. No wonder so many of his agents were crushing on the motherfucker.
“I have no wish to anger you, Nicholas,” she murmured as her smile faded.

“Huh? Oh, no, I was just thinking of the shit-storm we left back on Earth.”

“Now who does not speak the truth?” She dropped her gaze to the floor. “I should not have come; you have my apolog...”

“Hey, none of that; I was out of line. Your pop and I don’t have the best history and you resemble him. It...ah, hell. Uh, that’s with two ells, you know, our...”

“One of the places of punishment in one of your primary religions, I’m aware. I am also aware that you merely tolerate my sire, but I’d hoped we moved past that.”

“We did, sure; but that doesn’t mean that thinking about him makes my day.”

“Understood.”

“Anything going on out there that I should know? Your grandmother thinks I need to be kept out of the loop to recover better. I don’t think she understands that makes for more stress and less recovery.”

Her lips pursed in a thoughtful expression. “Nothing happens of which you did not already know. Some of your secrets are now revealed, however, and your Avengers are unhappy with you.”

Shit; he bet that meant they’d found out about Coulson. “Yeah, well, rank has its privileges.”

“Was it your privilege to decide to allow my father’s love to die when you had the means to save her?” She didn’t sound angry, just curious.

“No, it was my responsibility. Rank has those as well.” Hel nodded in what looked like agreement. “The thing that saved my agent was deemed too dangerous to use. He’d protested our using it on him, in point of fact. It could break the mind of anyone it’s used on and with Hellbringer’s abilities...”

“It was deemed an unacceptable risk; I see. My father is not likely to agree and nor are his mortal friends. No matter; you will not suffer their wrath.”

“Good to know.” He thought about that for a moment and a chill ran down his spine. “Wait, why is that?” Stark wasn’t the most forgiving motherfucker on the planet and Loki, if anything, was even less so.

“That is one of those things I cannot discuss. Be well, Nicholas Fury,” the goddess said with an enigmatic smile as she drifted out of the room and closed the door behind her.

“Sounds like I’m well and truly fucked no matter what happens,” he muttered.

… …

Chapter End Notes
Yes, Virginia, there is an update; and yes, it took forever. For those who aren’t following on Tumblr, my (slightly) older dog was sick all summer and crossed the Rainbow Bridge on 9/11, appropriately. We’re all pretty devastated and the (slightly) younger dog is still looking for her buddy. On top of this depressing event I had a nasty fall in July and am still suffering the results – I just had an MRI to determine whether I will “just” have to have physical therapy or first have surgery and then physical therapy and am awaiting the results with bated breath. Life has been sucking all around and pain meds only do so much. Hopefully the next update will come out a lot more quickly, but I make no promises. Many thanks for your patience and good wishes.
Kara laughed as Loki sputtered after emerging from a random wave that had struck him from behind. “Why did you not warn me?” he demanded petulantly.

“You’re the one who claimed to have a millennia of experience swimming in oceans; you shouldn’t have needed a warning.” She trudged through the heavy wet sand and then across the dry beach to the lounge chairs that had been set out for them. Heavy duty lounge chairs, she noted with a relieved grin as she carefully stretched out in the one that had full sun on it. Now where had she put that sunscreen?

“The oceans elsewhere in the Nine Realms are unlike yours,” Loki admitted. “They are not near so…untamed, if one doesn’t count the inhabitants.” He joined her at the chairs and reached under hers then straightened holding the missing bottle. “Lose something, darling?”

“You know I did.” She held out a hand which he, of course, ignored as he sat on the adjoining lounge. “Come on, Loki; I’ll burn if I don’t use sunscreen.”

“Human Kara would burn; for Æsir Kara that is highly unlikely. But let’s not take the chance, hmm?” He poured some of the lotion into his left hand and then began stroking it across the bare skin of her breasts. “I do love the creamy tone you have naturally.” She relaxed under his touch, glad that this was a private beach and that they could dispense with swimsuits. Too soon her breasts were coated and he moved on to less erotic areas. “I had considered adding in the ocean to our list, but my mind has changed.”

She chuckled at the annoyance that had seeped through him. “One errant wave and you’re ready to cross ocean sex off the list? Is being married turning you into a wuss?”

Loki gave her his should be patented ‘glare of death’. Obviously that was a colloquial term he understood. “If you’re willing to have saltwater up your nostrils and in your…”

“Maybe later; I need to get a sunny nap in first.” Sighing as she relaxed back on the lounge Kara gave her husband an encouraging smile. “If you keep that up,” she told him as his fingers stroked between her thighs, lightly brushing her sex, “I might change my mind. But then you’d have to apply the sunscreen all over again once we got back out here.”

She giggled as he scooped her up and headed down to the water. “Was that supposed to be a disincentive?” he asked with a smirk.

… …

“Zaebis”, Natasha muttered as she listened to Maria Hill explain their problem. “I’ll contact Loki; he won’t be happy. Stark calling to warn them about the possible traitors on The Bus was annoyance enough. He’s been looking over his shoulder and checking his suits for tampering ever since.” She nodded as her Hawk held out a glass of ice tea took hit from him, mouthing her thanks. “Not certain; he kept muttering something about a bale of hay and old west songs.”

“What’s going down?” Clint murmured.

She frowned and shook her head. “I’m certain he’ll do it if it is within his ability, he just won’t be
pleased to be interrupted yet again.” Pausing to listen, she took a sip and waited out the two-part explanation. “Oh, well then; if Fandral says he can do it then it must be true.” Her sarcastic tone was not lost on Hill or Hawkeye; the latter wandered off smothering a laugh. “I didn’t refuse. How can I reach you when I have an answer?” Clint returned to hand her a notepad and pen; his timing was never less than perfect. She jotted down the number of what she assumed was a second throw-away phone. “Fine; give me a few hours.”

“What’s the deal?”

“Hill and Fandral think that Pierce is going to make an assassination attempt on the entire WSC; or at least upon those who are not part of Hydra.”

“She’s convinced Pierce is Hydra?”

“Completely.”

“Well, shit; sounded like she wanted you to pull Loki in on something.”

“Yes; apparently he can change someone’s appearance to match another’s in a way no technology can penetrate.”

“Fuck. She wants you to go in as a ringer.”

“In place of Councilor Hawley. We’re roughly the same height and build. Pierce hasn’t seen her in person often enough to notice any discrepancies.”

“Retina scans, fingerprints?”

“Hill is arranging for contacts to duplicate the scan. The council never uses fingerprints; they’re far too easily faked. You and Tony need to go collect the councilor while I arrange for Loki’s help.”

“Fine. I suppose we’ll have to leave her with the newlyweds for safekeeping.”

“Exactly.” She stopped him with a touch to his jaw. “Be careful; they’ll be watching her.”

“I know. Don’t worry, I’ll fly on back to you intact, babe.”

Her eyebrow shot up. “You call me babe again and you won’t remain intact.”

Clint laughed as he stepped into the elevator to go find Stark. “You know I love it when you talk dismemberment.”

“Idiot.”

… …

Steve sighed as he jogged down the beach towards Loki and Kara’s bungalow. One of these days Loki was going to go off the wagon and try to twist his head off just because he’d annoyed him, Steve just knew it. Hopefully Kara would talk her borderline-psychotic husband down when that time came. While the trickster was a pain in the behind, strangely enough he liked the guy. Maybe it was because he was always polite and protective with women and children; even ones like Kara and Romanov who didn’t need it? Maybe. He rounded a flowering bush and stopped in shock. Loki was walking out of the water, carrying his wife who had her legs locked around the prince’s hips. She was moaning and he’d bet his vintage motorcycle that it wasn’t in pain. Yep, the woman was rocking herself back and forth and grinding down against Loki’s…well. The worst thing about this
was that he couldn’t bring himself to look away let alone move. He just stood there in horrified fascination as the couple continued…fornicating.

“God, Loki that is so damn good,” Kara whimpered as she was carried across the sand. “Please, I need to come.”

“Not yet, love. Let me get you situated first.” The man walked past the lounge chairs and grabbed a pair of folded towels and continued on to a rock that looked, well, out of place. It was probably one of those decorative touches that some designer thought looked natural. The towels were laid on it and Loki shifted Kara so that her behind rested against them. “Ready, darling?”

The redhead groaned. “I’ve been ready.”

Loki chuckled and braced his legs before starting to…oh my God they really were fornicating right on that rock! “I know you have,” Loki grunted as he used his hips to…oh crap. Steve wondered desperately why he couldn’t move.

Still staring helplessly, Steve wished he could sink right into the sand. Finally he managed to move his feet an inch, then two, and then he was running back behind the bush and dropping down on the sand, burying his face in his hands. “Steve?” Beth said as she came down from the walkway that led to the bungalow, the baby balanced on her hip. “Did you find them? Nat’s getting kind of impatient. What’s wrong?”

He wordlessly hitched his thumb in the direction of the couple on the other side of the flowering bush. Beth frowned at him and started to walk in that direction. “No!” he barked as he leapt to his feet to block her path.

“What is wrong with you? Wow, your face is bright red.”

“They’re, they, uh, are, um, busy.”

“Huh? Oooohhhh. A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Did you walk in on them again?” Beth had gotten the story of his original unintentional interruption back in the tower from Thor who had thought the whole thing hilarious.

“Yeah. It was like a traffic accident; I couldn’t look away.”

She laughed at his miserable expression. “Oh, hon; it’s okay. They do have a license for that, you know.”

“Sure, but that,” he said, jerking his thumb toward the bush again, “is supposed to be private.”

“Yes, it is;” a cold voice snapped. He winced as Loki came around the bush, dressed, thank God, in a pair of shorts. “This is twice you’ve disrespected our privacy in this manner. Mayhap you need be taught better manners.”

“Let it go, Loki. You knew he was there, I can tell.” Kara frowned at him when he turned to give her an excuse.

“I was ignoring him, hoping he’d correct his mistake and leave,” he insisted.

“Lie. And don’t think I’m okay with you using me to teach him a lesson; I’m almost as embarrassed as he is.” He couldn’t suppress the cringe of guilt that he’d been trying to ignore.
“Steve, what’s going on that you came over here?” Kara asked.

“There’s an urgent call for…”

“Stark can take his urgency and place it…” Loki began. He’d had enough of his brother-in-law’s urgent news.

“It’s Natasha; she needs your help,” Rogers told him.

Worry bloomed and he pushed aside his annoyance at yet another interruption. “What happened?”

“Nothing yet; she’s trying to thwart an assassination plot.”


Both men sighed. “Though I wasn’t aware Steven’s vocabulary was that eclectic, it is a perfectly valid word and used properly,” Loki grumbled.

“Hey, what happened to calling me Steve?” Steve asked. Loki snorted in reply.

“Whatever. Let’s go find out what Nat needs your help with.”

Rogers still wouldn’t meet his eyes back at the security office. Good. He should be embarrassed. Loki snuck a glance at Kara who was fussing over the baby again. His lady had never had much contact with infants, or so she had told him, and had never wanted it. Now that she carried their child, it seemed her attitude toward them had changed. Kara caught him looking and smiled. “I never thought I’d ever be able to have a baby; now that I can, everything’s changed for me.”

He nodded. “So it should, love.”

Rogers was hitting buttons; Apparently the videoconference option was not to Natasha’s taste. “Here we go,” the man said. “Natasha, I got him, are you still there?”

“Yes. Loki? It’s possible for you to change my appearance to match another person’s, correct?”

“Yes. Correct. I cannot change your mass, however. You will still feel like you to tactile senses. Also, the better I know someone’s appearance, the better the illusion will be.”

“The subject is about my height and build and you’ll have her to use as an example.”

He smiled and from the way Kara was rolling her eyes, it was every bit as smug as he felt. “In that case, I defy anyone who isn’t physically intimate with one of you to be able to tell the difference. I can also cast the illusion on your voice well enough pass for mortal ears; just do not expect it to fool your technology.”

“That’s not an issue; no voice prints are in use for this and I’ll have the retinal scans covered by tech. Hawk and Stark are picking up our target now. They’ll swing by for me and we’ll arrive in a little over two hours. It will be cutting it close for me to get from there to DC, but it can’t be helped.”

“If time is of the essence, I’ll meet them all there.” He frowned as he ran through his options. “I can walk the branches part of the way and shift myself the rest and arrive well within an hour.”

“You can’t just shift all the way there?” Kara asked from behind him.

“Eh? No; that skill can only be employed over short distances, and of course the branches have
egresses where they will, not where I will them to be.”

“That I remember. And you can’t just make them where you want them or you’ll potentially weaken reality or something to that effect.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. “More or less, yes.”

“That would be helpful.” Natasha interrupted. “Cap, we’re going to send our target on to you after Loki’s done his thing. Hawk will bring her in our Quinjet. I’m going to need you in Washington so fire up the one S.H.I.E.L.D. provided and start heading out there. Everyone will know what side you’re on; with Clint, they’d be guessing. If Pierce is up to what I suspect, we can’t afford any hesitation on the part of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who aren’t compromised.”

“Will Barton be staying to protect Beth and the baby?” Rogers asked with a sidelong glance in his direction. Loki hid a smirk, realizing the soldier wasn’t about to imply, again, that he and Kara needed any such assistance.

“Affirmative; Iron Man will remain here with Banner to protect the Tower, our support staff, and to provide electronic support. Loki, Thor was needed in Asgard but Odin is sending two of his friends to help Fandral. I’m not sure why, but Darcy just placed an order for more food than we go through in a month.”

He snorted. “They’re sending Volstagg and Hogun. Tell her to double the order; it’s said that Volstagg fights with the strength and ferocity of ten warriors. What they don’t say is that he eats like ten warriors as well.”

“Got it. I’m meeting one of Hill’s trusted techies to pick up the items she has for me; I’ll be back here before you arrive. Romanov out.”

… …

Fandral spun as a trace movement caught his eye. The masonry of the wall behind him exploded as it was struck by multiple projectiles. “Get down!” Maria hissed unnecessarily. Their enemy had already moved. He could barely pick out the man’s stealthy movements from the other sounds of the city, but no matter how extraordinary this mortal was, he was not match for a warrior with Æsir senses.

Dropping down next to the deputy, he gave her a confident grin. “He’s moving around that building. I believe he’s climbing as well. Be prepared to target up, about sixty degrees.”

“You can hear him? Of course you can,” she finished. “Damn Asgardians.”

“Wait for it,” he cautioned. A dark object almost folded around the edge of the building a few degrees higher than he had expected. He lifted Hill’s poised arms so that she followed the line of sight and was able to target accurately. The figure withdrew, but not before firing his weapon again. More masonry exploded as they ducked but the sound was drowned out by a loud screeching from the opposite direction. A vehicle he’d heard referred to as an SUV careened around the corner and weapons began to be fired from it.

“Damn it all,” Maria snarled and tugged him to different cover. “We must have rattled Pierce’s cage; looks like he’s going all out to take us down.” More projectiles struck the metal and stone around them and a shower of chipped rock opened small cuts on his lady’s face and hands.

“We’ve must get you out of here; you’re bleeding.”
“I’ve bled worse; but yeah, retreat is looking like our only option. The question is: how?”

There was movement and weapons fire from three directions now. Fandral looked around to judge which would be their best option and was disheartened to note that none seemed likely to offer a viable escape route. “Yo, pretty boy, you got your ears on?” An irreverent but nonetheless welcome voice sounded over the communications device he still wore.

“Stark? We’re surrounded; I could survive the injuries I would take making an escape, but Deputy Hill would not.” The woman in question glared at him and then nodded to acknowledge his assessment.

“No problem; I’m dropping in some help for you while I try to take out the nasty looking masked one that’s moving like his feet are on fire. Might take a few; he’s got some good moves and I’m not sure I’m maneuverable enough to take him in a cityscape.”

A shadow passed above them and moments later an SUV crashed into a wall. “Your toys cannot stand before the Lion of Asgard!” a familiar voice boomed. Volstagg was here; and where Volstagg was, Hogun would not be far behind. The Warriors Three were reunited. It was time to show these mortal scum the folly of attacking Asgardian Warriors and those they protected.

… ...

“We had faith in that man’s loyalty,” Councilor Hawley muttered for the third time. “How could we have been so blind?”

“He played his part well. Even Director Fury counted him as a friend and you know how little he trusts anyone,” Natasha reassured the woman. Stark was babbling about a ‘damned slippery son of a bitch’ over the comm unit. “Jarvis, bring up the feed from Stark’s visual.” A holographic screen shimmered into being with a dizzying point of view from the Iron Man armor’s HUD. She narrowed her eyes and stared at the figure Stark was chasing over the rooftops. “Krovavyi ad,” she breathed. “I don’t believe…of course I believe it.”

“Believe what, Avenger?”

Hawley had referred to her as ‘Agent’ several times before Natasha had become annoyed and reminded her that she had resigned and was now an Avenger and independent from S.H.I.E.L.D. “Iron Man’s target is a premier assassin. No one’s ever come close to catching him before, he’s a ghost.” She shook her head remembering her own close call with the zasranec. “Those few of us who have survived an encounter call him The Winter Soldier. It figures he dances to Hydra’s tune.”

“I thought he was just a rumor.”

“He’s very real and Deputy Hill must be his target.”

… ...

“I’ve got to get down there,” the mortal insisted. “If Pierce has gone rogue he can unleash hell on Earth if I’m not there to stop it.”

“You left an entire team of heroes to protect your world, and I have lent you my son and three of my greatest warriors,” Odin told him mildly.

“They can’t stop this. It’s tech and they need my authorization to shut it down. He’ll have deleted everyone else’s access, but I’m out of the picture so he won’t think to delete mine.”
A tiny smile graced his lips as he watched the human’s expression change from incredulity to frustration and then to superiority. Loki likely enjoyed baiting this one simply to watch his reactions. “Despite our best efforts, you can barely stand for more than a few moments at a stretch; how do you propose to battle your way through to this council room you mentioned?”

An audible grinding of the director’s teeth almost cost Odin the battle against smirking outright. “I. Will. Manage.”

As entertaining as this was, perhaps Director Fury had a point. He’d found himself underestimating too many of late. “Thor will return from Álfheim shortly and Heimdall keeps close watch on the situation on Midgard. When the time is right, Thor will take you where you need to be and ensure your success.”

With that he swept out of the room, ignoring the mortal’s exasperated and unenthusiastic “Thank you.”

… …

“How is my baby?”

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “Perfect; how could you expect else?” He smirked as Natasha’s intended glare was ruined by her smile at his praise of the babe. “Where is Stark? I owe him for interrupting the honeymoon he assured me would be sacrosanct.”

“I sent him on to DC to back up Hill and Fandral. They have a serious problem there.”

“I see. The sooner I get you ready to join them the better, I take it?” Her nod was terse. “Very well. Ah, Councilor Hawley; how good to see you…again.”

“We’ve never met.”

“No? Hmm, my mistake; many of you mortals look so much alike.” His interference with her mind while he was bound to Thanos’ oversight had not been remembered. Good. “Stand next to Natasha if you would.”

The blonde older woman moved next to Natasha and began to turn in a circle at his direction. “Councilor Hawley of the World Security Council,” the woman said as she, along with Natasha turned, and she followed his instruction to announce herself as she would at the Triskelion. The magic formed to his will and the two women were covered by a greenish glow of energy as the illusion built. “I respectfully disagree, Mr. Pierce,” she continued, following the script Natasha had provided. “Deploying Project Insight at this juncture would be unwise at best.” The words and phrases would be duplicated exactly in the Councilor’s voice. A few more phrases were spoken and the women came to a halt. The true Councilor Hawley gasped as she turned to face her doppelganger. “Brilliant. They’ll never suspect.”

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“Of course not,” said Natasha in the Councilor’s voice. “Thank you for your cooperation, Councilor. Hawkeye will take you to safety now.”

“I’ll ride back with them,” Loki told the former spy. “That complicated a working is draining. Be careful, Natasha; this Pierce person is playing a deep game, he will not take kindly to having many decades of careful planning thwarted.”

“I’m not taking his corruption of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the threat that Hydra poses to my daughter very kindly.” The words and tone were all Natasha, but they sounded odd in the Hawley woman’s accent. “Pierce is going down, and he’s going down today.”
“You should be able to stand and walk normally,” the goddess told him. “Try to avoid physical
confrontations you have no hope of surviving,” Nick grinned at her wry tone. “That would be all
such confrontations,” she advised.

“I figured, but thanks for the vote of confidence.” Eir smiled and patted his shoulder as she stood.
It irked him that a woman who looked no more than forty treated a man of his age like a child, but
there it was. From what the odd brothers had told him, an Æsir that looked forty was probably
closer to four thousand years old. Maybe older depending on what kind of skills they had.
Speaking of the devils…

“Nicholas!” Thor called out, loudly as usual, from the door of the healing hall. “Heimdall tells me
that events unfold quickly; let us make haste, my friend.”

He must consider anyone who was not his enemy a friend. It was refreshing after dealing with
Stark who barely saw him as a semi-friendly antagonist. “About time; you have a good vacation in
elf-land?”

Blonde eyebrows drew together briefly. “Álfheim. T’was diplomatic business, I’m afraid. Queen
Elénaril still looks with little favor upon a match between Nyvorlas and Sif. The All-Father has
sent his official approval of their union.” A grin lifted one corner of the big god’s mouth. “Her
Majesty was less than pleased.”

“The fate of Earth is a bit more important than a motherfucking wedding,” he retorted.

“I do not think you understand. Weddings such as this keep the peace in the Nine Realms and that
peace, or lack thereof, is important to Midgard’s safety from threats beyond her atmosphere.”

Shit. Interstellar politics. And he thought there wasn’t a goddamn thing he could hate more than
the good old Earth version. “Point taken. Let’s get on with it.”

A carriage of sorts was waiting for them at the doors to the palace. “Tis a long walk; you need to
conserve your strength for the task ahead,” Thor explained. “Though we shall use the tesseract to
make this journey rather than the Bifröst, we shall do so from the Observatory to take advantage of
Heimdall’s advice as to when and where to travel.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He frowned as a dark-haired figure stepped out from the shadows of the
doorway. What the fuck was Hel still doing here? Didn’t she have a kingdom to run? A chill ran
down his spine as she smiled sadly.

“Stay safe, Nicholas Fury; I look forward to seeing you soon.”

“Uh huh. Is that a warning of some kind?” he asked, even though he really didn’t want to know.

The goddess of the Dead laughed and it was a musical sound. “Not at all. You shall need to return
to Asgard to complete your healing and I shall visit you here; I meant nothing more than that.” Her
usually somber expression was alight with mirth. It made her coolly elegant features beautiful.

He swallowed at the warmth that now infused her smile. “Good to know. Ah, that you didn’t mean
anything else. It’s bad business when you discover that the people you’ve admired all your life
have done nothing but use you for their own lust for power and have corrupted every last damn
good thing you’ve accomplished. Somebody’s gonna die today.”

“It is not yet your time, I assure you.” The smile widened. “Do not, however, take foolish chances.
One can live yet wish they were dead.”

“I hear ya.” Thor took up the reins of the horses that were attached to the carriage. “Thanks, I’ll see you when I’ve taken care of business then.” She nodded and stepped back. He didn’t get her interest, but shit. If he forgot she was the goddess of the Dead, not to mention that motherfucker Loki’s daughter, it would be damn flattering. The carriage rolled along and he stared at it. “Thor, I thought your people had advanced technology. What’s up with the old-style transportation?”

“Our energy driven vehicles cannot be used on the Bifröst, nor even on its approach. The resonance between the two power sources conflict and the vehicle would be thrown into the void. One must walk or ride on a living creature, or ride in a conveyance drawn by a living creature to survive it. You were not conscious for the trip to the Valhöll and were borne in a cart to the Healer’s Hall.”

“Goddamn.”

Maria Hill rolled under an abandoned UPS truck. She had to give credit where credit was due. The Warriors Three, as Fandral had informed her they were called, were better protection than having her own personal S.T.R.I.K.E. team. Particularly since she was one hundred percent certain of their loyalty. She snorted at the thought of equating that flirtatious ass with loyalty, but there it was. Emerging from the other side and pivoting up into a crouch she froze in horror. A black-clad man with a mask over the lower half of his face was turning his weapon on her and she had nowhere to go. “Incoming from your two o’clock!” Stark’s voice in her ear was never so welcome. She purposely looked in the other direction with a hopeful expression, counting on her opponent to reflexively follow her gaze. No dice. The weapon’s barrel was leveling and…”Gotcha,” Stark told her as she was pulled up into the air so quickly that her arms felt as though they were being jerked out of their sockets. Gunfire sounded and she heard rounds ricochet off the titanium-gold alloy of the Iron Man Armor before at least two struck her in the meaty part of her left thigh.

“I’m hit,” she told her rescuer. “Left thigh, don’t think he got the femoral.”

“We’ll take a look at it as soon as I get you to cover,” he responded. There was a short pause. “From what he can scan, Jarvis agrees with your diagnosis. Did it hit the bone?”

Maria wished he hadn’t said that. The sharp pain of a shattered femur blossomed when she turned her attention to it. “Yes,” she hissed. “And it’s bad.”

“Son of a bitch. Cap just landed the QJ and is heading to the Triskelion with a running buddy of his…don’t ask. I’ll lose the suit and get you back to Avenger’s Tower; Jarvis has notified Bruce to get an orthopedic surgeon there on the double.” More silence ensued before he spoke again. “Fandral reports that the mortal scum, as he puts it, are on the run. Once I pulled you out of the mess they started scurrying away like the vermin they are. Vermin’s his word too.”

“Great.”

“So, how does it feel to be important enough that Hydra called in their premier assassin just to target little ole you?”

Crap. She hadn’t imagined it. That had been The Winter Soldier. They were so screwed. “Painful.”

… …
This chapter’s title is courtesy of Foreigner’s ‘Juke Box Hero’. We saw them in September at our county fair…much fun. The scene I’m referring to is the one from The Winter Soldier where not only Bucky, but all of the DC cops are targeting Fury. Imagine all of that firepower directed at Fandral and Hill…and they’re on the street without any vehicle to provide even partial protection. All seems lost until Tony swoops in and drops Volstagg and Hogun into the middle of it all. In Iron Man III, Jarvis calculated that Tony could safely carry four people, yet Tony managed to take about a dozen to safety using a human chain and gliding technique and then dropping them in the water. Considering he has thrown around trucks and such, the two Asgardians, even at their much higher than human weights, would be doable, at least for a short while.

Zaebis’ = Awesome in a ‘holy fuck’ kind of way; Krovavyi ad = Bloody Hell; Zasranec = asshole.
Ashes, Ashes, They All Fall Down!

Chapter Notes

Spoiler warnings. I’ve borrowed quotes liberally from The Winter Soldier. Even with the spoilers I think you’ll enjoy the film, it is different enough in direction to still surprise you. The Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. storyline has already been interrupted by Lorelei’s capture and since Rumlow and Sitwell jumped the gun on the assassination attempt on Fury, the entire timeline of the AOS second season is derailed as well as Avengers Age of Ultron. We’d already derailed Thor the Dark World and we’re reworking the events of The Winter Soldier. We are so far AU now that we might need a compass!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... ...

He couldn’t believe it; the other S.T.R.I.K.E team was also compromised, and they were going to try and take him on in an elevator. “Before we get started, does anyone want to get out?” Their attack was fast and furious; he was constrained in his reactions by the size of the car. They knew that would be an advantage. What they didn’t know was how he felt about traitors. By the time the doors opened, his attackers were down and he was out the emergency hatch and climbing to a different floor. Crawling through the buildings ducts wasn’t his favorite thing, but the surprise was worth it. Dropping to the floor in front of the control room he keyed the doors open with a badge he’d lifted from one of the bodies. “Captain Rogers!” a couple of the technical guys shouted.

He strode up to the Agent in Charge. “This project needs to be shut down immediately. The President has ordered it.”

“I don’t care whose orders you bring,” the man said with a sneer. “I have my orders from Secretary Pierce. We go forward and there’s nothing that can stop us.”

“You’re forgetting the Avengers,” Steve returned.

The sneer deepened. “Not at all.”

That settled it; this guy was Hydra. He jumped up on a console to get everyone’s attention and toed on the nearest comm channel. “Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel, this is Steve Rogers. You all know me, what you don’t know is that some of you were ordered to hunt me down. It’s time for everyone to know the truth: S.H.I.E.L.D. is not what we thought it was. It’s been taken over by our old enemy, Hydra. Alexander Pierce is their leader, both of the S.T.R.I.K.E teams and the Insight crews are Hydra as well. I don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in this building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want, absolute control. They shot Nick Fury and it won’t end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, Hydra will be able to kill anyone, and I mean anyone that stands in their way. We have to stop them. I know I’m asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high, it always has been. It’s a price I’m willing to pay, and if I’m the only one, then so be it. The Avengers stand with us, Asgard stands with us, and I’m willing to bet many of you stand with us too. Whatever it takes, keep those carriers grounded.”

... ...
Thor nodded gravely as they parted by the elevator. “Be safe, Nicholas Fury. My niece expects me to return you to Asgard while you yet live.”

He did a double-take at the god’s pronouncement. “Your…oh, right. Hel.” But that… “Uh, why?” He was going to regret asking, he damned well knew it.

“She’s taken an interest in you; surely you’ve noticed?”

“Do you know how fucking old I am, Thor?”

Odinson’s usual infuriating grin was back. “Age matters not to the goddess of the Dead. Once we pass into her Realm or into Valhalla, we are forever young.”

His knees buckled. It didn’t have anything to do with his level of recovery, or lack of, he insisted to himself. It was the shock of that outrageous statement. “Are you seriously telling me she’s waiting for me to die so I can go to wherever the hell she rules and be young for her?”

“Tis called Helheim. All living creatures die eventually, my friend. We are all ageless to her eyes – she sees the embodiment of our souls. Despite your rough edges, you are a good man and she sees that.”

“Riiiggghht. Tell that to all the good men and women who have died on my watch.”

“I have lost comrades on the field of battle during campaigns I commanded,” Thor told him in a serious tone. “This does not speak poorly of my soul.”

He took a good long look at the god of Thunder, a man he’d dismissed as naive and shallow, and decided he must be losing I.Q. points in his old age. “So you’re saying the Queen of the Dead has the hots for my soul? That’s just…get the fuck out of here, Thor. See if you can get to the launch site to take out those Helicarriers if we can’t get them shut down on this end.”

“Aye, my friend. Good fortune to you.”

From what he understood about the Norse belief system, the fact that Hel expected him in her Realm meant he wasn’t going to die a hero. “Damn. Maybe I’ll get to die a quiet death in my own bed after all.”

The elevator stopped at the top floor. He straightened his stance and strode out as though he owned the place. The Secretary of Defense, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s top dog, turned from where he was pontificating to the assembled members…several of them were simultaneously physically assembled at the Triskelion and wasn’t that fucked up…of the World Security Council. “Nick! Good to see you, my friend. We’d been told you were gravely injured.”

“Your lapdogs did a damn fine job, Pierce; but Asgard does a better one.”

“I don’t know what you’re…”

“Can the bullshit. This is me you’re talking to. What the fuck happened to you? This isn’t what we’re all about.”

“It’s about safety, control, and it always has been. Hydra will do what S.H.I.E.L.D. could never do. It’s not too late, Nick.”

He uncrossed his arms and revealed the pair of Glock 20’s he’d been concealing. “It’s too late for you, Pierce. We’re putting an end to this now.”
The smug bastard smiled at him, his watery blue eyes crinkling. “I don’t think so.” He held up a small remote. “I can kill any or all of the Council members present with a press of one button. You won’t risk global war.” His finger twitched and one of the councilors bent over, moaning in agony. “Of course, I don’t have to kill them to get their cooperation.”

The other councilors were staring at the afflicted one in horror. All but one. Hawley’s eyes had narrowed and she glanced down at her security badge and then over at Pierce. Hawley? Hell no. Nick smiled. “Drop it, Pierce, last chance,” he said to draw the motherfucker’s attention back to him.

“I believe that’s my li…” the man’s sentence was cut off as whoever was impersonating Hawley made her move, a spin and kick that sent the remote flying, though not before he pressed one more button. Hawley’s replacement dropped to the ground holding her chest and gritting her teeth at the pain before she managed to rip the security badge off of her blazer.

“Yest’ der’mo, i umeret’, zasranec’,” the Black Widow’s voice muttered. The others, the real councilors present quickly followed her lead and divested themselves of the deadly badges.

“Now,” Nick continued, gesturing to the computer screen with one of the Glocks. “We’re going to issue the shut-down order for Project Insight.”

“Are we?” the motherfucker said with a smile.

… …

The room erupted in chaos. Technicians fought technicians, S.T.R.I.K.E. team operatives appeared out of nowhere, and the AIC laughed maniacally as the sound of Helicarriers rising from their berths poured from the room’s speakers. “You’re too late, Rogers. Hail Hyd…” The bastard never managed to finish his sentence as a female technician swung a chair like a giant baseball bat and hit him in the side of the head with one of the metal legs.

“Never liked that supercilious jerk,” she told him. She stepped over the body…the AIC’s temple was caved in and gray matter oozed out…and handed him several pieces of plastic. “Flash drives. You have to get them on board the carriers and into an input jack,” she explained. “It’s a failsafe, sort of; A kind of computer virus that will take them down. Iron Man gave it to me when he first heard of the project; he was worried about Justin Hammer’s programming though; I don’t think he even dreamed Hydra might be involved.” He took the flash drives, as she’d called them. “I sure didn’t.”

“Thank you. Good luck here, I’ll do my best to get these in place.” He ran from the room, pushing aside the thought that he was failing the loyal agents in the room. Better to fail them than to fail the whole world.

“You always do!” he heard her call out as he used his shield to make an emergency exit through the observation window.

… …

“You don’t think we’ve wiped your clearance from the system?” Pierce asked. “It takes two authorizations to abort the project launch. Even if you force me to use mine, you still lose.”

Nick stared the motherfucker down. “I know you erased my password. Probably deleted my retinal scan, but if you want to stay ahead of me, Mr. Secretary,” he bit out, removing his eye-patch and leaning forward to let the computer take a scan.
“Scan accepted. Fury, Nicholas J.,” the computer’s voice intoned.

“You need to keep both eyes open.”

By this time Romanov, still looking disturbingly like Councilor Hawley, was on her feet. She fisted a hand in Pierce’s hair and forced his head into position for the retinal scan. “Scan accepted. Pierce, Alexander G.”

“Shut down Project Insight, effective immediately,” Nick ordered.

“Project Insight launch has completed. Shut down unsuccessful.”

Pierce started to laugh. “Hail Hydra,” the bastard chortled.

Nick saw red. He raised both hands and put one ten millimeter slug in his old friend’s skull and another through his cold heart. “Hail this, motherfucker.”

... ...

After he’d jumped through the window, it occurred to Steve to wonder just how high up it was. Oh crap. This was gonna hurt. Bad. He spread his body out to maximize wind drag and prayed. “Spangles, what the hell?” he heard over his comm unit. “Thor I’m too far out, can you get to him?”

“Aye, Iron Man,” Thor’s voice replied, for once not mangling Stark’s name. Steve looked around for them and caught a hint of movement from below and behind an instant before the impact of a larger body interrupted his fall. “I’ve got you, Captain.”

Thor twisted around so that they were both heading feet down for the ground. “Uh...”

“No fear. I can take the impact; fold your legs up to your chest.” He followed the Æsir’s instructions just in time. Thor managed a two-point landing that crushed the asphalt beneath his feet.

Steve let out the breath he’d been holding as he was set safely on the ground. “Thanks. We’ve got to get to those carriers.” He paused as Iron Man joined them and held up the plastic flash drives. “One of the techs gave me these. Look familiar?” he asked the genius.

“Laurel came through. Great kid; I tried to hire her away for Stark Industries, now I’m glad she didn’t jump ship.” He reached for one of the drives and tucked it into a small compartment that opened in his armor. “Thor, do you remember what the data input jack on my console in the observation lounge looks like?”

“I do indeed, my friend,” Thor replied as he took the drive Steve handed him and tucked it in his armor.

“Good. We’ve each got to get on one of those pieces of junk, find an input jack and get one of these in it. The programs will download themselves but it takes about two minutes for the full payload to deploy. We’ve got to give these flash drives the full two minutes before anyone can remove them or destroy the piece of equipment we’ve plugged them into, got it?”

Steve nodded. “I’ve got it. Protect it at all costs for two minutes and then get out of there, causing as much chaos as we can on our way out, right?”

“Exactly. Thor, why don’t you take that Helicarrier,” Stark suggested, pointing, “And I’ll drop Cap
off on that one and head for the last.”

“As you say.” Thor took a running leap while swinging his hammer and flew through the air. “For
Midgard and for the Honor of Asgard!”

“Yeah, all that dramatic baloney,” Tony mumbled as he launched them towards the other two
 carriers. “Cap, how about we just kick some Hydra ass?”

“My pleasure.”

… …

“Agent Coulson, I was told you were dead.” Phil winced at Dr. Gunnarssen’s angry tone. It made
him wish he’d allowed May to accompany him into the island’s security center.

“More importantly,” a young blonde woman interjected. “I was told that you’d never died. What
were you all thinking, keeping this from me?”

His eyebrows rose. “And you are?”

“Bethany Anderson.”

“I’m sorry, Miss…”

“Doctor. Doctor Bethany Margaret Carter Anderson. I work with Dr. Nassar.”

This was Raj Nassar’s deputy? Interesting. “That omission was none of my doing. For quite some
time, I didn’t know that I’d died for more than a handful of seconds. You’ll have to take that up
with Dr. Nassar and Nick Fury.”

She made a humphing sound. “Oh, I will be. I can’t be prepared to step into Raj’s shoes if he keeps
me in the dark, particularly under these circumstances.”

The woman had a point. “We’ve all been kept in the dark, supposedly for our own protection and
look where it’s gotten us,” he tried to smoothly change the subject.

“I’m married to the god of Lies. Nice try, but if I can read between the lines with his silver-tongued
attempts to distract me, you don’t stand a chance. By the way, he’s sorry he couldn’t find a way to
spare you.”

“Of course he couldn’t.”

The redhead’s sparkling eyes narrowed. He frowned. Surely they weren’t that…glowy before?
“Literally. He had Thanos in his head watching and listening to him speaking. If he’d given them
an excuse they’d have killed him and taken on a genuinely willing partner. Then what chance
would Earth have had?”

He’d always thought the Avenger’s win over the alien army just a bit too coincidental. “He
planned to lose?”

“Yes. Thor says that they’ve never lost a campaign planned by Loki in all the years they’ve fought
together. Never. For him to come here with a physically and technologically superior army and
lose was next to impossible. It confused the hell out of him until we finally got Loki to admit it.”

“You’re sure the admission wasn’t a lie.” Her eyebrow rose. Oh, wait. Empath, one of the most
powerful S.H.I.E.L.D. had ever encountered, Agent May had told him. “Sorry; he can’t lie to you, I
“Isn’t that what I just said not a minute ago?”

A reluctant smile curved his lips. “So you did. I apologize, Doctor.”

“Princess,” Dr. Anderson corrected. “She can’t practice anymore, so she’s asked us not to use her degree title, so if you want to be formal, it’s Princess.”

“Ah, from your marriage to Loki; my apologies, Princess, where is your husband?”

Kara was getting more annoyed every second. There was just something about him that got under her skin. Part of it, she decided, was the fact he looked like every nondescript bureaucrat she’d ever hated dealing with, but she could feel that he had a very sharp mind. “I don’t think we’re going to discuss that considering you’ve brought Hydra along with you.”

He grimaced. “We don’t know that for certain.”

“I’m not taking any chances with his safety or the safety of those he’s with. You understand, surely?”

“Of course. Actually, I was hoping he could settle that issue for me, but you could do it more easily, I think. You are far less obviously someone who could catch them in lies.”

She was, but she didn’t know if she wanted to take that risk. If something happened to her, Loki would lose it. Staring at the floor in thought she chuckled. “Why not? If I can take down a Mad Titan, I can take down a few Hydra Agents. Keep anyone you like clear of them, though. If I think they’re going to cause a problem, it could get messy in their immediate vicinity.”

“Oh. Right. I heard about that. Was he really all that indestructible?”

Shrugging, she spread her hands in a ‘clueless’ gesture. “So the Asgardians insisted.”

“They had to take his remains out in all of those boxes and separate them so he couldn’t resurrect himself,” Beth said dryly. “I think that kind of speaks for itself.”

“Okay.” The agent frowned thoughtfully. “Agent May is definitely true S.H.I.E.L.D. and my consultant, well, she’s been targeted by what I think was Hydra, so she’s a good bet to be in the clear. I’m fairly certain Agent Tripplet is clean, and Fitz-Simmons as well. Granted, that’s just a hunch.”

“You had a hunch that Loki wasn’t trying to win very hard when no one else realized it; I’ll take your hunch seriously,” Kara told him. “So that leaves Grant Ward and John Garrett according to the files we were sent. I’ll see what makes them tick.”

“Well then, let’s go meet the team.”

“I’d like to see them alone. Why don’t you wait here with Beth and Brianna?”

“Brianna?”

“Clint Barton and Natasha Romanov’s baby.”

“Ah.” He chuckled at the thought of Romanov as a mother. “I’ll be happy to.”
Necker Island was coming up in the distance. “Man, I can’t wait to see my kid,” Barton enthused. “How has she been for you guys?”

Loki lifted one eyebrow. “I wouldn’t know. Bethany and Rogers have been tending to her. It is, or was, my honeymoon.”

“Right.” Clint sounded a bit deflated. He decided to indulge the newish father, just a bit.

“We saw her before I left. She was behaving delightfully. Kara is now truly looking forward to holding her own babe in her arms.”

The archer grinned. “Yeah, there’s nothing like it.” The grin faded as a warning signal pinged from the craft’s control panel. “What the hell?” Barton poked at a button and a display lit up showing a large aircraft sitting to the side of the island’s small runway, a smaller one sitting beside it. “Shit, looks like Coulson’s people found you.”

Loki was halfway to his feet when he realized that shifting the remaining distance would be injurious considering the depletion of his power after the complicated working he’d done on Natasha Romanov. “Kara and my goddaughter had best be safe or I shall kill that man again and, this time, ensure he remains dead.”

“Take it easy; Kara’s tougher than anything Hydra could possibly throw at her. It’ll be fine.” Barton’s voice was calm, but Loki’s senses screamed that the human was lying to himself in an attempt to avoid panicking like the new parent he was.

“She is, and she will protect Brianna. Take us in for a normal landing. We will not allow them to realize we are prepared for them to be hostile.”

Clint gave him an exasperated look. “Um, been doing the spy thing long enough to know that.”

He grinned. “I’ve been doing it since before your many times great-grandparents were born.”

“Spying? Right, a Prince of Asgard a spy. Uh huh.”

“Princes, particularly second sons, often spy. However, we call it diplomatic relations.”

Thor burst through the opening he’d made with Mjölnir. The Helicarrier personnel scattered with satisfactory yells of mixed confusion and fear. Several reversed themselves and raised hand weapons. “I have no time for your jests,” he growled at them and swung the Uru Hammer once more. The lead projectiles went wild as bodies flew and crumpled to the floor. Thor looked around quickly but saw no sign of the input portal he needed, so moved into the next compartment just as a wall slid closed behind him. A warning blared over the intercom of an ‘intruder alert’ and he smiled grimly. The battle would surely come to him.

More searching revealed an equipment bank with the required input…jack, Stark had called it. He plucked the ‘flash drive’ from his armor and fitted it into the device. A small translucent square on the end began to glow blue and the screens on the equipment began to flash with different displays of what appeared to be some type of engineering schematics if he was reading them rightly. “You there!” a mortal voice shouted. “Step away from the console!”

He gave the man the foolish smile that oft annoyed his brother. “Speak you to me, sir?” he asked in
an affable tone. “What, pray tell, is a console?”

“Step back, asswipe, or I’ll let you have it!”

“Ah, If I do not move you will gift this console to me? What shall happen then if I move away?” He kept up his ruse of pleasant confusion. If this man was typical, it should soon drive him to rashness. Perhaps he could get a full minute of the vital two out of this playacting.

“No, idiot. If you move away I won’t kill you…much.”

Thor bit back laughter. “How is one killed less or more? I did not realize mortals were so versatile in death. Can one die, yet only die a little? I am confused. Might you explain it to me?”

The enemy gave a wordless yell and fired his weapon. Thor ducked as blue light flashed across the compartment. The weapon was one developed from the power of the Tesseract. This Hydra had access to them and that was terrible news, indeed. “Stay still, fucker!”

“Truly, you seek to confuse me again. First you bid me move, now that I have moved you bid me stay? Please sir, choose one or the other; I am but a simple warrior and cannot follow your thoughts.” More than a minute had passed. Thor contained his jubilation. Running footsteps echoed in the distance. By the sound a good dozen enemies approached. He glanced around, hoping for inspiration that would allow him to defend the equipment without leaving his position. A nearby set of screens had three chairs fastened to the floor before them. Ducking another blue beam he shoved Mjölnir’s handle in his belt and ripped two of the seats from their fastenings and threw them with all his strength at the approaching Hydra personnel and then laughed heartily as they tumbled backwards. “A fine game you bring me,” he enthused. “Such hospitality.” Ripping the third chair from its spot he swung it casually to send the other man flying and another blue beam of energy off-target.

A beeping sound drew his attention back to the flash drive and the screen above it. “Payload delivered,” said the voice of Jarvis, Stark’s artificial assistant. “Mr. Stark wishes you to know that Hammer Industries cannot code their way out of a paper bag. Have a nice day.”

With that all of the screens darkened as did the lights. The sound of the Helicarrier’s engine began to whine and fade. The craft lurched as silence reigned. Then the screaming of mortal voices started elsewhere on the carrier. Thor grabbed the flash drive from the jack and pulled Mjölnir out to bash a hole through the door leading to his exit then looked at the downed men. One or two were somewhat conscious. “Many thanks for the fine entertainment,” he called out to them as he took to the air.

… …

“We head for the Fridge next,” John told him quietly. “Take out that Quinjet, sabotage our jet, and take the Bus.”

“They’ll send a warning.”

“Not if we disable their communications array. Don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be, boy. I’ll think you’re waffling on me.”

Grant snapped a quick glare at his mentor. “Never. But these people haven’t hurt us; I’d rather leave them in one piece…if we can.”

“Hence the taking out their communications and transportation. If the rumors are right, that will give us a week at least. No one wants to risk the Asgardian’s temper by interrupting the freak’s
honeymoon.”

The doors to the Avengers’ Quinjet opened and a tall, taller than Grant, dark haired man strolled down the ramp wearing a designer suit; he was followed by Clint Barton. “Looks like someone already interrupted it.”

“Shit. This is going to go south, I can feel it; if I can’t count on you, tell me now, boy.”

“You know you can.” Until and if John threatened Skye; that he wouldn’t tolerate. Trip was looking up at the prince, his gaze assessing. Fitz-Simmons were staring openmouthed and Skye had an outright smile on her pretty face. Wait. Where had Melinda gone? “Where’s May?” he asked Garrett.

“Went to check on Coulson; you missed that? You’re slipping, boyo.”

If John called him a variation of ‘boy’ one more time…no, it wouldn’t be worth it. “You had me watching the aircraft.”

“Right, but you’ve got to keep more than one ball in the air at all times.”

Bastard never would admit when he was in the wrong. Grant watched as Skye approached the alien. “Hello, you must be Prince Loki,” she offered in a welcoming tone. “I’ve heard so much about you, it kind of makes me wonder how much of it was real and how much was BS.”

The alien’s eyebrows rose. “If it was negative, it was likely true.”

“O-okay. Um, excuse me, but I’ve got to call bullshit on that. If it were, the Avengers wouldn’t have welcomed you to their team.”

A smirk creased the lean face. “Ah, a human who thinks rather than simply reacts to gossip. How does it feel to be a minority?”

“Wait a minute,” Fitz interrupted. “We think,” he said, indicating himself and Simmons.

“You would be the scientists of the group?” The two nodded in unison with slight smiles. “Ah. But you were not the ones who expressed your thoughts so what good did they do?”

Both faces fell. “Hey, that wasn’t exactly fair,” Skye picked up the ball and ran with it. She was so gutsy in the defense of others; it was what had drawn Grant to her in the first place. “Scientists have to gather data first and then weigh all the evidence. They don’t have the luxury of going with their instincts like I do. They have to back up their instincts with measurable proof.”

This time the alien smiled, and it looked warm and genuine. “Well said. Where is your leader, Skye? I have business to settle with him.”

“What kind of business?”

“This business of not dying when I’d killed him.”

“You aren’t going to hurt him; we won’t allow it.” Grant decided that this was his cue to approach. He moved to Skye’s side and found the alien was only an inch or so taller than his own six-two. Funny; he looked a lot taller than that.

“Hmm. And your watchdog here is going to stop me if that is what I intend? Hardly.”

“I’m not her watchdog, I’m her friend,” he ground out. He didn’t like this so-called god.
“Are you?”

“Yes, he is,” Skye insisted.

“Ah, but I didn’t ask you, young one.” This time the alien’s voice was kind. Sharp green eyes flicked from Skye to him. “I asked you. Yes or no; are you her true friend?”

He stared at hard expression that had transformed that lean face when the prince’s attention had shifted. Was he her friend? “Yes; though I’d like to be more, that hasn’t happened yet.”

Prince Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Interesting. Well, my dear,” he said to Skye. “It appears you have a suitor.” Skye blushed in response. “Time will tell if he is a worthy one.”

“Loki! Stop playing games with the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents,” a woman called out from the direction of the Security Center. A moment later a redhead emerged. Redhead was kind of an understatement. Her hair was strange; it had every shade of red he’d ever seen represented in the strands. And her eyes…talk about freaky. The colors shifted back and forth, like shimmering gems or maybe a kaleidoscope. Red hair, funny eyes, oh crap, this must be Hellbringer. “You know it makes them grumpy.”

“... ...”

“But it is so tempting, my love,” Loki told her wearing a world class smirk. Kara rolled her eyes. She’d finished going over the files Jarvis had hacked from S.H.I.E.L.D. and unless Hydra had passed on intel from them that was coded for a level ten or above, none of these people would know just how accurately she could read them. They’d be careful around Loki; her, not so much. When Kara had encountered her on the way out of the Security Center, Melinda confirmed that she hadn’t told any of them about her experience with therapy, so the stealthy parts of her abilities were still under wraps.

“I’m sure it is, but resist the temptation.” She smiled as he gathered her close for a hug and a too brief kiss. “Your goddaughter needs to be rescued from her father. Clint rushed right in and is kissing the hell out of her. Go and talk some sense into him, will you?”

His smirk grew and she knew he was translating that as ‘get out of here so they’ll talk and we can really find out what’s going on with them’. “Of course, Kara; I shan’t guarantee the child ceases being smothered by affection, however, just that her father stops doing so.”

Loki was going to be an overly affectionate dad, she could tell. It was too bad he’d missed out on Hel’s childhood. They both would have benefited from being together. Of course, she might never have met Loki in that case. “Fine; the two of you can one up each other about who gets to spoil her. Go; you know you want to.”

“So I do.” He dropped one more quick kiss on her lips and excused himself to head into the command center.

“Well, isn’t this fun; The Newlywed Game live and in person,” a snottily sarcastic voice muttered. She gave John Garrett a considering appraisal. Ego, check. Intelligence, hampered by the ego, but still, check. Chutzpah, double check. Grant Ward was looking warily at his former S.O. and she quickly read his emotions. Loyalty, gratitude, love, hate, annoyance, what a mix, and all of it directed at Garrett. Very interesting.

“Yes, well, this was supposed to be our honeymoon. We’re rather annoyed with this Hydra group as you can imagine. Tony only had that nutty Latverian dictator and his robots interrupt his.”
“That was his wedding,” Beth said as she joined them. “You said Amora and Kurse interrupted his honeymoon, oh, and Malekith.”

“Oh. Right you are. We had Angrboða and Amora and Kurse interrupt our wedding, and they brought Amora’s sister Lorelei into it as well. So we’ve still got the worse interruption. One nut and his robots as opposed to a whole subversive organization.”

“Hydra doesn’t consider itself subversive, honey,” Garrett said, still in that supercilious tone.

“Princess,” she corrected. “You really don’t want to piss off Loki. Distracted by his goddaughter or not, I’m sure he’s watching the security feed.”

“Whatever, princess. They think they’re bringing about order to a world of chaos.”

“Spoken to many Hydra agents, have you?” she asked lightly. The smug factor in him rose exponentially. He really thought he was playing her.

“I’ve come across some here and there. I’ve been in S.H.I.E.L.D. a long time.” All truth and that would be all that Loki would have seen. She, however, felt the bastard’s excitement with the game he was playing.

“How about you, Agent Ward?” she asked.

The young man frowned. “I haven’t exactly had a conversation with anyone who admitted being Hydra,” he told her. Also the truth, but also a misdirection. He was worried…and conflicted. “I suppose, in retrospect, some of the people whose loyalty I’ve questioned might be Hydra.”

Now that was an outright lie. “I suppose so. How about you Agent Triplett?”

“I don’t see why you’re asking all of these questions. Is our loyalty to S.H.I.E.L.D. in question?” The man’s response was slightly belligerent and felt all the way offended. He didn’t know. Wow.

“But all. I’m trying to understand how Hydra got so deeply entrenched. It’s the psychologist in me.”

“There was definitely something strange going on at the Academy,” the other young man, the one with a slight Scottish accent, told her. Leo Fitz, she recalled from the file. Mechanical genius somewhere near Tony’s level, but without Tony’s drive to succeed, or his overweening ego.

“That’s right, we both noticed it,” Jemma Simmons agreed in her English accent. Another genius, this one in bio-chemistry. Fury had certainly pulled out all of the stops for Coulson’s team.

“And it’s all tied up with Centipede. That’s kind of the same imagery, isn’t it? Lots of legs instead of lots of heads?” This one must be Skye, no last name and no real history…and…she didn’t feel exactly human. Now that wasn’t even hinted at in the files.

“Not much of an analogy.” That was from Garrett again. He was really getting on her last nerve. After the surprise with Skye, she turned her healer’s ‘eye’ to his anatomy and got her second shock of the evening. The man was some kind of cyborg! Another critical bit of information missing from that otherwise detailed file.

“I don’t know,” she replied casually. “There could be something there.” She turned to face the aperture of the security camera; her back was now to the others. ‘Make an excuse to call me in there, keep Coulson there,’ she said silently before turning back. Garrett was mouthing off some more; everyone looked uncomfortable, even his protégé. Kara thought about interrupting him, but
was saved from that by the emergence of Hawkeye from the security center.

“Kara, you’re needed to mediate between your husband and Agent Coulson,” Clint said in an unusually terse voice.

“Damn; I told Loki to keep it civil.”

“You should have given the same advice to Coulson.”

Garrett spoke up. “Hell, I’ve got to see this.”

Kara whirled on him. “No. Absolutely not. You were not there for the incident in question or the aftermath with Loki. You have no business being involved.”

“Look, sweetheart…”

“And furthermore, if you call me by anything but my name or my title One. More. Time. I will fry you where you stand.”

She marched off, shoulders stiff, swallowing a chuckle when she heard Ward whisper, “John, back off; she’s Hellbringer, you’ve seen her file. She could do it.”

“Damn, that just makes riling her up all the more fun.”

… …

Steve pulled a service hatch open and slipped in, closing it behind him. If God was with him, the light indicating that the hatch was open that appeared on the control room’s screens was on briefly enough to have gone unnoticed. His eyes adjusted to the dimness quickly and he made his way through the service corridor to an equipment-filled room. Yes! There were unattended consoles, complete with input jacks for the flash drive he’d been given by Lauren at the Triskelion. The device slipped in easily on his second attempt – who knew there was only one way to put it in? He straightened with a slight smile. Still no evidence that anyone knew he was there; this was a piece of cake. A chill raced down his spine. There was no sound, but…Steve threw himself to the side just before he heard the sound of a bullet being fired. The slug hit the flash drive, destroying it. “Crap.” He touched his comm unit. “Drive destroyed before deployment,” he hissed. “Do you copy?” Tucking and rolling away from more gunfire he struggled to get a look at his opponent.

“Copy that,” Iron Man told him, his voice terse and miracle of miracles, serious for once. “Get your star-spangled ass out of there and we’ll get handle it some other way.”

“Roger. As soon as I get past this…holy crap. Bucky?” He stared at the face revealed when he engaged with the shooter and pulled off a dark leather half mask that covered the bottom half of the man’s face.

A confused look crossed the familiar features. “I don’t…know you. ‘Do I?’

“Cap? What the hell is going on?” Stark said in his ear.

“Of course you do, you’re my best friend, we practically grew up together,” Steve entreated. “Come on, Buck, you saved my butt how many times?”

“No; no, I don’t…who are you?” That face, one that he’d always associated with strength and confidence, looked lost. Then it hardened. “No.” Bucky’s arm flew up with excruciating force and sent him flying backwards. What the heck? Not even Thor’s hits felt that hard.
“Bucky, come on; you’ve got to remember me, Steve Rogers, remember? You’re my best friend ever! I can’t fight you!”

Bucky stalked forward, his eyes cold. Steve couldn’t help staring as a ripped sleeve revealed that his left arm was covered in, no, replaced by, some kind of metal “All the easier for me.”

Steve stood firm, staring his friend down. Bucky was miraculously alive, he wasn’t going to be the one to change that even if he was somehow working for Hydra. “They’ve messed with your mind; you are James Buchanan Barnes and you’ve been my best friend since you were thirteen. Come on, Bucky, remember me!” he pleaded.

“No.”

Steve tried to jump to the side as Bucky reached for him and they stumbled together, falling against that service hatch. It opened and they fell through the hatch and into the air. “No!” he screamed, reaching out for Bucky, only to miss. “Damn it!”

… …

Tony had used Jarvis to finess his way into the auxiliary control center and was waiting for his flash drive to finish delivering the payload when Roger’s mayday came through. “J, as soon as the engines are disabled, boot them up and reroute all control here. We’re going to crash this puppy into the carrier Cap was targeting and take them both down.”

“That is extremely risky, sir.”

“Yeah, ain’t it grand?”

“As you say, Mr. Stark.” The payload was delivered, all screens went dark and the engines silent, then the three screens right in front of him flashed on. “Control diverted.”

“You’re the best, J.”

“You would know, sir.”

His fingers flew over the manual controls and the behemoth began to turn. He checked and double-checked the course then nodded in satisfaction. “Okay, let’s lock this puppy down and boogie on out of here.” The lockdown protocol appeared and he activated it. No one save him and Jarvis would be able to alter the course now. “I gotta tell you, J, I’m worried about Cap. Who’s Bucky?”

“Bucky may refer to US Army Sergeant James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, a companion of Captain Rogers who was lost in combat shortly before the Captain himself was lost.”

“And maybe no more dead than the Boy Scout was? Huh.” He stepped out of the hatch he’d overridden and stared at the two figures falling toward the Potomac. “Oh, shit. Thor, are you close enough to grab Cap?” he asked as he launched himself towards them.

“I will try, my friend,” Thor’s voice said without much confidence.

“Damn it. Pour on the speed, Jarvis. Give it everything we’ve got.”

… …

Loki looked up as Kara stalked into the room. She was seething. “I’d want to fry that bastard even if I weren’t convinced he was Hydra,” she told the two men and the woman who were hovering
over the baby. Her eyebrows went up as she took in the sight. “I figured Clint was using the excuse I asked for to get me in here, but I sure didn’t expect this.” she said, spreading her hands to encompass the tableau.

Agent Coulson, Phil, smiled up at her. “It’s hard to hold a grudge when there’s a cute baby in the room.”

“My goddaughter is beautiful, not simply cute,” Loki felt obliged to point out.

Barton stepped up from behind Kara and fist-pumped the air. “That’s my kid!”

“I am certain she takes most after her mother,” Loki drawled.

“Well, yeah, but who had the good taste to fall for her mother?”

“Point taken. Darling, what did you need to tell us?” he asked.

Kara frowned and nodded at Coulson and May. “Your files are missing some crucial information,” she said to the agents, her tone wavering between annoyed and concerned.

“Such as?” Coulson asked.

“Were you aware that John Garrett is some kind of cyborg?”

Coulson’s eyes widened almost comically. “That would be no.”

“And your consultant is a bit of a surprise as well.”

“Meaning?” Phil asked. Loki could tell the man was holding something back in that response.

“She’s not fully human. I don’t know what else she is, but her energy is really off. I’m talking other Realm off, not just a human-mutant or super-soldier kind of off.”

“Interesting. We did find out that she was classified as an oh-eight-four,” Agent May offered. “But we haven’t been able to find out why.”

“What in Valhalla is an oh-eight-four?” Loki asked irritably as Barton and Kara both nodded at Coulson’s statement.

“Code for an object of unknown origin,” Coulson supplied. “By the way, are we good now?”

Loki smirked at the man’s non sequitur. The agent had accepted his apology with an offhand ‘I knew there was something very wrong with your game plan’. “We’re…good, as you say, and thank you.”

“Not an issue. Your offer to have a healer from Asgard take a look at me and Skye to see what that serum may have done is very reassuring.”

Kara sidled over to him and rubbed his arm. “That was a very thoughtful offer,” she murmured.

“I am capable of thoughtfulness, you know.”

“I know. Okay, so we table the issue with Skye, but Garrett? Something is totally rotten there.”

“I agree,” Coulson said quietly. “But what do we do about it?”
“Contain him,” Barton suggested, snagging the baby and moving over to a table to change Brianna’s wet nappies.

“Did you miss my cyborg verbal memo?” Kara asked the former assassin.

“Oh, come on. Are you going to tell me that Loki’s mojo can’t handle a little tech?”

“Not when I do not know the extent or capabilities of said tech,” he returned. “What about the other one. He lied when he claimed to be the young woman’s friend.” Frowning, he added: “Though he quite honestly said he wished to be more than her friend.”

Barton had the infant redressed and was holding her close against his chest. “Pretend you don’t know something’s up with Ward and contain Garrett. If Ward tries to interfere or release Garrett, then we’re sure he’s one hundred percent in with him. If he doesn’t, we wait until we’re sure either way to take action.”

Kara sighed. “We’ll call Tony and have him set up some kind of tech disabling field, I know he’s been fiddling with one. Then you can use your power to hold Garrett and his tech won’t do him any good. Much as I hate to give him the chance, Clint’s right about Ward. We have to give him enough rope to hang himself with.”

“Have I ever mentioned how I enjoy your quaint expressions?”

… …

He was hurtling toward the polluted waters of the Potomac. With the weight of his bionic arm, there was no value in attempting to slow his fall by spreading his body out as his-target was doing. Twisting into a diving pose, he extended that less vulnerable arm while using the other to pull the mask up over the lower part of his face to protect his neck and jaw from the impact.

In the distance he could see the Iron Man and the Asgardian speeding to the scene, they would be too late. Fortunately for his target, the Helicarrier had been near the Three Sisters islands, the water should be deep enough for him not to plunge through to the bottom. If he was lucky and the intel on Captain America’s physical capabilities was correct, he would also survive the fall. Captain America…Steve Rogers…why did that sound so familiar…so…personal. Did he really know the American hero? How? The man had refused to fight him, why?

There was no more time to think as his bionic hand broke the water and he moved it quickly to disturb the water molecules enough to limit damage to the more vulnerable parts of his body. The impact was still excruciatingly painful, but he was able to maintain consciousness and return to the surface to replace the air forced out of his lungs when he hit. Looking around, he could not see the American, just the disturbance in the water where he had gone under. The other heroes were still too far away.

Plunging beneath the surface he searched for and found the unconscious hero…his friend? His best friend? Did he have any friends? It would be foolish to let this man die until he could learn the truth of his claims. Swimming strongly, he grasped the unconscious hero under the chin in a lifeguard’s towing position and dragged him to the closest island and then pulled him up onto the shore. After a brief examination, he turned the blonde over and pressed on his back rhythmically until the water he’d swallowed was expelled. The Iron Man was headed their way; undoubtedly his tech had alerted him to their position. It was time to go. With a last long and troubled look at the unconscious Captain America, he melted off into the woods.

… …
Yest' der'mo, i umeret', zasranec = “Eat shit and die, asshole” for those who are keeping track.
“I’ve got Cap; get back to the Triskelion. Fury, Hill, and T.W. Three are going to need help,” Tony told Thor as he touched down next to the Boy Scout’s unconscious form. He was breathing, that was a plus.

“Aye, take care; the other is about somewhere.”

“I know it; Jarvis is searching for him. Bastard’s like a ghost, though.” Looking up he saw Thor spin in mid-air and change directions.

“Bu…Bucky’s ghost,” Cap rasped.

“Who?”

“Best friend, Bucky Barnes. Lost him in the war.”

Sounded like Jarvis had guessed correctly. “Was Hydra in the vicinity?”

“Dealing wi…with Red Skull.”

Damn. Howard had talked about that bastard, usually with a tumbler of scotch in one hand. “Sorry, bud. But if he was involved then they’ve turned your friend somehow.”

“Yeah. Got that.” Rogers was already sounding stronger and sat up on his own. “He didn’t remember me at first, Stark. They must have wiped his memory somehow. But he’s breaking out of it.”

“Uh huh. What makes you think that?”

“I don’t remember anything between the shock of hitting the water and hearing you land. He saved my life.”

… …

“Stark’s busy in DC, we’ll have to handle this joker ourselves,” Clint informed them.

“His kind won’t turn on their masters. We should put him down like a rabid dog,” Loki advised.

Phil Coulson shook his head. “Not that I disagree,” he said when they stared at him. “But that won’t help us determine whether Ward is salvageable or not.”

“So?”

Kara winced at Clint’s blunt rejoinder. “Clint; you took a chance on Nat, she took a chance on you, and I took a chance on Loki. I think Agent Ward deserves that same chance. There’s something weird about how he reacts around Garrett. His emotions are totally contradictory,” Clint sighed, looked down at Brianna and then back at Loki before nodding.

“Stockholm syndrome?” Coulson asked.
“Mmm, no; but along those lines. He seems to look at Garrett as both a hero and an oppressor at the same time. It would make a hell of a case study if I were still practicing.”

“We don’t have time for case studies, love.”

“And I’m not still practicing, am I? The point is, there’s something going on that isn’t strictly good or evil and it needs to be questioned.”

“Hey, why don’t you roast Garrett and Loki can grab Ward and secure him,” Clint suggested. “Phil can watch out for the rest of his team and Melinda and I’ll protect Brianna.”

“I can’t just roast someone who hasn’t done anything that we can prove.”

“Well, sh…sugar.”

… …

People were running all over the place. Nick ducked back into alcoves whenever the fleeing agents or their pursuers got too close. He didn’t want anyone to be able to confirm that he was still alive, let alone here. If they couldn’t cleanse the Division of Hydra’s influence, he was going to have to let it get shut down and rebuild a new organization. He couldn’t do that as the face of the old one. Better to let them all think he was dead. “Director?” Hill gasped from behind him. Fuck.

“What are you doing here?”

“We came for you.” Standing with his back to her, peering through the smoke and dust that filled the corridor was Asgard’s resident dandy, Fandral the Daring, or some such bullshit. “Romanov let us know you needed an anonymous way out. She picked up Hawley from Avengers’ Tower and is escorting her and the other targeted directors to a safe-house, one we won’t mind losing too much, until Kara or Loki can question them to be certain they weren’t in on this.”

Good. He may have people who weren’t loyal, but his loyal people were still thinking in top form. He drew a deep breath and winced. His chest was still tight despite Asgard’s best efforts over the past few days. “I’ve got a path out, just got to get to it.”

“We’ll make a distraction to let you cross open areas unseen,” Hill continued. “Which way?”

“Your office,” he told them, smirking at the look of surprise that pulled from his second in command.

“Damn; wish I’d known that.” She tapped the Æsir’s shoulder. “Got it?”

“Yes, my…Deputy. Your office; twentieth floor, as I recall?”

“Good memory,” she agreed.

“Hill, you’re limping.” It wasn’t a question. Nick looked down at the metallic sleeve that encased her thigh.

“ Took a bullet from The Winter Soldier.” He flinched and she nodded. “Yes, he’s here and in your absence, I assume, gunning for me. Stark and Dr. Banner patched me up since we need every trusted hand on deck right now. Let’s move out.”

They dodged skirmishes in which you could not tell one side from another and climbed over fallen bodies with hearts growing ever heavier. When they passed fighting where they could tell who was
Hydra, either Hill or Fandral would take them out and advise the loyal combatant to get to safety and wait for contact. Until they came across Olivia Ramos. “Fuck,” Nick muttered. The young agent had a wound on her temple dripping blood, some kind of jacket folded and tied around her waist that was already blood-soaked, and was sprawled between two former S.T.R.I.K.E. Team agents, one dead judging by the fact that he had a gaping hole where his left eye and nose should be and the other moaning piteously in an ever-widening pool of his own blood. “Ramos, look at me,” he demanded.

The girl’s dark eyes opened and struggled to focus. “Director, sent the files, coded,” she managed. Goddamn. That was good news. “Good job. Let’s get you out of here so you can decode them on the other end.”

“Not gonna make…”

“Belay that bullshit. I don’t want to hear it.” He dropped to a knee and took a closer look at her side. The bullet hadn’t hit any major arteries and from the angle, appeared to be lodged in her right hip bone. It was a miracle she’d been able to get this far. A broom with a section of the end broken off lay nearby; she must have been using it as a makeshift crutch. He folded the jacket and had Fandral retrieve the belts worn by the two traitors and used them to hold the pressure on the wound. There was no way she could walk. Hill and Fandral were better equipped to fight than he was and carrying Olivia over his shoulder would hide his face from one direction. “Help me get her in a fireman’s carry,” he told Maria.

“You shouldn’t be…” Hill began.

“Somebody’s got to and you’re not in much better shape and Fandral needs to be free to fight. I’ll manage.” Damned straight he’d manage. He’d lost Ramos’ father when the man had taken bullets meant for him a while back. He wasn’t leaving Olivia behind.

“Box,” the young agent muttered as they hefted her up and he stood somewhat shakily.

“Where?” Hill asked before following the injured girl’s pointing finger and retrieved a small standard safety box, meant to protect SD cards from electronic influence and crushing. “Got it.”

Olivia sighed and relaxed as he took it from Hill and zipped it inside his vest. “Has the keys for decoding. Jarvis can do it if I don’t make it,” she managed.

“You’re damn well going to make it and that’s an order, is that clear?” he demanded sternly. Her “CFB, sir,” was a pained whisper. Goddamn motherfuckers.

… …

Garrett was pacing when they went back outside. Kara noted that he was looking everywhere except at the three aircraft. “Is there someplace you need to be?” she asked, thanking heaven, not for the first time, that Clint and Loki had decided to leave the WSC rep with Bruce and Darcy instead of bringing her here. She so did not need the Regents seeing, in person no less, just what she could do. Sure, as a Princess of Asgard she had diplomatic immunity, but she doubted that would hold weight with their sense of entitlement.

He turned his smarmy face her way and a wave of gloating superiority washed over her. “We got a call while you were playing peacemaker,” he said casually. “Seems there’s trouble at the Triskelion. Trip and I have been recalled. They need every loyal agent for backup.”
“Then we’d best send Agents May, Coulson and Triplett,” she told him. “You and Agent Ward can stay here to protect the scientists.”

The bastard smirked. “I’ll go and take Ward, Trip can stay here. They don’t know Coulson’s loyal, but they’ll listen to me about Ward since I used to be his S.O.; they’ll clear him and he can clear the others. Coulson and May they’d shoot on sight.”

Triplett was definitely not a traitor. It was looking worse and worse for Ward. “I thought you said they called for loyal agents? Who was the call from? Hydra?”

“Kara,” Loki hissed as Garrett moved, far more quickly then she’d expected, and grabbed Skye, pulling her in front of him as a living shield.

“Nobody move. If I see any movement, or anybody disappears, she’s dead,” he continued, nodding at Loki.

“John, no. Let her go,” Ward spoke up.

“Get their communications array disabled boy; we’re outta here.”

Indecision flashed through the younger man, then he straightened with a grimly determined look. Kara held back a groan of disappointment. She’d really thought he cared…wait. His emotions shifted again. Ward nodded and moved behind Garrett to avoid putting himself in the line of fire, heading in the direction of the Security building. Once he was totally out of the renegade’s line of sight, he spun and the foot of one long leg hit the older man in the back of the head, sending him sprawling. “Skye, run,” Ward yelled and jumped on Garrett’s back before he was able to regain his feet.

Loki disappeared from her side and reappeared next to the girl; taking her in his arms he disappeared again and then emerged alone from the security building. “She’s with Barton and May,” he reported. “Bethany, retreat and take those two in with you,” he instructed.

“Got it.” The blonde urged the two scientists into the relative safety of the heavily reinforced building.

“What the hell?” Agent Triplett asked as he stared at the bizarre sight of the much older and out of shape looking Garrett easily tossing Ward off of him and several yards down the beach.

“He’s got some kind of cybernetic augmentation,” Kara told him, approaching carefully as the traitor watched Ward clamber to his feet. “And he’s Hydra.”

“You’re…shit, he muttered, diving to the side as Garrett fired a hand gun of some kind.

“Drop your weapon, John, there’s no place to go,” Ward called out.

“If I go down, I take you with me, boy.”

“I’d deserve it. What happened to you, John? It wasn’t like this, it was never supposed to be like this.”


“You know nothing,” he snapped. “And not even a pair of self-professed gods can take me down.”
Her eyebrows rose as Loki snickered and Ward sat down heavily on the ground. “Uh, John? Remember the Titan?”

Garrett stared at the younger man like he was out of his mind. “You’ve lost it, boyo. What does a maudlin football movie have to do with anything?”

Kara chuckled. “Not Titans, Garrett, Titan. As in the Battle of Central Park bad guy that should have been able to destroy the entire planet he was so powerful. Yet Loki and I blew him to bits.”

“To be honest, love. Helblindi and Gymir did assist in that.”

“True; but Mr. Garrett here doesn’t have cosmic energy infusing his cells, and he hasn’t been cursed by Death to never die…so far as we know. He should be much easier.”

“Good point, Kara. Now get on with it; I want this interruption to our honeymoon over.”

“Pushy; don’t rush me.”

“You’re a couple of fucking lunatics!” Garrett shouted as he pulled a slightly larger weapon that shot a beam of blue energy at them.

Kara blinked as it bounced off a swiftly raised shield of green tinted magical energy. “You’ve gotten faster at that,” she told her husband.

“Not really; I was waiting for him to try it.” Garrett stared at them both and then spun to fire at Triplett, Ward, and Coulson in quick succession. Coulson was behind Loki and to the left and the green shield flared again as the beam struck it. Ward and Triplett were not so fortunate and had to dive for cover. “Do continue to dawdle, love. Eventually he will hit someone.”

“Oh come on; you know this takes time.” She concentrated fiercely, and finally found the key to altering the molecular structure of the cybernetics enough to make them burn. “Uh oh,” she muttered as a domino-style cascade of energy built. “Shield the building and everybody run!” she warned and hurried towards the door.

… …

Loki quickly expanded his shielding to protect the building and backed towards it, meeting and then pushing Coulson back as he went. The other two humans would have to fend for themselves, there was naught he could do for them. Garrett’s smirk disappeared as he felt the burning deep within him and his face twisted into a rictus of agony before simply disappearing in the resulting explosion. The concussion of energy against his power was enough to send him staggering. Coulson leaned into his back and enabled him to stay on his feet. “My thanks,” he told the human, righting himself.

“My pleasure.” The area was strewn with debris, much of it flesh, interspersed with metal of some sort. “Wow, she doesn’t do things halfway. Do you think the energy that was released could be dangerous to us?”

“I…no, I do not believe so, at least, not the ambient amount spread across the area. Were it concentrated there could be a problem.”

They looked around for the other two men and saw Ward clambering to his feet in waist deep water. He’d evidently run off the beach and dived under the waves to escape the explosion. Clever. A rustling of vegetation signaled the other man’s survival. “Can I get a hand over here?” Agent… Triplett, that was his name, called out.
The three of them headed toward the voice and found the dark skinned human hanging from a tree, his head and chest seemingly trapped between branches. “How in the Nine did you manage that?” Loki asked.

“Didn’t. I was running and felt the concussive force and then blacked out for a few seconds and found myself like this when I came to.”

“We’re going to have to tie him off and then cut one of those branches,” Coulson said.

“No; tie him off, yes, but if I climb out beyond him my weight will separate the branches without chancing breaking his ribs or neck when the one you try to saw off snaps,” Ward told them.

“Good call. You up for this?” Coulson asked.

“After all I’ve done? I’d better be. I’m sure you don’t want me on the Bus by myself. Can you get me a rope?”

“No need,” Loki told them and pulled a coil of silk climbing rope out of what Stark liked to refer to as his ‘hammerspace’. “It’s woven by the Ljósálfar from the webs of a spider-like creature that inhabits their realm and is far stronger than it looks,” he informed them when he noticed their skeptical expressions. “A coil of this diameter will support over two of your tons in weight with ease.”

“Nice,” Ward commented as he threaded his arm and head through it so that he could wear it like a bandolier as he climbed. “Hang on, Trip. I’ll be there in a minute.”

… …

“Yeah, not going anywhere,” Trip managed and tried not to barf as the tree swayed presenting him with crazy changing views of the vegetation, the beach, and the ocean. “This has got to be the worst landing I’ve ever done.”

“Are you hurt?” Grant Ward asked him as he drew closer.

“Uh, not badly enough to notice so far.”

“Then maybe it’s the best one you’ve done.”

“A matter of perspective. Sure.” He fell silent, waiting for Grant to reach him. Shit. Grant and Garrett were Hydra. Everything he thought he knew was hanging as precariously as he was.

Ward appeared slightly above him and swiftly fashioned a rope harness around his body then passed the free end over a stable branch and dropped it to ground. “Let me know when you’ve got it secured.”

Blinking as salt water and a bit of sand from Grant Ward’s clothing dripped into his face he looked down in time to see Loki bend over and pick up the rope. “Done,” the prince announced.

“Uh, shouldn’t you tie it off?” Trip found himself asking nervously.

The man frowned and wrapped it around one hand and held it with the other. “I’m likely stronger than anything I could tie it off to.”

Yeah, gods. Right. “Oooookay.” Grant took a step out onto the lower of the branches that held him and Trip felt himself begin to shift as it moved. Slowly he slipped down between them and then
was supported solely by the rope harness. A glance at Loki showed him holding the rope taut, seemingly with no effort whatsoever. “Damn, he’s strong.”

Grant moved down one branch and nodded. “ Doesn’t look it, but never judge a book by its cover, I guess.”

Loki began letting the rope slide slowly through his grip, lowering him towards safety. Grant kept pace climbing from branch to branch. “What happened to you, man?” he finally asked.

The specialist shook his head. “I-I guess I believed in the wrong person. I never wanted this; any of it.”

“Yeah, well you’ve bought yourself a shit load of trouble.”

“Story of my life.”

“Look, just try to be honest about it all; maybe there’s something we can do for you.”

“Really, Trip? I’m a damn traitor. I don’t deserve…” he broke off as Trip felt strong hands around his waist, settling him down on the ground.

“We’ll listen,” Loki said. “Everyone deserves a chance to be heard and a chance to change. I know that better than most.”

… …

Thor set down in the battleground that had once been a busy street. One of the small projectiles favored on Midgard pinged off his armor making him frown. A quick glance showed Hogun and Volstagg ignoring the bullets but dodging bursts of blue energy. It seemed all of the combatants in the immediate area other than his friends were Hydra. He stood tall, not flinching as one of the bullets as they were called managed to penetrate his skin. It would come out easily enough later. Raising Mjölnir, he called out to his comrades. “Stand clear!” Hogun and Volstagg looked back at him and up at the sky noting the swiftly gathering clouds then retreated to points by his sides and took themselves low to the ground. Thunder rumbled in the distance as the storm answered his call. A moment later the full storm arrived and lightning flashed down to strike the Uru Hammer before being distributed in a wide circle of bolts that struck or scattered their enemies. Thunder right overhead crashed loudly enough that the ground shook. “Surrender or you die this day!”

One sought to wisely surrender and was shot by his own comrade. “They’re mad, Thor,” Volstagg proclaimed.

“Aye, my friend; so it seems. After the others.” They chased down the few survivors of the lightning strike until the street was clear. “Have you found Fandral?” he asked them.

“He has returned to the building with Lady Maria, they seek to aid the man of Fury.” Volstagg advised. “We’d been keeping these scoundrels occupied so the innocents in the area could escape.”

“What of the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel who are loyal?”

“Hard to tell,” Hogun muttered disgustedly.

Volstagg chuckled. “True; all look much the same in their livery. We decided that if they made no move to attack us and appeared grateful to see us, they were loyal and we allowed them to pass.” The big warrior shrugged. “Else we risked killing the blameless.”
Thor stared up at the tall building from which smoke was pouring and touched the communications device still in his ear. “Has anyone heard from our people still in the building?” he asked on the open channel.

Iron Man answered. “Romanov is out with the Council members; she’s got them stashed safely and under guard. No word from Hill or the Pirate.” A long pause ensued while Thor remembered that Tony oft referred to Fury as such. “Uh, buddy? No word from Olivia either. She dumped a huge-ass file on Jarvis right before he lost contact with her.”

His throat tightened. While he did not love the young woman, he was fond of her and valued her friendship. “I shall find her.”

“Cool beans. Keep the channel open. Cap is on his way back to Necker Island. We haven’t heard from the honeymooners in too long and no one’s answering there.”

Loki and Kara could protect themselves and their godchild, Thor thought, pushing his worry for Brianna aside. “Understood. I’ll keep you advised of my progress.” He looked around the now deserted street. “Follow me,” he told his friends and headed for the building.

… …

Kara emerged from the security building after Melinda and watched her sprint over to the three aircraft before looking around. Pieces of flesh and metal stopped in a line a yard or two in front of the door where Loki had held his shield. “I’ve got to find a way to do this that isn’t so nauseating,” she muttered as she concentrated on the mess and quickly turned all the biological remains to ash. Picking her way through the scattered bits of metal to the foliage, she could hear the four men talking. Arriving just in time for Loki’s comment to a chagrined Grant Ward, she nodded. “Exactly. But keep in mind, you’ve got a hell of a lot to prove…to all of us.”

The younger man nodded. “I’m aware.”

“Good; now, we’ve got a problem. The energy that was released somehow shorted out our communications. Melinda has already gone over to check the aircraft to see if any of their equipment survived. Fitz, Skye, and Clint are pulling apart the island’s array to see if they can fix it.”

Loki shook his head disgustedly and strode back out into the clearing. “If all else fails, Heimdall can get a message to Stark. Not the most efficient method of communicating, but beggars cannot be choosers.”

May stalked out of C-17 Globemaster her team was using as a base. “All three are fried,” she reported. “Not just the communications, everything electrical.”

“Shit.”

“Really, Kara?” Loki admonished with a smirk. “Heimdall, take heed.” He waited for a bit, she assumed to give the Gatekeeper time to hear his name being called and refocus his attention. “We’ve had a problem with all of the technology available here. This means we cannot contact anyone on Midgard or leave here other than through the Branches of Yggdrasil. I’m certain the All-Father would rather we didn’t take humans that way other than in an emergency. Please send a messenger to the Avengers and advise them of our predicament. Thank you.”

“Now we wait?” she asked.

“Now we wait. And Mr. Ward here can begin telling his side of his story.”
Raj Nassar watched as the councilor from the African continent, Masopha Mahlangu, hurriedly pulled items from his floor safe and packed them in cases holding close-cell foam inserts. He’d been watching since the tall wiry muscled man had arrived home and set up his holographic attendance of the Insight launch. The moment Pierce’s forehead became so much meat, Councilor Mahlangu had leapt to his feet to begin packing. Finally the man snapped the last case shut and reached for the dial of the lock to secure it. “Going someplace?” Raj asked in as pleasant a tone as he could manage. Mahlangu spun, fortunately not locking either the cases or the safe before doing so.

“Nassar.” His eyes darted back and forth, doubtless seeking an escape.

“I’ve blocked your escape route,” Raj informed him. “I don’t suppose you have a good reason for not being at the Triskelion?”

Mahlangu roared and jumped forward, grabbing a ceremonial staff that hung from one wall. Raj ducked, rolled and fired upward into the man’s chest. At this angle, it would not likely hit a rib. “You’ll never defeat us,” the traitor gasped. “Hail, Hydra…”

Raj sighed and hopped to his feet as the councilor’s body toppled to the floor. “One down; three to go. What a bloody mess.” He gave an apologetic look at the dead man’s wide eyes as he stepped over him to examine the content of the cases and the safe. “No pun intended.”

… …

“Goddamn motherfuckers,” Nick muttered from behind her.

Not that she disagreed. The blocker that Banner had given her was wearing off and pain was shooting from her wounded thigh. While her office was only a few yards away, those few yards were occupied by four traitors armed with tesseract powered weapons. “We need a distraction.”

“Shall I challenge them to a duel?” Fandral suggested. “Those weapons might do me an injury, but tis not likely the wound would be fatal.”

“We have enough injured as it is,” she returned. “Besides which, you’re too heavy for us to carry if you do go down.” He made a pffft sound, his expression indicating he thought little of that becoming necessary. “Stay put.” With that she ducked under his arm and walked directly around the corner, bold as brass. “Looking for me, gentlemen?” she asked.

“It’s Hill!” one of them yelled and they all raised their weapons and powered them up to fire.

She turned to dive back out of the corridor when the wall exploded just beyond her. “What have we here?” a loud voice that could only belong to Thor proclaimed.

The weapons were hastily retargeted, but the blue bolts fired met and were deflected by the god’s spinning hammer. “Oh thank god,” she muttered as Fandral caught her by the elbows and helped her stay on her feet. Two other Asgardians, one she recognized as Hogun and the other a bear of a man who had to be Volstagg, emerged from the shattered wall and headed towards the traitors, swiftly taking them down.

“My brother tells me that the proper response to that statement is: you’re welcome,” Thor returned as he grabbed the handle of his weapon to quickly halt its spin. She could just make out a dimple through the blonde’s closely trimmed beard as he smiled broadly. “Between you and me, I do know he jests, but it gives him such pleasure to hear me say it.”
Was Loki there? “Please tell me your brother isn’t with you,” her director groused from behind her.

“Nay, Nicholas. He has returned to his honeymoon though we’ve received word that there may be trouble in paradise. We’ve heard naught from them since he and the Hawkeye landed and reported that your Bus and another aircraft were on the runway.”

“Another…oh shit,” Maria felt her gut clench. “That other jet is manned by Garrett and Triplett. They’d been sent to give your team a hand,” she told Fury. “Unfortunately, they were specifically given that order by Pierce.”

“Which means they’re more than likely Hydra, goddamn it.” Nick leaned back against a wall to support Olivia’s weight.

“Ah, you have Olivia,” Thor said as he rounded the corner. “How badly is she hurt?”

“Hip injury; lost a lot of blood. But she’s got guts, she’ll make it.” Nick groaned as he bent to let the god take the young agent from his shoulder. “I think Eir is gonna be pissed.” He punctuated that statement with another groan, clenching his jaw as he straightened.

“Aye, my friend, as will Hel. I was supposed to keep you safe.”

“You just did,” Nick said, nodding at the carnage in the hall. “Come on; let’s see if my emergency exit is compromised. It’ll take too goddamn long to get out of the building before it collapses if we try the conventional routes.”

That was why she’d thought she heard the groan of metal. Oh, fuck. “I didn’t even think…”

“We’ve still got a little time; this section is the most reinforced.” A thunderous crashing sound echoed through the building, almost on cue. Nick grimaced. “A very little time. Let’s go.”

“Everything looks good.” Steve reported as he overflew the end of the island that contained the small airfield. “I still can’t raise anyone though.”

“Raise them how?” a voice said from behind him.

“Jeez!” he looked over his shoulder at the dang god of Mischief who was inexplicably standing behind him wearing a quizzical frown. “Where did you come from?”

“Jötunheim originally, then Asgard.”

“Not funny.”

Loki shrugged. “You have no sense of humor, captain.”

“Oh, come on.”

“You are in uniform. I thought it would be polite.”

So he was; helmet and all. “Whatever. What’s going on down there?”

“All of our tech is out; otherwise all is now well.”

“I take it that means it wasn’t well?”
“Yes. Do not land just yet. I need to make a report and then I want to take some working tech from your vehicle and return to the island and see if it will continue to work. It would not do for you to land and be stranded with us.”

Oh crap. “Good plan.”

… …

“So what do we do with him?” Skye asked after Grant had finished telling them about his history with John Garrett and his painful childhood - the truth this time, as they gathered far enough away from the cuffed and bound double agent that he couldn’t overhear their discussion. “He’s saved my life a couple of times and he’s saved some of you, too.”

“That was part of being under deep cover, Skye,” Melinda told her in a monotone. “Hydra didn’t need us dead yet, so he was forced to save us.”

“I don’t know,” Fitz mused. “I rather think it was more than that.”

“Maybe,” Jenna agreed cautiously.

“Trip, what’s your take,” Phil asked.

Their new friend heaved a deep sigh. “He’s got to have one hell of a lot of knowledge of Hydra locked inside that head of his. John was always going on about how smart he was and how effective a specialist he was. I kinda doubt he meant as a S.H.I.E.L.D. Specialist. John was pretty single-minded. He wouldn’t bother to praise someone not on his side.”

“And Kara said he was really conflicted. She’s the one that gave Loki a chance; if she thinks Grant deserves a chance maybe we should listen to her,” Skye added. The group all turned to stare her way. “What?”

Phil shook his head. “Skye, I know you and Grant were…close, in a way. We all liked him. It was his job to get us to like him. But what Hellbringer actually said was that it was up to us.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Fine; it’s up to us. That means all of us. Me, Jenna and Fitz think we should give him a chance. Trip thinks we need him for his knowledge of Hydra. Only you and Agent May think we should…should…you know.”

“I never said that,” Melinda denied. “I wanted you to understand why he saved us and to not romanticize it. I’m with Agent Triplett. He’s too valuable a resource to waste. I vote we keep him under lockdown and have him provide intel we need. If it all pans out, or as much as is reasonable as things do change, and we become more comfortable with the idea, we’ll look into giving him some limited active roles to further prove himself. At that point, his fate will be up to him.”

Phil looked at each of them in turn. Skye did her best to dampen her enthusiasm for this idea. Finally, he nodded. “Good plan. Once we get the tech up, we’ll beef up the security on the lockdown area. Ward is much more likely to be able to break out than Ian Quinn.”

“I can help with that,” Loki’s voice announced. The spun to find the god standing between them and the security building, wearing what Skye guessed was his trademark smirk. “Captain Rogers is in the Quinjet circling the island. Let me try this device I retrieved from him so that we’ll know if it’s safe for him to land.”

He lifted a handheld communications unit and spoke into it. The response came quickly. “Rogers here. Looks like whatever fried your tech was instantaneous rather than a pro…uh, prolonged
effect, like Stark suggested.”

“So it does,” Loki replied. “Go ahead and land. I’m certain Bethany will be pleased to see you.”

… …

Steve looked at the bits of metal and ash strewn across the grass and river rock that made up the landscaped area in front of the security building. “Do I want to know?” he asked Loki.

“Probably; do not ask Kara though.”

Oh boy. “What…” he paused as he saw the redhead standing closer to the beach staring out at the blue water. “Who was it?”

“John Garrett. Apparently a long time Hydra mole and some kind of cyborg, I’m told it’s called.”

“Seems to be a lot of that going on with Hydra.” Loki raised an eyebrow at him. “Uh, both. Moles and people with some kind of…cyber…ah…”

“Cybernetic augmentation,” the youngest of the group of Coulson’s people supplied. “Captain Rogers, it’s really cool to meet you. I’m Skye.”

Oh yeah; the hacker. “Nice to meet you, Skye. Yes, that’s what I was trying to say.”

“I guess it’s pretty rough having to not only learn eighty years of new science and technology all at once, but try to remember the jargon for it all too.”

“It’s had its moments.” Loki choked on a laugh and Steve frowned at him. “Why don’t you have issues with it?”

“I do have issues with colloquialisms as you know, but this is rather antiquated technology for Asgard. While it is true you do things a bit differently than we as most of your kind cannot manipulate the energies of Yggdrasill, the concepts and purpose are a bit behind ours. I also had the advantage of being in Erik Selvig’s mind for a time. Whatever else the gentleman might be, he is brilliant.”

That was a really uncomfortable reminder. Particularly since Kara had dutifully reported that Loki’s weapon still had that capability. “The S.H.I.E.L.D. agents weren’t?”

“No, else they’d have been used by their organization in other ways. Mind you, they were quite intelligent; simply not brilliant. I learned much of your times and technology from them as well. Also, I’d been studying Midgard regularly. The All-Father might have felt it was a waste of time, but I always found it interesting.”

“Is she okay?” he asked, nodding in Kara’s direction.

Loki nodded, a serious expression on his face for once. “She will be. Even though she was very put out with him before he forced her hand, taking a human life still sits ill with her.”

“Steve!” Bethany emerged from the building and ran over to him. He gave her a quick hug and kissed the corner of her lips while fighting a blush. Yeah, Loki’s smirk was back. “I’m so glad you’re back. It’s been crazy.”

“It was crazier in D.C., Beth. I got confirmation just before Loki popped in on my flight. The Triskelion is gone.”
“What?” Steve glanced over his shoulder as Phil Coulson arrived. “What happened?”

“Is everyone here cleared now?” he asked instead of responding.

“Yes. Thanks to Loki, we've got Ward on ice. We’re good.”

“Uh?”

“Not literally, Steven,” Loki snapped. “I merely augmented their containment area.”

“Hey, sorry.”

“It’s fine.” By Loki’s tone, Steve realized it wasn’t fine, but they’d have to hash that out later.

“Okay. Let’s get everyone in one spot and I’ll brief you on the latest.”

… …

Loki waited outside while Steve gathered the others on the island. He’d wait to call Kara in until last so that she could finish her meditation. “What about your…our people?” he asked Steve after the others filed into the Security building.

The blue-clad Avenger gave him a solemn look that was quite dismaying. “That’s still a problem. We can’t raise Fury, Hill, or Thor and his friends. Iron Man is taking one of his new suits down there; it’s built to be able to lift, well, buildings if he has to. Bruce and Natasha are going with him. Natasha left a trusted agent with the WSC members she was babysitting.”

“Then we need to be there as well.” He would not admit, not for anything or to anyone, that he worried for Thor’s safety.

“I agree. Let’s get the briefing done and we can go. Coulson will have to take his people elsewhere once we get their transportation up and running; the military is all up in arms and they don’t know he’s alive. I think we’d better keep it that way.”

“Agreed. I’ll be there in a moment.” Steven nodded and disappeared inside. He went to stand quietly beside Kara until she noticed him. Her beautiful eyes were haunted. “Why has this one affected you so profoundly?”

“You really wanted him to hurt, love.”

“You really wanted Thanos to hurt, love.”

“Totally different thing. Thanos tortured you and was ready to do it again. Someone I loved suffered horribly at his hands. Garrett just pissed me off. I mean, I’m the stereotypical redhead with temper issues, but I’ve never been…not like this.”

“He quite purposely goaded you into losing your inhibitions against displaying your full power. I think, in some ways, he had a death wish. It is not your fault.”

“I should have seen that and reacted accordingly. I’m a damn Empath and a trained psychologist.”

He sighed and took her into his arms, holding her close. “You have been through so much in so terribly short a time, love. Everyone has a snapping point. The fact that you recognize your reactions weren’t typical for you and that you find them unacceptable means that you are still in overall control. I am so very proud of you.”
“Thank you.”

“Steven is going to brief everyone on what has happened. Are you ready to go in?”

“Sure.”

… …

Raj rarely cursed, but when he did he cursed fluently in six languages. Now was one of those times. How had he missed seeing the bodyguard? He leaned over the black-clad body and retrieved a belt holding unfamiliar tech. “I suppose I’ll have to have Stark take a look at this,” he muttered. Straightening, he searched the area and found a well-stocked first aid kit and put a pressure bandage on the wound, then taped it securely. Fortunately, crossing the border into the states would be easy enough.

He gave a last glance at the terrified Councilor from Canada. Montreal, no less. How a man with a French background could join an organization rooted in Nazi Germany was beyond him. “You’ll never defeat us,” Jacques Martel proclaimed.

“Yes, yes, I know. Cut off one head and yada, yada, yada. Do try and be more original, Jacques. Though I suppose you always were a bit of a dullard. Ah, no matter.” He’d managed to get the safe open and retrieved the thumb drives stored there. A quick check revealed that they’d been backed up only a few hours ago. It was time to leave. “Say hello to the others, would you? You do have bragging rights; you’re the only target or their bodyguard who managed to draw blood.” A bullet through the traitor’s head and he was gone. There were no more clean up crews to call.

S.H.I.E.L.D. had been globally compromised.

Several hours later he ditched the vehicle he’d stolen and wiped it for prints. Taking the tarp he’d been sitting on to avoid leaving any blood or skin to be typed, he hurried through the woods to his preferred crossing then sat down to wait for the shift to change. The border staff wasn’t S.H.I.E.L.D.; they belonged to him as Chairman of the WSC. There would be no record of his crossing the border in either direction.

Pulling out his mobile, he dialed a number from memory. “Foster, here,” the woman’s voice answered.

“Jane, so glad you’re in. I’ve run into a spot of trouble and need to beg a favor.”

“Does it have something to do with the fecal matter hitting the rotating device in D.C.?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Her voice sounded worried but resigned. “What do you need me to do?”

… …

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had my knee surgery and am off pain meds. While it should be a lot easier to write now (I’ve been looking at the last chapter and cringing at all of the typos), updates will still be slow. I’m trying to change departments to one in a building that more honestly meets ADA requirements so that I don’t end up in the same boat with
my gimpy knees.

Apologies for the slight cliffhanger, but this was getting a bit long. While I did destroy the Triskelion as it was in The Winter Soldier, I didn’t kill off the WSC. Well, not the ones I decided were loyal. Bet you didn’t realize Raj could be so cold-blooded! Am also trying to keep in the spirit if not the letter of the first season of Agents of SHIELD. Obviously we sidetracked before Grant was forced to dump Fitz-Simmons in the ocean, so Fitz isn’t going to be suffering that injury and they never got to Nick’s secret base so Billy Koenig still lives and the location is not compromised. Anyone want to guess what Olivia’s comment of “CFB” means? Answer to that in next chapter’s author’s notes.

i think that about wraps this one up! Hope you like the direction we’re going.
Loki frowned at the toppled mess that was once an intimidating building. "Thor lives," he murmured. "I would have felt the disturbance in the atmosphere if he did not." A grim smile twisted his lips. "We'd have all felt it. Storms would have raged as his soul energy was released."

Natasha trotted over to them and Steve nodded. "Any ideas?" he asked.

"Kara was able to find Loki and Banner under the snow in Jötunheim." She turned to where Hellbringer stood, tears welling up in her glittering eyes. "Can you feel anybody alive in there?"

The other redhead nodded. "There's one largeish group of emotions and energies, and a few scattered individuals throughout the building. Our people have to be the group; the energy is too strong for just humans and we had four Æsir in there."

"So what? You don't care about the other humans if they're not with your group?" Rhodes asked.

"Of course she cares. We all do," Natasha retorted. "Stark will be back around this side in a minute. We'll have to see how practical it will be to start moving the rubble before we can even think about rescuing anybody."

Steve frowned when the colonel turned to Loki. "Tell me you're not going to ignore the other survivors."

Loki sighed. That wasn't typical from his experience. "We will not ignore anyone Rhodey, but Thor and Fury are a priority. We would risk much should either of them not survive this."

"Wait, Fury's in there? Romanov didn't tell…"

"Keep your voice down," Natasha hissed. "No one is supposed to know he's alive let alone back on Earth, that's why I didn't tell you in the middle of the uniforms."

"I really hate this secrecy. I'm supposed to be loyal to the military, you know."

"We know," Steve interjected. "But, hey. I'm still military. Kind of. Consider it being loyal that way?"

Loki actually chuckled at that one, Steve was going to count it as a victory. Rhodes was shaking his head. "Fine. I know there are a lot of military members who would take an order from Captain America if it didn't violate existing orders from their chain of command. Even then they'd still strongly consider it."

… …
What a mess. Tony's eyes darted back and forth between the different displays popping up on his HUD. "It's like a giant kids game," he complained to Jarvis. "What's it called? The one where you have a lot of blocks and you have to pull one out without disturbing the rest?"

"Jenga, sir," Jarvis replied. "Sir has the XXL version in the game closet."

"That's the one. Which reminds me, we're going to have to have a 'This shit is over' party and pull that out. I think the thing stacks up as tall as our favorite Norse god of whatever the hell Loki's god of."

"I do not believe the other Avengers will find it amusing at that point, sir."

"Fuck 'em. I will. Stop raining on my parade, J."

"If sir would concern himself with the trapped individuals, sir might actually create a reason to celebrate."

Shit. He hated it when Jarvis was right. "Fine. We'll get them out and then decide to party." He continued around the perimeter of the building, allowing Jarvis to finish mapping the debris. "Hey, looks like the gang's all here. We'll, not everybody, I mean, all of the pre-Titan-Gate Avengers are here," he finished sheepishly, then looked around. "Or we were. Where's my science-bro?" he asked Romanov.

"Dr. Banner is at the café down two blocks picking up beverages, mostly tea for him. I sent him there with an escort, he was looking a bit shaky."

"Oh, good call. Is he getting coffee?"

"Yes, Stark, he's getting your coffee. Try to focus?"

"Hey, I'm still the poster boy for narcissism, you know."

"We know," Loki interrupted. "Make yourself useful and project schematics of the building's remains so that Kara can show us where our people are trapped."

"Yeah, yeah. J? Go ahead and put up a hologram for us so we can see it in three-dee." As the beams of light emerged and began to coalesce into an image, he popped the faceplate of the gargantuan suit. "I call this baby the Hulk-Buster. Not because Bruce is ever gonna need busting, but just because it could...theoretically." His audience ignored him. "Anyway, it had to be big, which gave me extra room for processors so I was able to include holographic technology, cool, right?"

"Frigid," Loki commented, making Tony sputter with laughter at his brother-in-law's dry tone. "Kara? Can you find them in this construct?"

"Give me a minute; I'm trying to...Tony, move it, or have Jarvis move it so it appears over the actual debris in the distance, please." They waited while the hologram shifted into the requested position. "Great. Now, can you light up with green lights the number I say when I point to an area?"


"Okay." She pointed to an area close to the edge. "Two." Two small green dots appeared. "One for each of these areas." Kara indicated five areas in succession and a green dot appeared in each. "And seven here." This time her finger pointed to an area deep in the rubble.
"Oh, damn. That's not good." Tony swallowed as he examined the way girders and concrete were supported around the indicated area. "If I move any of this, it's all going to crumble."

"Can we get to the other survivors without endangering those seven?" Loki asked.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure the rest won't be a problem. See these two shapes here? Those are independent concrete walls reinforced by one hell of a lot of steel and they're supporting this entire section. If the rest falls, it shouldn't affect that area."

"Good. Then all of you work on freeing the others. I am going to take a nap."

Tony blinked. "Say, what?"

"I've already overextended myself today. I will not be able to shift in there, let alone bring anyone out safely until I've had sufficient rest."

"Oh. Right."

"You may want to use some kind of amplification device to inform all of the survivors of what is happening. That way none of them, and by that I mean Thor, will sabotage your efforts while trying to free themselves."

"Good point, we haven't been able to reach him on his comm unit."

Natasha smirked. "I'll go hunt up a bullhorn. Clint, come with me."

… …

"We've got Stark's armor, what do we need a bullhorn for?" Clint asked, looking back over his shoulder to where Tony was staring after them quizzically.

"We don't. Where is Brianna?"

"Oh for…babe, you could have asked there."

"What have I told you about calling…"

"Sorry, sorry. Look, we got Logan back. He called in that Spider guy and Nightcrawler to help Beth and Darcy with Bree while he went to babysit your council members, okay? We also got word from upstairs that Frigga is on her way with a few guards to relieve the guys so they can come down here to help out."

"That's…sorry. I know I'm being irrational, but, she's our baby, Clint. I keep thinking I'm not being a good mother."

"I know, hon, I know. You're being a great mother and I wouldn't have left her if I was worried she wouldn't be safe so I'm being a good dad. Can we get back to the group now?"

"I'll go back, you go find Bruce, I didn't want to say anything, but he's been gone too long."

"Got it. See ya in a bit." He loped around the corner and stared down the street. There was no sign of either the laid back scientist or the green rage monster. Oh. Shit. Breaking into a run he reached the bodies of two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. "Please don't be smashed, please don't be smashed," he chanted as he turned them over. "Phew." Bullet wounds to the head. Bad for the agents, good for Banner; poor guy had enough innocents on his conscience. He flicked on the communicator.

"Guys, Banner's escort is dead, bullet wounds. No sign of Banner or the Hulk…oh, hold on."
A thudding sound had caught his attention and he hurried over to an alley entrance. The Hulk was surrounded by bodies in S.T.R.I.K.E. team armor and was in the process of overturning a van and shaking it until the driver fell out. "Hulk smash," he rumbled.

"No, Hulk, wait!" Clint yelled. "We want to question him!"

The green behemoth paused in mid-smash and the man in a suit with a shaved head whimpered as he cowered on the ground. Gamma radiation green eyes narrowed as they stared down at the shaking figure. "Bad man hurt friend, Hulk smash." With that, the massive fist descended and the figure hit the ground and stilled.

"Oh, shit." Cautiously he walked into the alley. "This is probably a bad idea."

"Clint, hold up, I'm on my way." He sighed in relief as he heard Kara's voice over the open line. Stepping back he saw her run around the corner and head for the alley at what had to be full Æsir speed...he sure couldn't move that fast. "Okay, let me check his rage level and see if he needs to be calmed down," she said. Woman wasn't even breathing hard. Damn gods. "Hey, Hulk, remember me?" she said softly, stepping into the alley. Clint stayed behind her.

"Kara, friend."

"That's right. May I look at the bad man?" she asked. Hulk stepped back and shifted from foot to foot. Kara trotted over and pulled at the downed man's shoulder. "It's Sitwell," she called out. "Bad man shot Fury, right, Hulk?"

He grunted. "Bad."

"Natasha, find someone to come pick up the bodies. Sitwell was Hydra and he had a team with him to try and take Bruce. We'll have to have someone examine them to see if they had anything on them or in them. We ran into a Hydra mole with cybernetics recently."

"Got it," Nat responded.

"Hulk, Clint and I are going to go help rescue people, do you want to join us?"

The big head nodded. "Hulk help Kara."

"Okay, my friend. Follow me...don't step on anybody, they have to be able to see who it is, okay?" Another grunt was the only response as Hulk carefully walked around the bodies.

"Wow, he listens to you really well." Clint tried to keep his voice calm and even. "Even better than on Jötunheim."

"I'm using a projection to take the edge off of the rage. I don't want to calm him down too much, we may need his strength."

"Okay, it's your show, let's do this."

... ...

Thor grimaced as the Iron Man's words filtered through to their steel and concrete prison. "We'll have to wait," Fandral told him.

"We have three badly injured mortals; waiting may kill them."

"Not waiting will," Hogun stated bluntly.
"You...you are right, both of you. Hel will have my hide if Fury dies like this. It would count as heroism, I should think, and he would go to Valhalla rather than her realm." Thor shifted minutely to raise the steel beam a bit higher off of the human's chest. Nicholas had been caught under it as he shoved Thor and the young woman he carried from its path. Hill had taken another bullet, this one in her shoulder, as they escaped into the tunnel. She was cradled in Fandral's lap while his friend held a pressure bandage to staunch the flow of blood. The warrior's normally carefree expression was drawn with worry.

"Olivia's heart still beats regularly," Volstagg reported from the side of the area where he leaned his considerable bulk against a wall of concrete preventing it from falling in upon them. The young agent was wrapped in Thor's cape, her head on Hogun's thigh. Hogun lifted his hand from the woman's neck, nodding agreement.

"As does Maria's," Fandral told them in a hoarse voice. "Yet I am concerned. I have not been able to rouse her and there is swelling on the side of her head."

"Aye, she was struck there by debris." Thor took another deep breath, struggling to control his anger over the situation. Pulling in a storm would serve only to hinder their rescue. He closed his eyes and prayed that Eir would be able to save their friends.

... ...

"Laurel! There you are, kid. I was wondering what was keeping you," Tony called out as he approached the inside of the security perimeter. "Guys, this is one of my employees, I asked her to come down and give us a hand."

The young woman blinked, probably in surprise, and then gestured to the three techie looking guys with her. "I brought my whole work team, actually." She always had been quick on the uptake.

"Cool beans. Uh, guys? You want to pass them through?" Staring down from the height of the new armor he frowned at the soldiers who were staring at the kids without moving. A slightly older military man trotted up.

"Mr. Stark; I'm told these people are with you?"

"Yeeesss, that's what I just told your Junior Rangers here."

"We weren't advised they were expected."

"I was busy mapping the rubble when I called them. I have people to rescue and you're making that job difficult."

The lieutenant put a hand up to his ear, apparently listening to incoming instructions. "All right; let them through, corporal."

"Sir, yes sir."

Tony escorted the four newcomers over to where the Boy Scout waited. "So you can vouch for these three?" he asked Laurel.

"Yes; they helped me take out some of the moles in the launch facility. We all went home to change and pack bags; they're stashed at a friend's gym - a personal friend who doesn't even know who I really worked for, and then we came back here to see what we could find out." The quartet wore regular street clothes.
"They as good as you at tech?"

"Um, Dave and Ronnie pretty much. Gary is better."

"Okay. You're all hired, we'll get Pepper to work out the details of your positions and salary. Meanwhile head over to the QJ and relieve the Widow…uh, the Quinjet. She's guarding Loki."

"I thought he was on our side now?" Ronnie looked confused.

"He is. Loki used a lot of power earlier helping the Widow get into the building unrecognized so she could take out Pierce and protect the Council. Before he can use more to get our people out of that mess," he explained, gesturing at the rubble. "He needs to recharge his batteries, so to speak. You guys just hang out and refuse to let anyone disturb him that isn't an Avenger, capisce?"

The group nodded. "We can do that," Laurel promised.

"Okay. Get Natasha to give you a phone and call Pepper with it so she can set up your records just in case anyone looks. Tell her I want her to use Jarvis to delete you from any S.H.I.E.L.D. records and make it look like you've worked for Stark Industries for however long you were with S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Yessir, Mr. Stark," she gushed.

He nodded and headed back to the rubble.

"I'm glad they got out," Cap told him.

"You saw them in launch control?"

"Yep. There were only about a half dozen that tried to help. I saw one go down as I left, that leaves one unaccounted for. Damn."

"Whoa, watch it, Church Boy. You're gonna go to hell if you keep cussing."

"Not funny, Tony. I didn't take the Lord's name in vain."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Oh, shit, Bruce is still hulked out. Kara, what's up?"

"He's good. I'm keeping him on edge so he can help with the heavy lifting."

"Uh, doesn't sound ethical."

"I've got prior permission. We had a long talk after the avalanche incident because I felt so guilty about it, didn't we, Hulk?"

Hulk grunted. "Kara friend," he said, staring at the remains of the building. "Space men back?"

Whoa, Tony thought. Reasoning things out wasn't usually Hulk's thing. "Nah, this was local talent, buddy. You remember Thor?"

A wicked looking grin showed Hulk's huge teeth. "Thor friend." Huh, he was probably remembering casually batting the god across the street.

"Yeah, he is. He and some more of our friends are trapped in that mess. We're going to get them out."
The big guy nodded. "Hulk help."

"Good. But don't try to move anything unless we tell you to. It's very delicate. Move the wrong thing and people will die."

The big head swung towards Kara and then back to him. "Hulk careful?"

"Don't touch until we say," he agreed.

"Hulk wait." Big and green settled down on his haunches, casually squeezing nearby loose rocks into gravel. Tony shuddered and hoped that would keep the big guy amused.

… …

They'd gotten out four of the trapped individuals out with no problem. Hulk had followed their directions well; Kara was sure that Bruce had one heck of a lot more control than he thought. Their next spot was the area holding two survivors. Immediately after Hulk and Tony between them had lifted the massive steel girder trapping the pair, a black-clad male had pulled up a tesseract-powered weapon and shot at her point-blank. She stood in shock as the stone in her betrothal bracelet flared green and the blue beam fizzled against its glow. Knowing it was only good for one attack got her moving quickly enough to kick the bastard in the chest. The weapon went flying, the man went flying. Hulk grabbed him in mid-air and snarled. The nasty smell of human excrement filled the air.

"Is that any way to say thank you for being rescued?" Tony asked as he leaned down to pull the other man from the pocket in which they'd survived.

The sight of two men, one dangling from Hulk's grip and the other from the giant gauntlet of Tony's Hulk-Buster armor made her chuckle. "Very rude, I thought," she commented. "Um, Hulk? Be careful with that one, I think I broke a few ribs pretty badly, he sounds like he has a punctured lung."

"Bad man."

"Yes, but one we'll want to question. Be gentle but firm." The behemoth stared at her. "Uh, Cap? Why don't you collect this guy from Hulk, I think that was a little beyond what he can manage."

"Sure, no problem. Not saying I'm going to be particularly gentle, but I'll keep the traitor alive."

Oh yeah. Steve had severe issues with Hydra. Wonderful. "Okay. You and Hawkeye put these two on ice and we'll go dig out the other single survivor." She wanted to keep Natasha with them, Hulk had a soft spot for the other redhead as well.

"Did Loki have you shielded?" Tony asked.

"Not exactly. Remember the bracelets that Odin gave us? We're usually wearing long sleeves so you don't see them, but we almost always have them on. It's a good precautionary measure. I didn't know they'd work with those weapons, though."

"Nice. Can I take a look at it after lover boy recharges it?" he wheedled.

Kara gave him a baleful look. "Only if you call him that to his face."

"Aw, you're no fun."
"That's not what Loki says."

"Geez, Kara. T.M.I., you know?"

Natasha gave them both what was a mostly symbolic shove considering she really couldn't move either of them if they didn't want to be moved. "Come on, back to work. We've got one more to dig out before we can see how to get to our people."

"Slave driver," Tony muttered.

… …

"Oh my God, you're bleeding," Jane gasped as he collapsed into the passenger seat of the Mercedes roadster. "I'll get you to a hospital."

"No. Just take me back to the Tower."

"But…"

"Where is Beth?"

"Uh, at the Tower, but you really need…"

Raj sighed and patted the hand that she'd laid on his left arm. "Jane, I can't go to a hospital and explain why I was stabbed in the abdomen. It's not deep and it's only noticeably bleeding because I've been walking a few miles. Just get me to Beth, she'll stitch me up and put me on an IV to replace the lost fluids and I'll be fine, I promise." She still looked worried and was biting her lower lip. "No one can know I was out of the country."

Jane swallowed and nodded. "Okay. Got it." She locked the doors and reached over the seat to the small storage area behind them and pulled out two bottles. "Gatorade and water. Drink the Gatorade first. Then I've got some cheese and some homemade chicken jerky back there that you can have with the water."

A small chuckle escaped. "You came prepared."

"I figured you'd be exhausted, not injured. Just do it, buster and don't sass me, I'm not in the mood."

"Yes, ma'am." He took a deep drink of the blue beverage before laying his head back to rest. "Care to give me an update on the situation?"

"All hell broke loose, but I guess you want details."

"Want, no. I need details, unfortunately."

… …

Blue beams of light flashed at them and were turned aside by the shields of her personal guard. Frigga checked on the healers who stood behind her and then stepped off of the platform and pulled her sword. "Take them," she ordered as one of her guardsmen handed her his shield. The six warriors rushed the men who had sought to do them harm and a very brief battle ensued. Human bodies littered the grass as they continued toward the street.

A police vehicle came to a screeching halt and two officers tumbled out, guns drawn. "Hold up," the one told his partner. "That's Asgard's Queen in the back." They both looked around, saw the
bodies and then the one with silver in his hair looked to her. "Ma'am, what happened here?"

"These men were traitors to your kind," she told them, putting the weight of thousands of years of rule into her voice. "They are responsible for the trouble in your Capitol, and waited here to attack us before we could recover from our journey."

"Did you use some kind of blue laser on them?" the other asked.

She held up the weapons she'd taken from the bodies. "No, they used these to attack us. I shall turn them over to your Avengers for destruction. Such weapons should not exist in this place and time."

The two frowned at each other and she waited patiently for them to come to the proper decision. "I'll give Avengers' Tower a call and have them send transportation for you," the senior of them finally said. "We'll stick with you and make sure you get there safely. Meanwhile, we'll get the coroner's office out here to collect those, uh, bodies."

"Thank you, officer. You are most gracious," she replied.

"Just doing my job, ma'am."

……

Natasha grimaced as they uncovered the last of the trapped individuals. The young woman's right leg was crushed and she was barely conscious. "Medics!" she yelled out. "We need a rescue basket and a tourniquet and get a medical doctor here, stat. This one's going to need heavy pain meds."

She'd probably lose the leg, Natasha couldn't imagine anything that could be done to save it. But maybe...hmm. "Kara? Do you think you could do anything to fix that, or if not you, the healers upstairs?"

"No. If something's that bad, it's gone. That's why they've got a god missing a hand and why Odin is missing an eye. If it's at all fixable, they can do it quickly enough to save the person's life like they did for Nick, but if it's not...well, they have their limitations too."

"Govno."

"It sure is. I guess we're lucky the other survivors haven't been this bad."

"Do you think most people got out?" Natasha half held her breath, waiting for the answer.

Kara's expression destroyed any hopes she may have had in that area. "No. I...I can sense hundreds of bodies." She sighed. "Though I guess since thousands of people worked here, most did get out, but still, that's a whole lot of death." Their own personal goddess paused for a moment, staring out over the wreckage. "Holy crap."

Natasha stared in the direction of Kara's gaze but saw nothing. "What am I missing."

"Valkyries," she breathed. "Honest to Asgard Valkyries, gathering souls. Weird. I would have expected most people here to, you know, follow Christ or Buddha, or Allah, or something local."

Nat shrugged. "The Norse gods were local to Earth a few thousand years ago. And these people knew some of them personally. I guess that makes them eligible?"

"I guess. Oh, crap. That might mean..."

"That might mean what, wife of my sire?"
Hel smiled at her when she turned around. "That if we had Valkyries here, we might expect you as well."

"I do not personally collect those who have ended their lives in dishonor, I have servants for that."

"Then you're here because…?" Kara hoped Hel wasn't going to have a fit about Nick.

"Nicholas is in dire straits."

"Um, he'll be fine, I'm sure, there's no need to take him."

Pain flashed through the goddess. "I could not even should he die this day." Kara frowned at her… geez, Hel was her stepdaughter. She'd never really thought about her age difference from Loki in quite that way. "Today," Hel continued, "he is a hero and if he dies he will be taken to Valhalla by Odin's Valkyries. He would be lost to me until Ragnarök."

Oh, shit. "He's tough, Hel, really."

"There are limits to all living beings. I fear he has met his."

Shit, no, shit, shit, shit. "He only has to hold on a little while longer. Loki will get him out of there…and you don't think he has a little while longer, do you?"

"No."

"Okay, maybe I can change that." Before becoming an Æsir she had to be within sight of a person to do anything energetically to them but on Jötunheim she'd been able to feed rage to keep Bruce hulked out even through the snow. If that carried through to her healing gifts, she might be able to strengthen Fury until he could be rescued. Kara strode over to the accessible point in the rubble that was closest to the trapped group and worked to separate Fury's energy from the others.

"Gotcha, she muttered.

"Kara?" Nat called out.

"I'm trying to send healing energy. Don't let anyone disturb me."

"Got it."

"And check on Loki. We need him ASAP, if he can pull Fury out, maybe the rest can wait."

"Okay, I'll ask." Kara nodded at her friend and returned her concentration back to the dying Director.

... ...

"Damnation, Hel will have my hide," Thor told his companions. "His heart beats only sporadically."

"Hel will get over it," Fandral said.

"I think not, my friend. She believes him to be her other half."

The other blonde's eyes widened. "That…but none of us here are healers, there's naught we can do!"
"I shall have to try and free us."

"You cannot. You heard the Man of Iron. Any movement will crush us and the mortals."

"Where is Loki?" Volstagg asked. "He could retrieve the man."

Hogun shook his head. "Call them on your device."

"What? Oh, of course." He could feel the heat rise in his cheeks. How could he have forgotten that he'd turned it off when they entered the escape route? Thor touched the unit in his ear and it hummed to life. "This is Thor, who can hear me?"

"Widow here; how's Fury?"

"Doing most poorly. We fear for him."

"Loki's trying to pull in enough energy to retrieve him. Make sure you spread out in the space, leaving room in the middle for him to shift into. In the meantime, Kara's trying to send healing energy to Fury."

"Ask them to hurry."

"They know how urgent it is," her voice had softened uncharacteristically. "They're both doing everything they can. Who else is with you?"

Thor frowned. What did that…ah, she meant to distract him from his worry. "The Warriors Three, Olivia Ramos and Maria Hill. Both women are also badly injured, but they seem to be holding on strongly."

"Good, that's great. We're glad you got them this far." Lady Natasha paused a moment. "Check Fury's heartbeat and breathing and tell me if there's been any improvement."

He examined the black clad man and sighed in relief. "Yes, his breathing is less labored and his heart beats more steadily. Not much, but still, an improvement."

"I'll tell Kara to keep sending him energy. Loki just nodded. I think…yes, he's ready."

"Thank Valhalla."

… …

"If you wish to thank Valhalla instead of me, you might yet have the opportunity," Loki told his brother. "Did you know that Kara can see the Valkyries?"

"I did not. That is…"

"Mother did say she has the Seer's gift."

"Ah, yes."

Loki dropped to his knees at Nicholas Fury's side. "His ribs have been broken again and at least one is lodged in a lung. Another has nicked an artery and he is bleeding internally," he said over the comm. "Kara, do you remember what you did on Jötunheim for Tony's heart?"

"Yes," her voice responded. "But I was right there with him."
"I know, love. But I feel your energy in Nicholas now, so you can reach him. Same artery, same repair, I have every confidence in you."

"Great. That makes one of us."

"Two," he heard his daughter's voice say in the background.

"And if I fail?"

"Kara, ignore Hel's presence for the nonce and concentrate on Nicholas. Just do your best, darling."

"Fine."

… …

Hel turned as she felt the air displaced behind her and the scent of sulfur scented the air. One of the…X-Men, if she recalled the team name correctly, stood behind her, releasing the young man dressed in blue and red with a web design upon it. "Whoops," the latter said. "That was a little close, Kurt.

"I never materialize in anyone or anything," the odder looking one replied as he bowed to her. "You are Queen Hel, are you not?" he asked. She nodded. "Are there many dead then?"

"There are." She did not think it any of his concern that those deaths were not the reason for her presence.

"We have come to help."

She glanced at the deeply concentrating goddess of Fire and then at the holographic representation of the debris. "Do you think you could take yourself to the place in the fallen building that corresponds to the spot with the green dots?" She hadn't needed to be told what it represented. Being her sire's daughter, her intellect surpassed that of most Asgardians let alone humans.

The blue skinned one shrugged. "Of course."

"Loki is in there with several injured. Go to him and ask who it might be best for you to bring out." While she longed to simply order him to bring out Nicholas, Loki would already have done so if the man was able to be moved without endangering him. Best to have the creature check with her sire directly.

A formal bow and a quick, "I am glad to be of assistance, your Majesty" later, the blue one disappeared.

"What can I do?" the costumed one asked.

"Report to Natasha Romanov," she decided after checking on what the other Avengers were doing.

"You got it!" Shaking her head as the young man bounded off, Hel settled down on a fallen piece of concrete to nervously await the outcome.

… …

Hogun half arose as another figure appeared in their midst. "Hold my friend, I recognize him," Thor urged. "He assisted with Angrboda at my brother's wedding."
The taciturn warrior nodded and settled back down to check whether his aborted movement had caused Olivia any distress. "No change," he responded to Thor's unasked question.

"What do you here, Nightcrawler, is it not?"

"Yes. I have come to help. Queen Hel bid me ask Loki who I should teleport out of this trap."

Loki glanced over his shoulder briefly before turning his attention and his magic back to directing Fury's healing. "What weight can you carry?" he asked.

"For a short distance, to the safety of the street, perhaps twice the weight of a large man."

"How frequently."

"Ah, for that distance perhaps a half dozen times more in succession before I exhaust myself."

"More?"

The mutant shrugged. "I have already teleported myself and Spiderman from Avengers' Tower this day."

Loki nodded without turning. "Thor, have him take the women out together. Perhaps by the time he returns, Nicholas can be moved. If not, he can then take Hogun and come back for Fandral. You and Volstagg shall have to remain supporting the walls until it is safe for Nicholas to be moved and at that time, I will take the two of you since it is unlikely he can safely teleport the two of you together and should you go separately, the one remaining would be crushed."

Thor swallowed at the thought. There were literally tons of debris ready to fall upon them. Even a full-blooded Æs would not survive such. "Agreed Loki, it shall be as you say. Hogun, help the Nightcrawler take a good hold on Maria and Olivia."

Hogun stood carefully, lifting Olivia as he did so. He helped their blue friend balance the petite agent in one arm before taking Maria Hill from Fandral's arms. "Be careful with her...them," Fandral said.

"I will. To whom should I deliver them?"

"Look for Captain America," Loki directed. "He'll have the best sense of where they can be honestly helped."

Thor watched as the trio disappeared. Mere moments later the mutant returned alone. "The Captain awaited me," he explained his quick return.

"Take Fandral next," Thor suggested, taking pity on his friend's lost look. "I'd forgotten he was Lady Maria's assigned protector."

"Thank you, Thor," Fandral said with a grin before the Nightcrawler wrapped arms about him and vanished.

"He's fallen hard," Hogun noted.

"Let us hope that Maria reacts to his distancing as I told the fool she would. Else he shall be angered with me anew," Loki said tiredly.

"She is," Volstagg opined. "I saw her watching him during our flight. It seems the lady is well on her way to being smitten."
"Thank the Norns for small favors." Loki's hands lost their green glow. "Kara," he said over the communicator. "He's stable now, love. Sit down and rest yourself." Loki turned back to them as Nightcrawler reappeared. "Go ahead and take Hogun out while I lay a glamour over Fury's features. He is believed to still be in Asgard; it won't do for anyone to recognize him."

"I'll be back," the X-Man said with a smirk worthy of Loki. "I've always wanted to say that!" He and Hogun disappeared with another pop.


"Indeed."

… …

Peter ducked reflexively as they appeared in the pocket deep within the rubble. The top cleared his head by nearly two feet, but hey, it was still not that huge an area. "Wow, you had seven of you in here?" he asked.

"Nine if one includes me and Loki," Kurt told him. "Do you think it will help?"

"Will what help?" an annoyed voice drawled.

Grinning behind his mask Peter nodded to the dark haired prince. "Nightcrawler thought that if I webbed the inside of this area thoroughly it might help it hold while you were taking out the rest of your Asgardians."

Loki looked around with a considering expression. "It might well indeed. An excellent notion."

"Great. If you could take your patient and sit on the floor with Nightcrawler in the middle and if you two guys," he said nodding at Thor and the Asgardian who looked like a defensive tackle a year or two after retirement, "could duck as low as you can without taking away from supporting the sides I'll take care of that."

The prince made lifting the tall dark skinned man look effortless. Peter frowned behind his mask as he stared at the guy. "Uh, that's not Fury."

"Good."

He frowned at the trickster god. "But…"

"Fury is still in Asgard. Therefore, this is not Fury, regardless of what you might have heard."

"Uh huh." He looked at Kurt who shrugged. "If you say so." Once everyone was ready he began webbing the area, anchoring it to steel girders still in place in the area beyond their refuge. "Okay, I'm almost out of webbing. Thor, could you ease up a bit and see if that beam shifts any?"

"Very well." The tall blonde relaxed minutely. The steel girder groaned a little, but the webbing held firm. Thor pulled away further. This time there was no sound or movement.

"Excellent," Peter said in a mad scientist tone, rubbing his hands together. "And you, sir? Could you ease up on that wall just a little?"

"I am called Volstagg, the Lion of Asgard," the big man informed him. "And you are?"

"Spiderman. You know, because I do whatever a spider can? Well, except eat bugs, that's kind of gross."
Volstagg chuckled and then shifted his weight forward. The concrete moved with him and he quickly leaned back. "Ah, I am sorry good Spiderman, it will not hold."

"I was afraid of that. But still, once Nightcrawler takes me and Mr. Not-Fury out of here, Thor and Loki can go over to you so there's nothing falling down until you're all gone."

"Yes, that would have been most difficult to manage else," Loki spoke up. "You've both helped considerably on that front as well."

"No prob."

Kurt shook his head slightly. "Let us go, my friend. This man still needs medical attention."

"You got it." He lifted the man who was, of course, not S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nick Fury, Kurt wrapped his arms around Peter's waist, and the dizzying nothingness of teleportation enveloped them.

… …

"It is good to have friends, I am finding," Loki said to no one in particular.

"Aye, brother, it is." He looked at Thor and sighed at the blonde clapped him on the back. "Are you restored enough to take us out or should I help Volstagg while you regain your energy?"

"I am as ready as I can be without a good deal of sleep. Let us go." He stood next to Volstagg and wrapped one arm around the broad back and took a secure hold of the man's belt while Thor moved behind Loki and held on to his waist. Loki concentrated on the open area where Kara had been standing and then stepped forward to find a crowd had gathered around their odd friends and their burden. "Stand aside," he called out and then nearly fell on his face. Thor and Volstagg's return grip on him kept him on his feet.

"You need rest, Loki," Volstagg rumbled.

"I do; but first I need to check on our wounded."

Thor let go of his waist and threw an arm around his shoulders. "My brother, a hero yet again," he said loudly, walking forward and essentially carrying Loki along with him. Loki did his best to look embarrassed - this was not at all difficult, while he allowed Thor to covertly support him.

"Well done, my thanks," he whispered.

Thor chuckled. "And here is your brave lady, who has worked so hard to save lives she could not even see. Songs shall be sung of you both," he promised.

"Just so long as you do not sing them," Loki chided. "We'd rather not be serenaded by the sound-alike of a bilgesnipe in heat."

"You wound me, Loki!" Thor's grin was ear to ear and the crowd was eating it up.

This allowed him to drop to his knees and check on Fury's condition. "Still stable, but I cannot walk the branches, I would not reach Asgard safely myself let alone burdened with another," he told Kara.

"Steve said that a Stark Industries jet helicopter asked for airspace clearance a couple of minutes ago. He got the brass to authorize it. Bethany must be on her way. She can help keep him stable.
until we can fly him to the egress."

"Good." He pulled Kara close and brushed a kiss on her temple. "You did a spectacular job, darling. I'm certain you saved his life."

"She did," Hel's voice said from behind them. He looked up to see a tear in his daughter's eye. "Thank you both."

Painfully getting back to his feet, he hugged his daughter. "I'm glad for you." He let her return embrace support him as his energy flagged even further.

"You need rest. Both of you."

"We'll get it shortly."

… …

Bruce groaned as he opened his eyes. The building had collapsed further while he'd been out of it. Wait; he remembered…everything. Well, pretty much. "So, do you remember trashing the building?" Tony Stark asked.

He looked up and frowned at the genius who was still encased in his gargantuan armor. "Ha-ha."

Staggering to his feet he gave the red and gold monstrosity an annoyed look. "You had to call it the Hulk-Buster?" he asked.

"Uh…well, hmm."

"Yeah, I remember you saying that several times. Seriously, I remember almost all of it."

"Wow. So how'd they take you?"

"Enough tranquilizer to drop a few elephants." He grinned. "It didn't last long."

"That's because I fudged the official records after we did our experiments," Kara called out from where she was leaning against Natasha's legs. "I put three instead of a dozen as the minimum effective dose. I've always been iffy on math, you know, one, two, many?" she said, holding up one finger, a second, and then all of them while batting her lashes in faux innocence.

"Good job," Tony said admiringly. "Sneaky brat."

"Hey, you didn't claim me as your sister because of my angelic qualities."

"No, no I did not. You and Chaos-boy make a good couple."

"I heard that, Stark and we make a great couple, not simply good."

Bruce tried not to snort too loudly. "You know you're going to pay for that."

"Yeah. But it was a good one."

"Whatever you say, Tony."

… …

An area was cleared and the sleek helicopter set down. Steve ran under the blades to help open the side hatch and then stared in surprise at the passengers revealed. "Is everyone out, Captain?"
Queen Frigga asked.

"All of the survivors are out, ma'am," he replied automatically and stepped back, offering her and then the three healers a hand out of the craft. A quartet of guards hopped out on their own and fanned out protectively.

Frigga scanned the area and then headed towards Hel who turned and accepted her grandmother's embrace. "We came as soon as we could, dearest. Heimdall sent word immediately when the building fell."

"Thank you. Kara has stabilized him, but he still fairs poorly."

"We have a couple of other people who need help too," Steve asked. "Assuming you don't need all three healers for, uh, you know." The queen's eyebrows rose. "He's not supposed to be here, so Loki made him look different."

A chuckle escaped Asgard's Queen as she looked down at the Director. "He can only copy features he's seen. Other than the eye color, he's made him look like Heimdall," she explained.

"Oh, that's why he looked kind of familiar but kind of off at the same time."

"He would have died a hero, grandmother," Hel said quietly. Steve didn't know why her expression indicated that to be a bad thing, well, other than the dying part. Hel was Queen of the Dead, so would that matter?"

"I see; darling, there's always that danger. He is a heroic man."

"I do not think that I could patiently await Ragnarök were that to happen even if I am fated to survive it. Is there no way I could have access to Valhalla?" Her tone was wistful and the problem fell into place for him. If Fury died a hero, because of his association with Asgard he'd go to Valhalla and Hel wouldn't be able to see him let alone anything else. The thought of Fury and Hel as a couple still wigged him out almost as much as the existence of a heaven and hell so different from those of his own faith, but he was dealing with it.

"I am afraid not, dearest. You can no more access Valhalla than we can Niflheim." Hel winced at Frigga's reminder. "We shall do all we can to keep him safe, you know this."

"Yet there is only so much anyone can do."

Steve winced at the resignation in Hel's voice. "We'll all do our very best, ma'am. Have a little faith; we've got a good track record," he said, with a wink, hoping to coax a smile. Hey, it worked on Beth.

Hel did smile, slightly. "Thank you, Captain. I know that you are sincere."

"He awakens," one of the healer's called out.

… …

Nick groaned as the empty blackness receded and pain shot through his body. If anything, he hurt worse now than he had after being shot. How in…oh. He remembered being on the stairway in his secret exit with the Asgardians and the two injured women. Thor was carrying Olivia while the dandy held his damn Deputy with all the care a child would give a precious china doll. That had been a sight. The building had been shaking and groaning around them as they hurried down floor after floor. They'd made the landing of the eighth floor when their protected section of the building
began to crumble. A steel girder had crashed through one wall, headed straight for Thor's side where Olivia's head was cradled in the brawny arms. Would he have thrown himself at the god's back to push him forward if the woman's head had not been the obvious first point of impact? If he were honest with himself, probably not. But he had and had felt the impact and then...nothing. He blinked and then stared as his eyes focused on the beautiful features of Hel, Queen of Niflheim, land of the dead. "Am I dead?" he asked.

Her lips curved in a slight smile that was belied by the tears that had welled up in her forest green eyes...a much darker shade than her dad's, as he recalled. "No, Nicholas. Had you died this day tis not my face you would see as your soul came back to itself. Today you would have died a hero and would have been lost to me." One lone tear escaped her right eye and meandered down her sharply sculpted cheek. He reached up to catch it with a finger and was surprised he was able to move without too much pain.

"How bad is it?" he asked Bothildr, who he recognized from Asgard.

"You are quite fortunate the princess was here; you'd be quaffing ale in Valhalla, else. It will take some time, but we shall set you to rights. Now be still. I have blocked much of your pain so that we may transport you without undue trauma."

That explained it. "Will do." He turned his head slightly as he was lifted into a transport basket. "Do I get the pleasure of your company back Upstairs?" he asked Hel.

This time her smile seemed more...real. "If you desire it, yes."

"Yeah. I think I'd like that."

Hel looked up suddenly. "Abide a moment; there is one bit of business that will not wait until my return to Niflheim," she said, her tone growing hard. He watched as she strode towards the pile of debris that used to be S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters.

A shadow fell over him and he saw Frigga kneel down beside him. "Close your eyes a moment, Nicholas," she asked. He did and felt her fingertips gently touch his eyelids. "Now open and look. This is something the living rarely see, but if you are to lose your heart to my granddaughter, you must know all of her, including her terrible power."

He frowned up at the goddess and then looked for Hel and swallowed a gasp. There were numerous dark shadowy figures rising from the rubble pulling along what appeared to be transparent human shaped clouds. As they cleared the mangled steel and concrete the shadows and clouds would disappear. "What the fuck?"

"They are Hel's servants, come to take the traitors to judgment."

Hel stopped and pointed to one of the shadows. "Wait," she called out. "Bring that one to me." A shiver ran down Nick's spine as the shadow dragged the cloud over to Hel and the cloud stabilized into a recognizable but still transparent form. "Alexander Goodwin Pierce, through your fears and your dishonorable actions you have caused the deaths of many good men and women whose time should not yet have come. You have corrupted others to your demented cause who will continue to kill until they too are brought down. You will pay for these wrongs, your flesh feeding my servants until you acknowledge and truly repent your misdeeds. At that time and that time only will you be able to achieve redemption. Be gone from my sight."

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god of Pain in the Assery, but the other was a desiccated corpse.

"Holy shit."

"Grandmother; what have you done?" Hel asked. He really didn't see how she could talk like that; it must be some of that goddamned magic shit.

"He needed to see the truth of your existence so that he may give his heart to all of you, not just your living form."

"There are many truths in my existence," she spat as her form wavered and she once again appeared whole. "This is every bit as truly me as the other, Nicholas," she said, sounding panicked. "My other form takes me only when I pull on the power of my throne to pronounce judgment."

"Uh huh. So which is real?"

"Both. You will only see my alternate form if I am sitting on my throne or pulling its power. Else this is my only choice of form. I cannot fairly judge the dead without being dead, at least in part, myself. I would have no power over them."

He frowned as he thought about it. Well, he'd seen stranger things. On second thought, maybe not stranger, but still really strange. His frown deepened reflexively as he saw Hel's expression. She was scared, really damned scared. "She thinks you will reject her," Frigga breathed in his ear.

What? It kind of surprised him that he felt so adamant about denying it. He set his jaw. "Okay, I can understand that," he managed. "Fuck, I've got one Avenger that turns bright green and gets as big as a tank, another who turns blue and can freeze my ass off, and still another that can step into, not to mention control, a raging fire. Guess this isn't a really big deal." Hel looked up to meet his eyes and he managed a smile for her. "I still think your dad is a pain in my ass, though."

The goddess laughed. "That pain in your ass helped to save your life, Nicholas. I think that perhaps you should, what is the phrase?" she asked the group around them, most of whom didn't seem to know what was going on, except...

"Cut him some slack," Kara said, looking a bit shocked herself. Guess she could see everything he had.

"Yeah, sure. Makes up for trashing my desk on the Helicarrier."

"Oh, is that all it took?" Loki huffed. "This is actually the second time I've helped to save your life."

"Yeah, well you and your Álfar buddy trashed two marble desks between you."

"So we did."

… …

Chapter End Notes

Okay…stopping here as it's already super long. Hope you enjoyed it. I'm going back to work on Monday for the first time since March 9th. My knee is doing well. I'll have
to see how much work is waiting for me before I can guess at when the next chapters of my WIPs will be out. Until then…
Winding Down

Kara collapsed face first on their bed in the Tower and Loki dropped down beside her. “I want to sleep for at least a week.” she grumped.

“Likewise, darling. So much for our uninterrupted honeymoon.”

“Do you think maybe we’re cursed or something?”

He frowned and tried not to sigh. “Fated, I suppose. Or I am.”

“Oh, right. Ragnarök and all that junk. I don’t see what that could have to do with our lives being interrupted all the time.”

“I imagine it is supposed to ensure I become bitter and isolated and wish only destruction upon everything and everyone.”

Kara’s beautiful eyes opened and she reached out to pull him into her arms. “Hmm. That’s not as hard as it used to be.”

“You’ve grown stronger.”

“True. You’re not going to let it get to you, right?”

“Ah…oh, no, Kara. So long as you remain in my heart and my life I shall never grow bitter. Even if the universe does continue to conspire against us.”

She chuckled. “Oh, Loki. We had a good few days. We’ll take some vacation time to ourselves after everything is straightened out; everyone will understand and cover for us.”

They would, he knew. “I suppose that going back to the island would be pointless now. It would be difficult to regain the celebratory mood.”

“Let’s just get some rest and think about it when we wake up.”

He smiled. “A sound idea, my love.”

… …

Steve walked into their trauma room – dubbed ‘Sick Bay’ by Star Trek fanatic Darcy – and stopped short. Raj Nassar lay on the fancy operating table Tony had brought in, shirtless, while Beth peeled off a bloody mess of bandages. “What happened?” he asked.

Raj looked up with a grimace. “A traitor on the WSC had a better bodyguard than I suspected. He managed this before I could take him down.”

“You…oh boy.” He thought about that for a moment. “So one day Beth is going to be expected to do, um…”
“It’s called wet work in the vernacular,” Raj supplied. “And no, not necessarily. Some chairmen prefer to use operatives they trust for such things. I grew up in a rather rough part of London, it’s not such a stretch for me.”

“Oh, good.” Steve took in Beth’s annoyed frown. “Not that Beth couldn’t handle it if she wanted to, but it’s nice to know she has that option,” he added hastily.

“Nice save,” she muttered as she cleaned the now exposed wound.

“I have all kinds of respect for your abilities, honey, but I’m still going to worry.”

“Oh huh.”

“Hey, I do! I didn’t stand in Peggy’s way; I loved her, but I knew she was as tough as nails,” he blurted out.

“What?”

“Oh dear,” Raj muttered.

Steve could feel the blush rise up from his neck. “Um, that is…”

“Oh my God. You’re the soldier…her one great love, as she always put it, that she lost in the war? Oh, wow.”

Nassar was giving him a sympathetic look. Steve rubbed the back of his neck while he tried to figure out what to say. “Uh, I didn’t know she felt that much for me, like I did for her. But, you know, the war got in the way. We never even had a date let alone anything else.” Oh geez, Beth looked like she wanted to cry.

“Are you seeing her when you kiss me?”

“No!” The very thought horrified him. “Heck, I didn’t even know you were related until you said so. I fell in love with you just because you’re you and you’re incredible.”

She sighed. “This is really awkward.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’m certain it’s awkward,” Nassar commented. “But would you take a break from the awkwardness and stitch up my wound? Please?”

“Oh my God. Of course, I’m sorry.”

Raj managed a wry smile. “No apology necessary. You’ve had a shock, you both have.”

“I’ll say,” Beth muttered as she went back to cleaning the wound.

… …

Nyvorlas frowned as he looked at the small group sprawled in the common area of Avengers’ Tower. All of them looked tired and each suffered from at least a minor injury or two…other than Tony Stark. “Was there a battle?” he asked the room at large.

“Fury lost another desk,” Stark quipped.
“And that caused a battle?”

“Well, he might have lost the entire building along with it.”

Building? “I thought his office was aboard his flying base.”

“Yeah, but he had another in a headquarters building in DC, near where you met our President.”

“That sounds…unfortunate.” Stark shrugged at his response and drank from the glass of amber liquid he held. “Heimdall advised us that Loki and Kara have returned from their trip; might we meet with them?”

“The Keymaster didn’t tell you they were wiped out from rescuing people from the building?”

“Gatekeeper, Tony,” the human woman called Darcy told him. “Get your characters straight.”

“The Gatekeeper possessed a woman, the Keymaster possessed a guy, so he’s the Keymaster. Besides, calling him the Gatekeeper would be using a title, not a nickname.”

“Good point. Keymaster it is.”

Loki’s friends or not, humans were, on the whole, quite unfathomable. He chose to focus on what he did understand of their blathering. “Ah, no. Heimdall only told us they could be found here.”

“Us? Got a mouse in your pocket?” Stark asked, again making little sense.

“Sif stopped to speak with your lady.”

“Oh.”

“Stark, what is wrong with you?”

“He is exhausted, Prince Nyvorlas,” a deep rumble that could only belong to Volstagg, the Lion of Asgard, told him. Nyvorlas turned to see the stout warrior emerge from a side room, a large leg of some kind of roast bird in hand. “We all are. What need you here?”

“Hey, Papa Bear, where’d you get the mutant turkey leg?”

Volstagg broke out into a big grin. He seemed to approve of Stark’s name for him. “Ask Lady Darcy,” he boomed with a half bow in the human’s direction. “It and its brothers are part of the victuals she brought in to feast upon.”

“I got hold of Disney’s supplier. The Park guests in the US are gonna be a little disappointed that the food stands aren’t going to have any giant turkey legs for the next few days, but too bad. There’s plenty of other park foods for them to stuff their faces with.” Darcy looked proud of herself and if she managed to keep Volstagg’s prodigious appetite sated, she well should be.

“Good job, Cupcake.” Darcy extended her tongue at the man and wandered into the kitchen. “So, Keebler, what’s up with the visit? Not that you and Xena aren’t welcome, but…”

“Our visit has threefold purpose. First, and most importantly, to escape my mother’s clutches. Now that the All-Father has voiced his rather insistent approval for our union, she has decided that Sif needs lessons in comportment and that she would take on the task of teaching them personally. My brother has no wish to take the throne just yet so suggested we act as Ambassadors and deliver Loki and Kara’s wedding gifts in order to separate the two. Our queen would not likely survive such lessons.”
Stark coughed and nearly choked on the liquid he’d just swallowed. “Oh, man; we could sell tickets to that match up. Be better than naked mud wrestling.”

“Tony!” Pepper Stark scolded as she swept into the room and swatted her husband’s shoulder. “Be nice.”

Nyvorlas grinned. “Oh, he was, Lady Pepper. While I’ve not experienced this mud wrestling, I expect it should pale in comparison to the entertainment of watching my somewhat delusional mother trying to teach my already quite wise betrothed anything she has no wish or need to learn.”

… …

“Thank you,” Sif said as she entered behind Pepper, flanked by the guards that had accompanied them. The Ljósálfar stared around them; their first visit to Midgard had them gawking every few moments. It had been amusing at first, but now began to irritate. She joined Nyvorlas and kept her chin high as he wrapped an arm around her waist and the Æs in the room stared pointedly at them.

He didn’t question what she was thanking him for; they’d discussed Queen Elénaril’s foolish expectations on more than one occasion and she deeply appreciated his support of her over his mother. That augured well for their life together. “What’s that frown for?” he asked as her jaw dropped slightly.

“I am still bemused at the fact that we are planning to wed. From time to time it simply…strikes deeply.”

“Ah. Is everything handled?”

“Yes. The gifts have been placed with the others, and a pair of guards are on duty. Pepper has kindly had quarters prepared for the contingent and a suite readied for us.” She nodded as Hogun walked in from the game room and greeted them with a silent half bow. “Well met, my friends,” she said to him and Volstagg. “Where has Fandral got to?”

“He just headed Upstairs with Thor, escorting Fury, Hill, and Olivia.” Tony Stark informed them. “Along with the All-Mama and the healers. Olivia and Hill are in bad shape, but Fury is worse. Hel is still hovering. She knows he isn’t out of danger.” Stark’s eyes widened at her confusion. “Uh, forget I said that.”

“Hel and Nicholas Fury? When did that happen?” she blurted.

“Damn. I’ve got to learn to keep my mouth shut,” he muttered in response.

“That’s never going to happen, Tony,” Pepper told him. “It’s not really a secret anyway. Hel met Nick at Loki and Kara’s wedding and was, well, it’s been interesting. She thinks he’s her other half or something to that effect.”

“There seems to be a lot of that going around,” she murmured and then elbowed her betrothed hard in the ribs when he chuckled. Sif frowned. “Wait, Fandral went with them? Why?”

Hogun actually smiled, his teeth bared in what was distinctly not a snarl. Volstagg guffawed outright. “Fandral has fallen hard for the deputy. She ignored our Loki’s advice and instead of chasing our friend and thereby chasing him off, chose to ignore him and repudiate him. Fandral wisely listened to Loki and began ignoring her in turn. She has started showing favor to Fandral and he is now more smitten than ever!” He punctuated his comment by taking a huge bite of the turkey leg.
“What ever will the ladies of Asgard do for entertainment?” she muttered snidely.

“Gossip about him and Maria,” Darcy supplied, returning with a tray of glasses filled with ice and the peach iced tea Sif had learned to enjoy during her last visit. “Here, enjoy.” When the guards shook their heads, refusing the beverage, the girl shrugged and put the tray down, taking a glass for herself.

“Hmm, there is that. Thank you, Darcy. Stark, has our Queen heard you call her that?”

“Uh, no. But she’s got a sense of humor. I’m more concerned that Loki will hear it.”

“Tis an odd one to be sure, Tony,” Volstagg managed around another mouthful. “But Loki has a sense of humor as well.”

“Not where his mom is concerned. I’m still waiting for the payback on the last one,” he said cryptically.

“It matters not,” Sif decided. “He will be so pleased with his gift naught else will matter.”

… …

Tony grinned. “So, did he get want he really wanted?” he asked.

“Yes,” Keebler told him. “It should please him greatly. We also have a separate and equally worthy gift for Kara. The missive Thor brought from the All-Father waxed eloquent over his pride and joy in Loki’s choice of wife. My mother is now horrified at the way she slighted Kara when you visited us.”

“Cool. My gift is for both of them. Which reminds me, do we have any volunteers to teach a god how to drive?” he looked at Pepper and Darcy.

“ Nope. I’m not going there. Let Kara do it.” Darcy smirked. “Besides, I have more points against my license than you do.”

“Too busy running your company,” Pepper claimed.

“Hunh. Rhodey! I’ll get Rhodey to do it. He’s a responsible driver and he appreciates a fine vehicle. And Loki trusts him and visa versa. It’s perfect.”

“I take it you got them a car?” Darcy asked.

“Something like that,” Pepper murmured, with an exasperated look at her husband.

“We’ve got to make the gift opening an occasion. Sounds like they’re getting some cool stuff and I don’t wanna miss out on seeing it all.” She nodded with her eyes narrowed, obviously planning something. “I’ll go drag Bruce and Jane into helping me set something up once they finish getting the lab stuff back together and help Beth clean up in Sick Bay. Oh, crap. Forgot to tell you.”

Tony gave her an even look. That expression was a warning. “Now what?”

“Nassar is here and he kind of bled all over your Mercedes that Jane picked him up in. Happy is taking it to the shop to get cleaned…or maybe reupholstered.”

“He bled…never mind. I don’t want to know and I don’t want to see it. Tell Happy to trade it in after it’s fixed.”
“Oh, come on, it’ll be fine.”

“Nope. No blood in my cars, that’s bad luck. In fact, have him donate it to some charity, that way the bad luck will be mitigated by the good deed.”

“Since when is somebody’s blood in a car bad luck?”

“Since…about thirty seconds ago.”

“You’re weird, Tony.” Nobody bothered to disagree.

… …

“That should do it,” Beth told him. “It was a fairly shallow cut, why did it bleed so much?”

“I never had an opportunity to rest until I arrived here,” Raj returned, sitting up and reaching for his shirt. He frowned at the bloodstains and the rip where the knife had entered. “I’d best borrow a shower and perhaps find someone to lend me clothing.”

“You can use my shower,” Steve told him. “And I’ve got a pair of sweats that are too small for me. They have a string tie waist so even though they’ll be baggy, they’ll stay up.”

“Thanks. Have you heard anything about Nicholas? Jane told me he was in the building when it fell.”

“We got him out and he’s back in Asgard with Hill and Ramos. All three are in bad shape.”

“Damn. I’ll need to contact…hmm.”

“Coulson will be calling me here,” Steve told him with a stern look. “He had a mole in his group and you’ve had both S.T.R.I.K.E. teams compromised…well, mostly dead now. Oh, and John Garrett was Hydra and a cyborg.”

He rubbed his forehead tiredly. “Lovely. Was? He’s dead as well? I take it Ward was the mole; Garrett was his S.O. early on.”

“Yeah. Coulson’s absorbed Triplett into his team and they’ve got Ward secured. At the end, Ward stopped Garrett from using one of the team as a human shield and that allowed Kara to take him out.”

“They can’t trust him.”

“They know that. But they’re keeping him for intel and maybe giving him a chance to make it right.”

Raj hoped they knew what they were doing. “I’ll need to speak to Phil ASAP.”

“You’ll need to speak to me, Kara, and Loki first,” Bethany told him.

“Oh?”

“About GH-325.”

He tried not to wince visibly. “I have no idea…”

“And that is why you’ll be talking to Kara and Loki. You won’t be able to BS them. I should have
known about this, Raj. I can’t step in if you’re taken out if you keep important things from me.”

“If and when someone succeeds in killing me, you’ll receive a package with instructions on how to retrieve everything material you will need as well as everything you need to know.”

“So someone else knows Beth is your backup?” Steve asked.

“Do not worry; that information is not available to anyone until such time as I do not make a required contact.”

Rogers grimaced. “I hate this spy stuff.”

“We all do. We only do it because someone must and that someone needs to be free of corruption or we are all lost.”

… …

“Glad to be back?” Clint asked her.

“What do you think?”

“Oh, come on, Natasha, you know what I mean.”

She brushed a strand of Brianna’s fine auburn hair off of the baby’s forehead. “Not really. I was looking forward to the time off to spend with her. I didn’t know how much I really wanted this until I first held her in my arms.”

“I know you’d kind of resigned yourself to never having kids.”

“I was shocked when the S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors told me I’d need the contraceptive. We were supposed to have been irrevocably sterilized. I was told that I was; the other girls were, why not me?”

“You’re a Romanov?”

“That and five dollars might get me a Latte Grande.”

“Yeah, but what if one of the people associated with the Red Room had visions of producing an heir of Romanov blood at some point as a negotiating point? Wouldn’t be much of an asset if you were barren.”

“That’s a stretch, but we’ve nothing else.”

“Yup.” He leaned over her shoulder to ghost a finger down their daughter’s soft cheek. “Damn, she’s so perfect.”

“More than perfect, thanks to Loki.”

“Nah. She was perfect before you went into labor. I know it…she’s your kid, she couldn’t be anything but.”

Natasha closed her eyes and leaned back against his chest as a smile curved her lips. “Every so often, Clint, you’re perfect too.”

… …
“And you are?” the woman with dark honey colored hair asked him.

“Ain’t it obvious?” Logan asked. Government people stank, didn’t matter which governments. He sniffed reflexively. Okay, maybe stank wasn’t the best word, this kid smelled pretty damn good.

Her left eyebrow rose and the corners of her full lips turned down. “If it were, I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Romanov sent me.”

“Romanov? Who’s that?”

“Don’t give me lip. You know damn well; she’s the Avenger that had you take over this babysitting detail for her.” The kid shifted slightly and the scent of metal, cleaning oil, and the faintest hint of gunpowder reached him. “Put the weapon down. You can’t take me out with it.”

“Look, mister; I don’t know who you think you are…” Tired of the conversation, he extended the claws on the hand holding the door frame. “Oh. Why in God’s name didn’t you just give the pass phrase?” she asked, stepping back and holstering the weapon.

“The Widow didn’t give me no freaking pass phrase,” he grumped as he pushed into the small house. “Where’s the kids? Oh, and what’s your name, she didn’t tell me that, neither. I don’t go with this Agent 13 crap. Sounds like that goofy spy show guy hiding in the damn postal box.”

“Sharon Carter. They’re in the den next to a safe room entrance.”

“You related to Beth Carter Anderson?”

“She’s my cousin.”

“All in the family, huh? Yeah, that’s just great.” He examined the layout of the front part of the house, nodding at the evidence of high tech security. “Nice set up out here, at least. Wanna go tell your people I’m okay so they don’t freak?”

“Right. Just a second.” He watched as she moved down the hall quietly and warned the WSC members before she turned into a doorway. “Damn S.H.I.E.L.D.’s got more kids in the ranks than Xavier does.”

“…”

“We’re clear,” she told the four nervous members of the WSC that were hovering near the safe room door. “It’s Wolverine; he’s part of the Avengers, at least temporarily.”

“He was honored for his part in the Battle of Central Park,” Councilor Hawley told the others. “By Odin, himself.”

Sharon bit the inside of her cheek. Hawley was totally impressed by anything royal related. Probably because she was from a titled family in Britain. She’d go with that. “Yes, exactly. He was one of only three people born on Earth that managed to hurt the Titan. And he was modest about it. Wolverine was ready to just take off without even accepting any thanks for his help when the job was done.”

“Humble?” asked Councilor Yen Chao On asked.

“Ah, not so much. More, um, practical,’ she settled for. “He came to do a job, it was done, so he
headed home.”

“A good man should take pride in his work,” Councilor Mehransh Dama Singh said with an approving nod.

Councilor Rockwell snorted. “He’s a damn loose cannon,” he told the others. “Tony Stark without the intellect, but with all the attitude, and as indestructible as Banner’s Hulk. We didn’t approve him for the Avengers Initiative. What the hell is he involved for?”

Sharon dragged the shreds of her patience together, but before she could speak, a far surlier voice interrupted. “I’m involved because you politicians managed to oversight yourselves into sponsoring terrorists. We’re talkin’ Hydra for chrissakes, right under your friggin’ noses.” He sauntered into the room and went nose to nose with the aging Rockwell. “Sonny, just shut your mouth and take a load off. I’m here to keep you all alive; there’s still Hydra operatives out there and guess what? You were supposed to already all be dead. They’ll be moving ya to the top of their list.”

It was all Sharon could do not to laugh at Clifton Rockwell’s apoplectic expression. “Try not to give the councilor a stroke,” she murmured behind Logan’s ear. His head turned slightly to acknowledge the advice then he walked away from the man.

“You, Wolverine…” Rockwell began again.

“It’s Logan. Why ain’t you sitting down yet?”

“Councilor, Logan is here as a favor to all of us. Please listen to him. We’d like you to all get out of this alive,” she pleaded. “Secretary Pierce intended all of you to die, he had micro-explosives in your badges.”

Rockwell made a harrumphing noise and dropped into an armchair. “Never trusted that bastard.”

“You most certainly did until recently, Clifton. We all did,” Leticia Hawley scolded. “We were shortsighted fools and now Nicholas Fury and Maria Hill lay dying, and S.H.I.E.L.D. is destroyed with no one who can be trusted to lead it.”

“We’ll find a way,” Sharon told them. “I’m not letting Great Aunt Margaret’s dream die that easily.”

… …

“Jarvis, what in the Nine is that noise? I thought our individual floors had soundproofing between them?”

“Indeed, your Highness. However, the elevator shaft is impossible to thoroughly protect. It appears that Lord Volstagg and Dr. Banner’s other are arm wrestling in the containment room.”

Kara laughed at the alarm on Loki’s face. “I told you that he’s had a lot more control lately…ever since the trip to Jötunheim.”

“Ah well; Volstagg is well padded should the Hulk decide he needs to be pounded into the floor. He’d likely sustain far fewer injuries than I did.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t. We’ve had enough serious injuries to last us at least a decade.”

“Is anyone looking out for them, Jarvis?”
“Yes, sir. Ms. Lewis is there, as is the contingent from Ljósálfar, along with Mr. and Mrs. Stark, Captain Rogers, Dr. Anderson, and Lord Hogun.”

“What contingent from Ljósálfar?” they asked almost in unison.

“Never mind,” Kara continued by herself. “We’ve got to see this anyway. Let’s go be surprised.”

“Very well, love.”

They hurriedly finished dressing and sprinted for the elevator. When the doors opened in the basement, the noise that greeted them was almost deafening. “Come on, Papa Bear,” they could barely hear Tony shout over the cheering. “Just hold out another two minutes and I win the pool!”

“You must be so tired, Volstagg,” Darcy cooed sweetly. “And hungry. I have two more turkey legs with your name on them, and a half dozen churros.”

“That is the pastry with sugar and cinnamon, yes?” Volstagg gasped.

“Uh huh, nice, hot, and delicious,” Darcy promised.

“Ohhh, I am a bit peckish.”

Kara nearly doubled over in laughter. “Darce, that’s not fair.”

“All’s fair when you’re gambling against a billionaire.”

“That’s genius, billionaire, play…philanthropist, and happily married man,” Tony returned with a quick glance at Pepper.

“Nice save, genius,” she approved.

“I refuse to believe that the Lion of Asgard can defeat a being that even Thor is wary of,” Loki offered with a sly look.

“What say you?” Volstagg demanded and then yelped painfully as his arm was finally forced back to the concrete block they were using as a table. “Damnation, Loki. You broke my concentration!”

“Woo hoo!” Darcy cheered. “Pay up, genius.”

“Oh, man…thanks a lot, Taz.”

“Puny god help?” Hulk asked Darcy.

“Yep, big guy. Loki helped.”

“Huh, puny god good friend.”

Kara wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist and squeezed. “Aw, isn’t that sweet?”

… …

“Amazing, actually,” Loki managed faintly. Kara hadn’t been exaggerating. The beast was engaging in actual conversation with advanced concepts even if the vocabulary was rudimentary. That was an astonishing advance from his state when they’d had their first encounter. He watched in awe as Darcy patted her fiancé’s other on his massive forearm and the beast staggered back to slid down the wall and sit on the floor. “As is that.”
Kara looked equally surprised. “Wow; that’s the first time he’s voluntarily switched back so quickly,” she said as the huge form shrunk leaving an exhausted Bruce Banner in its place. “Bruce, you okay?”

The doctor looked up and slowly focused. “Yeah. Hey, we won? I remember that…and Loki helped?”

“Not helped, exactly,” Loki demurred. “I simply, well, made a distracting comment.”

“Disparaging, you mean,” Volstagg grumped.

He smirked. “Not hardly. I much doubt Thor could take him in such a contest and I’m certain that I could not even begin to give him the challenge you did.”

“Oh, well then; that’s different.”

“I am certainly impressed,” Nyvorlas said from the far side of the room. Loki had been so riveted by the bout that he’d forgotten Jarvis’s mention of visitors from Ljósálfar. Nyvorlas, Sif, and four guards were gathered there together with Hogun, Bethany, and Steve.

“You’ve only seen him fight overwhelming odds,” Loki realized. “Never when it was more or less on equal footing.”

“Yes. The Titan threw everyone off, it did not show this one’s strength to advantage.”

“Hogun, did you wager on the outcome?” he asked the taciturn warrior who had seen Banner’s other in action on Jötunheim.

“Aye, my prince. And won a cask of Volstagg’s finest ale.”

“The price of my foolishness in not heeding my good friend’s wise advice,” Volstagg agreed as he rubbed his biceps.

“I really thought he wasn’t angry enough to hold on to being the other guy,” Tony said. “How did you do it?” he asked Banner.

The scientist shrugged. “I don’t know. It was just…natural, somehow.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed as the amulet that Banner always wore slid into view. “May I?” he asked, reaching for it.

“Sure.”

“Is something wrong?” Kara asked.

“No, but it has been changed. Hmm. I see my mother’s hand in this…and perhaps Hel’s. She, Hel, that is, holds power that can connect between the living body and the everlasting soul. Coupled with my mother’s power over birth or creation as some call it, I believe they’ve strengthened the connection between man and beast. Ah, no offence intended,” he hurriedly added.

“None taken. Frigga and Hel were looking at it in DC. I thought your mom was just distracting Hel while the healers worked on Fury by showing her your work.”

“This is not an easy working. They must have been planning it for quite some time. Interesting.”

“Hel came by a lot while we were in Asgard,” Darcy offered. “I just thought it was for diplomatic
“Nay, my lady,” Volstagg said. “She wanted to see the man who had saved her father on Jötunheim.”

“Loki saved me right back,” Banner muttered. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“No, my friend. I could not have withstood the pressure of the avalanche without you to shield me from the worst of it and I was too badly injured to shift myself out of its path. I…we would have died that day without you.”

Sif frowned at that. “Your lives are bound together from both directions?” she asked.

“They are. Fortunately Kara is not near so vulnerable as she once was, though I’d be far less concerned for us both were she a good bit stronger and more of a hand to hand warrior should her powers prove ineffective.”

That smug smile was not the response he would have expected from Sif. “Good; then we chose her wedding gift a-right.”

“Speaking of wedding gifts…” Darcy began.

“Ohh, do we get to open them now?” Kara asked.

“No. You get to wait a few days.” Loki bit back a chuckle at Kara’s woebegone expression. “Once everything’s sorted out Upstairs your folks will be stopping by with your gift from them and would really appreciate getting to see you receive your other gifts.” Darcy shrugged. “You weren’t supposed to be back this soon so you’ve got to wait.”

“Damn.”

“Our gifts should wait as well,” Nyvorlas said. “Not depriving the All-Father of witnessing you receiving them is an excellent reason for us to dally here on Midgard for the nonce.”

Loki eyed the guards who were gawking at the strength and thickness of the door to the containment room. “Somehow I do not believe they’ll mind,” he murmured.

“You could have died,” Jane muttered as she fussed about, arranging pillows and such…doing everything but looking at the man in the bed.

“Yes, that’s always a possibility. Of course, you could have died when you ran into a stranger in New Mexico, or when a strange automaton appeared in the middle of a small town. Life is ever uncertain.”

“But that danger came to me, I didn’t go looking for it!”

“ Didn’t you? Were you looking for a bridge to another world with no intent to ever traverse it?” Raj smiled as she opened her mouth and then closed it again.

She flushed. “Okay, fine. But…damn. I don’t have a good rebuttal for that.”

“There isn’t one. Jane, safety is an child’s illusion at best, a fool’s expectation at worst. Neither of us are either. I do thank you for caring what becomes of me, though.”
“Well, of course I care. I mean…that is…” this time her blush traveled down her neck and disappeared into the collar of the linen blouse she wore. “Do you care?” she asked quietly.

“More than I have for anyone for a very long time.” He sighed. “I’m not a god, Jane, I’m simply a man.”

“You’re a hero, even if you don’t publicize it. Those people arranged for innocents to die and you made sure they couldn’t ever do that again. That’s heroic in my book.”

“Do you need the man in your life to be a hero?”

“What? No. I just need him to appreciate me and my dreams and to have dreams and goals I can be a part of and support.”

“Good. I do appreciate your passion for your work, but most of all I value your kindness and your determination. You are a unique woman, Jane Foster, and I am grateful to have you in my life.”

... ...

“He’ll live, niece, I’m certain of it.”

Hel smiled at her uncle. “Oh? Have you somehow become privy to the decisions of the Norns?” she asked.

“Heh. No, but Nicholas is a stubborn man. And I saw how he looked at you and heard how he spoke to you. He knows if he dies of this he will not see you again until Ragnarök. I am certain he dislikes that idea near as much as you.”

“I hope you have the right of it. How are the others?”

“Maria Hill holds her own. Olivia does not do as well.” Thor looked distressed, but not despondent. Nicholas had told her at the wedding that the two were involved. He must have misunderstood.

“I am sorry. She is a hero, should she not recover the Valkyries will come for her.”

“I know it. We...she has been a good friend and companion and I am fond of her.”

Ah, they must simply be pillow friends then. “Is there no hope?”

He shrugged. “Eir believes there is, but mother is less convinced. Eir may be the greatest healer we’ve ever known, but...”

“Agreed. Is there aught I can do to ease her passing?”

“Nay. I shall go sit with her. Mother has called upon Brunnehilde to reassure Olivia that passing from this life will be only a new beginning for her. Perhaps you should go sit with Nicholas. He will not be pleased when he learns of this. Her father, I am told, died protecting him.”

Hel smiled. “I wonder what the Einherjar will make of so many of the heroes of Midgard joining their company this day?”

“I know not, though I hope it is millennia before we discover the answer.”

... ...
Another update. Yay! First, thank you all for sticking with the story, your support is appreciated. Second, I didn’t intend for the cliffhanger, but I was informed rather stridently by several of the characters that having all of the good guys we’re familiar with survive so easily wasn’t at all realistic, particularly when some of them are only human. Third, I have a new story in the works…I had planned to finish at least one of the two existing series before starting it, but it was pounding at my brain, demanding I start it. The new one will only be rated T. Anybody out there up for a story by me that doesn’t include sex? It will include swear words (can’t have a story without Nick Fury without swear words) and violence. Let me know! So…hope you enjoyed this update, I am working on the next edition of Loki Does Las Vegas and hope to have it up before I head to Disneyland for their 60th Anniversary in mid July.
Brunnhilde frowned at the small mortal lying dwarfed by the sickbed meant to hold an Æs. The child did not appear to be a warrior, let alone one worthy of Valhalla. “She is more than she seems,” a soft voice said from behind her.

“You would know, my queen. I cannot begin to imagine what existence in Valhalla will be like for one such as her, though. How can I give her comfort?”

Frigga’s smile held a streak of mischief worthy of her favorite son. “No, but you do know what the existence of a Valkyrie is like.”

“A Valkyrie? Please; she would need to know what to do at the moment of her death and even then…”

“Her heart is worthy and strong, as is her will to live.”

“My lady, I cannot instruct her on becoming a Valkyrie. That would interfere with the Norns.”

“Would it? You shall not tell her that she can become such and you shall point out that no mortal has ever been made Valkyrie. What information you will volunteer is who and what you are and that you are there to keep her company on her eventual journey to Valhalla. She is a curious sort and will ask about you and your kind - how you became what you are. Simply answer her honestly.”

A smile stole across her lips. “That I can do.”

… …

Nick stared at the ceiling, concentrating on holding a nonchalant look. Hel sat beside him, her expression less worried than it had been. That must mean he was out of danger, right? “Good; you are well on the road to recovery, Nicholas Fury,” Lady Eir finally decided. “Kara did much of our work for us. Would that we had more like her in the Realms.”

“Does that mean I can get out of this goddamned bed?” he asked.

She gave him a patronizing smile. “I said well on the road, you have not yet arrived. You and that bed shall not be parting company for nigh on a week or more.”

Goddamn it. He did his damnedest not to growl in frustration, but judging by the mirth in Hel’s eyes he didn’t succeed. “I have a Division to rebuild; I can’t just lollygag around here in god-land.” Hel, the Queen of the motherfucking dead, outright giggled at his response. “I wasn’t joking,” he told her.

“I know this,” she said, still smiling. “Your phrasing, ah…tickled my funny bone, I believe young Darcy calls it.”

He sighed. Him. Yep. Nicholas J. Fucking Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., head badass of the covert community’s top badasses, fucking sighed. Shit. It must be love. “Hel, they need me,” he told her as Lady Eir used the diversion the ebony haired beauty provided to escape.
“They do, but they shall have to manage without you for the nonce. Neither you nor your deputy are fit for duty. My father tells me that a Phil Coulson has been in contact with your Avengers and that he is someone of great skill in your Division. Perhaps this man can do this on your behalf.”

“He’s gonna have to,” Nick grumbled. “I sure hope Nassar is still kicking. The last thing we need is a novice Chairman running around in this shit fest.”

“I have heard naught of Dr. Nassar, shall I inquire of Heimdall for news of him?”

“Yeah, that would be great…are you as good at, uh, lying as your pop?”

She blinked. “Not that I’m aware.”

“Damn, okay, tell me the truth about what’s up with Nassar, then. I’ll do my damnedest not to overreact if it’s bad news.”

Hel laughed again, and yeah, it was a bell-like tinkling giggle of a laugh. He found his lips curling up in a smile without his permission. “Oh, I’m certain,” she said in an obviously teasing voice. “I shall return soon.”

Nick watched as the too damn gorgeous daughter of the god of Pain in the Assery hurried out of the room…and sighed. Again. “I’m so fucked.”

… …

“You are traveling somewhere?” Thor asked Odin as he entered the latter’s private rooms. His father was overseeing a servant who was packing travel necessities in a small bag.

“Yes; your mother insists we must travel to Midgard once things are settled with your comrades here and present Loki and Kara with their nuptial gifts.”

He felt his shoulders slump as he stared at the floor. “Olivia is doing poorly. Eir…”

“I know,” Odin said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You were close, I have heard.”

“She is not my other half, but she has been a good companion. I am quite fond of her.”

“You have been blessed my son, if she is the only one of your close companions who loses their life over this battle. Fortune has been with us since your brother escaped the Mad Titan and met his lady.”

“It has. I suppose I’d hoped that good fortune would continue. Foolish, I know.”

“Optimistic. Fandral has been absent from meals; I know he returned with you. What has he gotten himself into?”

Thor grinned, the thought of his good friend so thoroughly besotted raising his spirits a bit. “Maria Hill, or rather he hopes to get himself into her. I know not whether he has aspirations beyond that.”

“Another mortal,” Odin grumbled. “And this one with no special gifts. I do not understand it. In a few decades our warriors will be devastated with grief for their lost loves and we will be ripe pickings for our enemies.”

“Perhaps we shall all have children to console us; children whose blood will be stronger for the mix in races and who will revitalize Asgard and enrich all the Realms.”
“Yours and Loki’s perhaps.”

“I firmly believe that the humans have more power to them than we know. It may not be what we consider valuable, but their will to exist, to create, to thrive, is second to none.”

… …

Maria blinked as the room came slowly into focus. She’d been floating in and out of consciousness for what seemed like years. As her sight sharpened to normal, she noticed a hunched figure at the side of her bed, blonde hair limp and in disarray, clothing rumpled. For a dandy such as Fandral, that was unheard of. She tried to speak, failed, and cleared her throat. He popped upright like a marionette on strings. “You’ve awoken,” he breathed.

“Master of the obvious,” she mumbled, barely able to manage the words through her dry throat. “Water?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, of course.” He scrambled to his feet and tripped over the chair as he reached for a pitcher that sat on a nearby table. The pitcher and the cup beside it slid as he knocked into the table. Fandral managed to catch them before they hit the floor. He gave her a chagrined glance. “I meant to do that. Entertaining, was it not?”

She chuckled hoarsely. He was a cat. Well, a tomcat, obviously, but only a cat would try to make you think that a stumble was intentional. He set the stoneware down and moved to help her sit up against a mound of pillows before pouring water into the cup and holding it steady as she drank. Pushing it away when she’d had enough Maria smiled. “Thanks. How long have you been here?” she asked as she picked up on his slightly ripe scent. The smile disappeared when she realized he was still wearing the damaged and bloodstained clothing he’d worn in the Triskelion.

Fandral shrugged. “Some time.” He sat back down and ran trembling fingers through his unruly hair. “I-we were worried for you.”

Her heart warmed and so, she was sure, did her cheeks. “Am I okay now?” she asked.

“You will be. Lady Eir has assured me that you will make a full recovery in time.”

“Then why are you still here?”

He shrugged again. “I did not wish you to awaken alone in a strange place.” Now his cheeks were filling with color. Wow.

“Oh. Thank you, that was very chivalrous.” Fandral straightened at the implied praise. “Well, I’m awake, I’m going to be okay, so why don’t you go get cleaned up, eat a decent meal, and get some rest?” He started to shake his head. “I’m serious. You’re beginning to stink; go get clean, at least.” She tried not to smile as his jaw dropped. “You don’t want me to worry about you, do you?”

“No, of course not. I—I’ll go bathe, change, and dine. Then I’ll return to check on you, yes?”

“Sure, that would be great.” This time Maria did smile as Fandral gave her a bow and all but ran out of the room. “Oh boy.”

… …

“So, are you like Sif?” Olivia asked the statuesque blonde who had stalked into her room shortly after Thor had left. “Do you fight with Asgard’s armies?”
The woman, who had introduced herself as Brunnehilde, frowned. “Not normally, no. Only when it appears Ragnarök might be nigh.”

Okay, that made no sense. “How come?”

Brunnehilde shrugged. “I am Valkyrie, that is my duty. I bring the heroes home to Valhalla when they pass from life and see that they train and hone their skills against Ragnarök’s arrival. Then we will ride with them to the defense of the Nine Realms.”

“Wait, seriously?” She pushed the overwhelming exhaustion aside to focus. “You’re an honest to God Valkyrie, like in the ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ story?”

“I do not know this story. We are the chosen of the All-Father. Eternal Warriors born of a need for vengeance against the enemies who slew our living bodies.”

Her head spun. “So…you’re dead?”

“In a manner of speaking. I was dead, but now am eternal.”

“So you’re, well, undead. Do you drink blood?”

The warrior made an appalled face. “Of course not. We drink the mead and ale that flows in twin rivers near the cliffs that border Valhalla.” She glanced around the room seeming uncomfortable. “I may or may not have bathed in the blood of mine enemies when I claimed my vengeance, but I did not drink it.”

Olivia swallowed. “Huh. That’s kind of radical, but I can see the appeal. So how did you become a Valkyrie?”

Brunnehilde sat down with a smile. “It is an interesting tale; I shall be happy to share it with a hero bound for Valhalla.”

… …

Hel headed back to Nicholas’s room, pondering which news to give him first; the good or the bad. Perhaps she should start off with one of the good, then go to the bad and finish with good? Or both good to soften him up before giving the bad? Dealing with the living was so confusing. Opening the door she smiled as the scowl on his weathered features softened as his dark gaze took her in. “I have news to share,” she told him.

“What, you didn’t come back just to enjoy my company?” he quipped.

Oh, he was feeling better. “That was a consideration as well,” she told him and fell silent, still unsure of what to say.

“I take it you have bad news,” he said. “That troubled look kind of gives it away,” he continued as she looked up in surprise.

“Ah. I do, but I have good news as well.”

“Let’s get the bad news out of the way then.”

Considering he’d likely want to storm out of the room at the bad news, she thought not. “No, the good news first. I am telling it, therefore it is my choice.”

“Fine. Let’s have it.”
“Dr. Nassar made it back to your Avengers. He is injured, but is rapidly recovering. Heimdall judges that he is still fit for light duty, making decisions and such but not well enough to go into battle should it be called for.”

Nicholas nodded. “That’s okay, we have the Avengers for that…don’t we?”

“Yes, they are all well, as are Volstagg and Hogun. Sif and Nyvorlas are also with them, and apparently your Wolverine friend has taken over guard duty for the remainder of your council.”

“Oh to be a fly on the wall for that one. I’d bet my retirement that Clifton Rockwell is giving him fits.”

“Also, Maria Hill has been treated and is recovering well. She shall have to remain off of her feet for a week before beginning therapy, but Eir has no doubt that she will regain full use of all her limbs and be back to full strength shortly thereafter.”

“That’s not just good news that’s…oh fuck. It’s Ramos, isn’t it, the bad news?”

She sat on the side of his bed and covered his hands with hers. “Eir cannot heal her injuries. Olivia has a day or so at best, even with support for her heart and lung functions.”

Nicholas’s eyes squeezed shut - he’d lost his eye-patch somewhere. “Her father died a few months ago protecting me and now I’m losing her because she hung tough to protect our data. Goddamn it, that’s…I should never have allowed her to join S.H.I.E.L.D., this is my fault.” He tried to sit but she held him down. “Let me up, Hel. I need to go see her.”

“You will, as soon as a chair arrives for you.”

… …

Olivia nodded as Eir explained her condition. “So, I’m dying, right?”

“You are; I am sorry, my child.”

She’d be nice and ignore being called a child; she was pretty sure the goddess didn’t mean it in a condescending way. “It’s okay. I was pretty sure I was a goner when your junior healers got so flustered after that last scan. You might want to give them a little more training in keeping their expressions neutral. How long have I got?” Brunnehilde’s stories had given her a crazy idea for a backup plan, but would she have time to even try it?

“Once we remove the regulator,” Eir told her, tapping the gold disk that was sticking somehow to her upper chest, right where a long necklace would hang, “you will have a few hours, no more than four or so.”

“Keep in mind,” another voice chimed in. Olivia looked toward the speaker and saw an older woman - it took her a minute to recognize Queen Frigga. “You will grow steadily weaker with every moment so if there is aught you wish to do other than lay helpless, tis best you do it quickly.”

The elder goddess spoke as if she knew what Olivia was thinking. “I’ll keep that firmly in mind. Could you find Thor for me? I’d really like it if he’d take me to see some of the beautiful things around here he’s been telling me about. After all, if I’m going to be in Valhalla waiting to protect Asgard during Ragnarök, I’d kind of like to see a bit of what I’m going to be protecting.”

“Of course, dear. I’ll send him in.” Frigga smiled, patted her shoulder and gracefully exited.
“Does she ever do anything awkwardly?” she asked Eir.

“Not since she was rather young, no. Do all young women of Midgard think so alike? Darcy Lewis asked me that identical question when she visited.”

“Huh. No, we’re just both observant and hang out with the same people. Most women aren’t at all like us.”

“A pity. You are both so strong and honest. Ah well, perhaps the other women of Midgard have their own good qualities.”

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from snorting. “Yeah, maybe. Are you going to take this off then?”

“If you are ready.”

“Ready for what?” a gruff voice demanded.

Oh, damn. Nick…the last person she wanted to see just now. “Just a medical thing. It’s okay. I’m ready.”

“Wait just one motherfucking minute. What are you removing and why?”

Olivia rolled her eyes as Eir bristled. “I do not answer to you, Nicholas Fury. My patient…”

“Is my Agent. Ultimately, I’m in charge of her safety and I’ve been doing a shitty job of it.”

Geez. “Nick, it’s okay. I-uh, guess they told you?”

“Yes, they told me. What I want to know is why you people,” he demanded, again, of Lady Eir, “can’t do anything to cure her when I was in a hell of a lot worse shape other than blood loss both times and you brought me back. What is different?”

Eir frowned, but her eyes were soft. She must be able to tell he was mad because he cared. Nick had appointed himself a family member several years ago when she joined the Division after her mom and most of their extended family was killed in an airline disaster. “Olivia’s nervous system was severely damaged. It appears she has been directly subjected to energy from an object similar to the Cosmic Cube. We are unable to heal it. Her heart and lungs still function only because we force them to do so.”

“Did you get hit with one of those energy weapons?” She nodded. “Fuck. This is my fault. Stark and Rogers were right. I should never have authorized their development and should have…”

“Stop it. This was from one of the Chitauri weapons you sent to the Fridge. Hydra moles raided it. You did what you were supposed to do with Alien Tech, it’s not your fault your boss was a traitor.”

“She speaks the truth, Nicholas Fury.” Thor said, quietly for him, from behind the Director. “I saw the weapons carried by the traitors. They were not the ones your people built.” The big blonde moved past Nick to her side with a slight smile. “What can I do for you, Olivia? Are there family I can look after on your behalf?”

“You already are. Nick is the closest to family I’ve got left. Oh, can you keep an eye on Phil Coulson? He was really good to me too when he was my Supervising Officer.”

“Done. Is there aught else?”
“Yeah. After Eir unhooks this thing,” she told him as she touched the disk. “You can take me on the five cent tour of the palace and grounds.”

“Five cent?”

“It means all the stuff that is great to see but that you wouldn’t normally think twice about because you see it all the time,” she explained.

“Ah. The Great Hall, mother’s gardens, and the Bifröst. It will be my...pleasure.” His voice caught on the last word and he quickly looked away.

A glance at Nick told her that he was also looking anywhere but at her. It hadn’t occurred to her that these tough guys could get like this. “And don’t forget the library. I hear it’s awesome.”

“Of course.”

... ...

Nick watched helplessly from the hovering chair as Thor strode out of the room carrying Olivia. The goddess of Healing had removed a gold disk from the girl’s chest, and the effect on her breathing was immediate. He shuddered at the labored sound and gripped the arms of the chair tightly. “My fault,” he muttered. “I should never have allowed her to become an Agent.”

“She would have gone to another such agency, Nicholas,” Hel told him. “Would they not have taken her gladly?”

With Olivia’s computer skills? “Yeah. In a red hot minute.”

“Then do not take on responsibility that does not belong to you. You bear burdens enough as it is.”

“She’s still a kid, Hel. Damn.”

“My grandmother tells me we should go outdoors for a bit. It will do you no end of good.”

“Uh huh. What is Frigga up to now?”

“I am certain that I do not know what you mean by that.”

He frowned at her with narrowed eyes. “You’re right; you don’t have your pop’s gift for lies.” Nick sighed and leaned back in the hovering chair as Hel laughed, again.

... ...

“It’s all so beautiful,” Olivia told him in a raspy voice as they left the gardens, the last stop on their ‘five cent tour’. “But I bet you don’t spend much time in any of these places.”

Thor grinned. She knew him well. “No, even when we were young I spent most of my free time in the training arena and armory while Loki spent his in the library or in the guild hall.”

“Can we go see that?”

“I am not very welcome in the guild hall.”

“No, you goof. The training arena...oh, you knew what I meant.”

“If you wish it,” he replied, admitting nothing. “It is dusty and muddy at best, not much to see.”
“It’s someplace special to you and you’re my friend. I want to see it through your eyes…you can share some of your memories from the good times you had there.”

“Very well.” He began telling her his favorite tales of his friends, The Warriors Three, and their training mishaps. It did his heart good to hear her chuckling by the time they reached the arena. After seeing his mother place her finger over her lips and shake her head, Thor didn’t mention Nicholas, Hel, and Frigga’s presence on a balcony that overlooked the yard. “This is it. The grounds are saturated by the blood, sweat, and even tears of millennia of Asgard’s warriors.”

“Wow, that’s awes…uh, no. No, that’s kind of disgusting to think about.”

“As I said; it is not much, but it is a place where we trained in honor to serve Asgard in honor.”

“I guess that makes it pretty special.”

“Aye, it does indeed.”

… …

Oliva sighed. Yep, this was the place, she knew it. Twisting in his arms, she strained to look around the area. Thor obligingly turned in a slow circle so that she could see everything. At the entrance to a building, she spotted a rack of bladed weapons. “There, that…is that a guan dao?” she asked, pointing to what looked very much like the Chinese sword on a stick, but without the usual tassel.

Thor frowned and walked over to the rack. “This?” he asked, pointing to it. She nodded. “We call it a glave. It is a versatile weapon, or so Loki informs me. Other than Mjolnir, I prefer a sword or axe. I’d discount it, myself, but it is the weapon of choice for some of the Valkyrie. It must have some value.”

She snorted. “It’s great as both a horseman and foot soldier’s weapon. Loki, as much as I hate to admit it, is right.”

“He saved…ah…” Thor trailed off and winced then stared at her with a hangdog expression.

Olivia knew he was realizing that Loki hadn’t saved her life after all. What he had done was give her a new chance, whether he knew it or not. A small chance maybe, but that was better than nothing. She didn’t even know if it would work for a human. “He saved a lot of people, including some of my friends. He did great. You should be very proud of him for this.”

“I am proud of many things he has done; even those things that others still hate him for. Often we have few choices and he made the best possible under his circumstances. I have not done as well when faced with adversity, not until I was banished to Midgard and began to understand how much courage your people must possess just to live every day and continue to strive for more.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that big a deal.”

“Is it not? Humans can die from a simple scratch while we are so very hard to kill. I do not know if I could live so courageously as your people do.”

“I never thought about it like that. Didn’t Loki almost die when he came to Central Park last year?”

“Yes, and again in Jötunheim. Loki bravely faced death twice in as many years, and fought to save others while believing himself to be beyond such help. I faced it only once and that was in direct defense of my home. Loki fought to save strangers.”
“Fine, Loki’s a hero, you win.” Her heart skipped several beats and Olivia fought to not panic. Her time was running out. “Could you put me down on that hay bale?” she asked, pointing to the one that sat next to the rack of weapons. “I’d just like to sit and absorb the atmosphere. You could tell me more stories,” she coaxed.

“Of course,” he replied, setting her down carefully on the bale. She wriggled a bit, lost her balance intentionally, and twisted as he righted her so that she sat close to the rack. “Shall I tell you how Volstagg became known as the Lion of Asgard?” he asked.

“Sure, that sounds great.” Her heart began alternating between skipping beats and beating rapidly. It wouldn’t be long before she passed out. Time to take a chance on the gods. Reaching out she wrapped her hand around the haft of the glave, almost panicking when it didn’t immediately pull away from the rack.

“What do you?” Thor asked.

“I wanted to take a closer look at this while I listened.” She hated lying to him, but…

“Ah, very well. This one is sharp, though. Take care with it.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to have an accident,” she said wryly. He went back to the long involved, and frankly boring story. Thor was not much of a storyteller. Tightening her grip, Olivia edged forward on the bale. She’d likely have only one chance at this.

… 

“What in hell is she doing?” Nick asked as he watched Olivia pull herself to her feet with the long hafted weapon. Thor had wandered several yards away, throwing his hands around and acting out parts of some damn tale and didn’t see her move.

“Just wait, Nicholas,” Hel said. “All will be explained in time.”

“Have I mentioned that I hate this mysterious shit?”

Hel smiled. “So says the man who headed a mysterious organization, hmm?”

“Yeah, yeah. Rub it in.” His Agent was steadying herself and looking up toward the top of the Valhöll, fortunately not in their direction. She took a deep breath.

“Odín høre meg!”

“What the fuck?”

“She is calling on the All-Father to hear her plea,” Frigga told him. “Literally translates as Odin hear me.”

“Dømme mitt hjerte og gi meg kraft til å hevne min død,” Olivia continued.

“Judge my heart and give me the strength to avenge my death,” Frigga translated again.

“Og jeg vil lovar å beskytte alle verdener som soldat før Ragnarök passerer!” Olivia slumped, clutching at her heart as she clung to the weapon’s pole.

“And I will protect all the Realms as your warrior until Ragnarök passes,” Frigga concluded and
then looked up toward the higher reaches of the palace.

Nick followed her gaze and heard the crackling of energy - similar to the sound the tesseract had made when the gate opened, but more…electric. Odin stood at the uppermost point, Gungnir in hand. The spear’s tip was glowing ominously. He didn’t like this one little bit.

… 

Thor spun as Olivia called out in his native tongue for the All-Father. The dying girl was standing, clinging hard to the glave as she continued to shout. At first he started toward her, intending to catch her before she fell, then the meaning of her next words sunk in. “Where in the Nine did you learn those words?” he gasped. A quick glance to the top of the Valhöll told him that Odin was indeed hearing her and judging her worth. As Gungnir began to glow, he began to move, running as fast as he could for cover. There was nothing he could do for Olivia now and he’d rather not spend the next few days, or more, in the Hall of Healing.

“Over here!” he heard Fandral call and he turned toward the sound.

His friend was holding open a side door made of thick wood. He turned and ran for it, diving through as Fandral pulled it closed, just in time judging by the spectacular sound of pure energy slamming into the ground of the sparring grounds. “Olivia,” he breathed.

Fandral was leaning up against the wall, his blue eyes wide. “Thank the Norns. Brunnehilde told me to hurry, in fact threatened me with celibacy in Valhalla if I did not. I just barely made it in time.”

“She put Olivia up to this? That’s not allowed.”

“No, but she guessed, and rightly.” Thor stood as Fandral cautiously opened the door and peeked out before pulling it wide. “Your friend Fury is, ah…furious,” he chuckled.

“He often is. Never have I met anyone so well named as he.”

… 

“What the fuck just happened here?” Nick demanded after watching Olivia’s slumped form disintegrate into a cloud of energy that grew larger before winking out entirely. He ignored the shape he thought he saw within it. Had to be something to do with the odd angle of vision in his partially healed left eye. “Was this some kind of goddamned mercy killing? If so, you people need to…”

“Enough!” He closed his mouth abruptly at Frigga’s commanding tone. “Olivia apparently heard tales of dying heroines becoming Valkyrie and decided to attempt the ritual.”

He fell back into the hovering chair. “Valkyries? You’re fucking with me, right?”

“No at all, Nicholas. Did you not see them come for some of your people the day your building fell?”

“You mean after you opened my eyes? No, I saw those shadows and the souls they collected for Helheim, but nothing that could have been a Valkyrie. What do they look like?”

Frigga frowned at him. “Hmm, you were supposed to see all. Perhaps by that point the Valkyries had finished their mission. Ah, no matter. They look much like Brunnehilde, you’ve met her, but when they take their spirit forms they have wings protruding from their shoulder blades.”
“Like angels from some of our more vocal religions?” he asked.

“If you imagine them in full armor, ready to destroy an enemy in righteous vengeance, yes.”

“Old style biblical angels, pre-renaissance era,” he decided. “Huh. So Olivia’s going to be a Valkyrie?”

Frigga’s expression changed. She lost the commanding mein and looked troubled and uncertain. “We do not know. While Odin judged her heart was worthy, he cannot judge the strength of her soul and her will to live. He gave her the tools, the power to rise as a Valkyrie. No full-blooded human has ever done so. We must hope that Olivia will be the first.”

He dropped back in the chair again and groaned. “Goddamn it all.”

… …

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for still hanging in there, I know I said sporadic, but…anyway. The ritual for the making of a Valkyrie was my own invention, though it was somewhat (but not exactly) influenced by author Kresley Cole’s interpretation. Olivia’s speech was my own and delivered in the mix of Norweigan and Icelandic I’ve been wont to use as the Asgardian native tongue.

Since this chapter was focused on events in Asgard I couldn’t include Loki and Kara except by mention. Sorry about that, but this is still their story and what happened here is important to the storyline. Loki will be back next chapter. See you then!
Nick stared at the boat laden with the personal effects of his lost agent. Olivia had been wearing a borrowed tunic when she made her plea to Odin, so her black leather uniform, boots, and her badge had been placed on the pyre in lieu of her magically incinerated body. Yeah, magically. There hadn’t even been any ashes. He shook his head and compressed his lips tightly together to avoid sighing.

“She’s not in my Realm,” Hel told him as she suddenly appeared beside him. She was trying to be comforting, he knew.

“Well, she was a hero, so I guess not.” He looked up to see the goddess’s green eyes sparkle as she shook her head.

“Once she made a plea for vengeance that took away her chance at Valhalla for dying as a result of a just battle. The judgment of Odin replaces that and takes her life moments before she would have otherwise passed.”

“So that means it worked?”

Hel’s lips curved down. “Not necessarily. It may have taken her to the current afterlife of human beliefs. But it is now better than even odds that she will rise as a Valkyrie. Calling on Odin does set her faith more firmly in our demesne.”

Frowning, Nick processed the information. “So, in normal cases,” how out there was it that he was using the word ‘normal’ about any of this, hell, he was talking to the goddess of the Dead, “if the ritual failed, the dying woman would end up in your Realm?”

“Correct. Unfortunately…”

“Not a goddamned thing about any of this is normal, even for you people.”

“Yes. But it is now slightly more likely that Olivia succeeded.”

“They why isn’t Brunnehilde popping back in here and letting us know?”

“It is forbidden,” Frigga said from his other side. “We are not to know the former identity of any of the Valkyries. The intent is to prevent attempts at continuing friendships or other relationships with the still living. The Valkyrie are required to be impartial once their vengeance is achieved.”

“Then we’ll never know?”

The queen smiled. “I think it is safe to say if your Hydra enemies start falling to an unidentifiable opponent, we will then know.”

He let the sigh emerge as Thor stepped forward and used Mjolnir to call lightning and set the boat ablaze.

… …

Maria wiped the back of her hand across her cheek as she watched the flames drift down the river.
from her balcony vantage point. Fandral handed her a soft cloth with a whispered “For your nose,”, as she sniffled. She never cried at memorials, let alone had a runny nose, but nothing about this was normal. “You were close?” he asked.

“Not really. Her father was my friend and we, well, the Director and I kind of took responsibility for Olivia outside of S.H.I.E.L.D. since she had no other family.”

The dandy half laughed, half coughed. “You were close. You take obligations seriously, Maria Hill, it is part of your charm.”

Her charm. Right. “I’ve never been charming in my life.”

“Hmm. Charm, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The women I have known, for the most part, have little substance. They flit around like lovely butterflies with few original thoughts in their heads and no goal other than to make a good marriage, preferably to a noble or to one close to the Royal Family.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “I am both. Now, I have often been accused of not taking ladies seriously, and playing fast and loose with their hearts. Tis partially true; I have gone from woman to woman, taking none seriously, but every woman I have dallied with was told there was no chance of marriage, no chance of permanence, and no chance of an introduction to Thor.” He shrugged. “I kept my word.”

“What if one of them truly cared for you? You’ll have missed out.”

“Only if I had cared much for them. Honestly, they bored me silly.”

“I see. So I’m not boring?”

Fandral grinned. “You are not boring, you are absolutely fascinating. And have I praised your bravery and intelligence? You are a rarity in my world.”

She looked down at the gathering below which included a small number of women warriors who dressed much like Sif. There were other women with shields who were paired with male warriors in a way that told her there was a romantic or family tie between them. “Bullshit.”

The blonde blinked at her, looking incredulous. Then he burst out laughing. “Oh, Maria, you are a treasure. Truly, there are women who are brave and intelligent, but they are also single-minded, focused exclusively on their callings as warriors, healers and what not that they make poor companions for one as adventurous as me.”

“And I’m not single-minded? Fandral, do you realize that I’ve devoted my entire adult life to the Division? S.H.I.E.L.D. is, for all intents and purposes, my life.”

“But it is an adventurous life, fighting injustice, rooting out enemies, standing for those who cannot stand for themselves. The intelligent women I have met before you do not see the…the need that is out there, what might happen if they do not…oh, I am at a loss for words. Incredible what you do to me.”

“The bigger picture?” she supplied dryly.

“Yes! That is it exactly.”

This had to be more of his lines. There was no way that it could be anything more, but he looked so earnest and sincere. “I’ll take your word for it…for now.”

His smile was positively blinding. Did Asgardians get their teeth whitened or something? “That,
my lady, is all I ask.”

… …

The Asset stared at the ostentatious building topped by a logo that read ‘Avengers’. He noted the landing pad and what appeared to be a glassed in lounge of some type. Had it been built by anyone other than billionaire inventor Tony Stark, it would be child’s play to breach. Since Stark and his advanced security systems were in play, it would be a little harder. “No orders,” he muttered almost soundlessly. “Should return to base.” All of his targets were missing. From what he’d been able to overhear, both Fury and Hill were in Asgard and out of even his reach. His handler had been eliminated, which mandated he return to base.

A tall blonde male stepped outside as one of the glass panes slid open, an even lighter haired woman on his arm. Captain America. Programmed as a target of opportunity only. The Asset had had the opportunity but had failed to complete his mission. He remembered those eyes and that voice. There was so little he remembered outside of his most recent missions that the anomaly disturbed him. Did he have a past that included this man? Had they been…friends? The word felt familiar though he could not fully understand the concept. Had he ever had a friend? “Must return to base,” he said with more conviction and began climbing from his perch.

… …

“Sir?” Tony ignored the AI’s prompt and continued muttering at the screens displaying video from the doomed Helicarrier where Cap had run into his old buddy…emphasis on the word old.

“Not that he looks a day over thirty, just saying.”

“Mr. Stark,” Jarvis called in an insistent tone.

“What do you want, J?” he barked. “I’m busy here.”

“I thought sir might want to know that the gentleman sir is studying is currently watching the tower from a nearby building.”

Tony swore the AI sounded smug. “Son of a bitch.” He ran for the elevator. “Send my suit to me at the launch pad and alert Spangles…is Rhodey here?”

“No sir. Prince Loki, however, is lunching with the Princess in the lounge.”

“Clue him in. See if he can get a line on our observer.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark.”

… …

“Crap. Walk with me, Beth, act casual.”

“I do know how this works.” She grinned as his cheeks reddened slightly. While he’d been opening up more and more after the startling reveal that he was her Great Aunt Margaret’s long lost soldier, he was still easily rattled.

“Sorry. I guess you do.” He leaned against the safety wall and stared out over the city, tucking her under his left arm and pointing to a normal point of interest with the other. She could see that his eyes, however, were on the building Jarvis had indicated. “I don’t see him.”
“You wouldn’t. Try looking at the building like it’s one of your drawings. What’s off about it?”

He stiffened. “There. There’s a moving shadow on the south face at about the, hmm, twenty-fifth floor. Jarvis, let Ironman and Loki know.”

“He has, Steven…Steve,” Loki said from the shadows near the glass doors. The god’s body shimmered and then disappeared. “Continue to enjoy the scenery and do not look in the direction of my voice. I do not know if our observer has any enhancements that would allow him to focus through my illusion.”

“Steve told us he had what looked like a prosthetic arm,” she told the god. “It would make sense that they’d have done other things.”

“Exactly. We should assume nothing penetrable by technology is sacrosanct.”

“What?” Steve asked.

“It means even magic might not be able to work on him,” Beth simplified.

“Got it.” Steve squeezed her hand gently and stiffened as a new shadow joined the first. “Loki?”

The god didn’t respond.

… …

Loki smirked as their observer recoiled and pulled a weapon that fired a shot that passed harmlessly through his illusion. He reached around from behind the man and confiscated the small weapon with one hand while simultaneously removing a larger weapon from the man’s harness and tucked them both into his extra-planer storage. His target spun on the narrow ledge and punched him hard in the solar plexus, driving the breath from his body. Ah, yes; the left arm was cybernetic. “Not bad. For your own health, do not aim lower; my lady would ill appreciate it.” The left fist shot forward again as Loki shifted to place himself behind his opponent once again. The Winter Soldier stumbled forward as his punch failed to find a target. “Careful,” Loki warned as he grabbed the man’s weapon harness. “Super soldier or not, you would not survive a fall from this height.”

The assassin’s eyes narrowed and he twisted away, kicking out at Loki’s groin to gain distance. He managed to stay on the ledge this time and pulled out a black hilted and bladed knife before surging forward to attack again. “Coward,” he hissed as Loki shifted behind him again.

“Not at all. Henpecked, I believe is the correct term. My lady would be quite miffed if I returned to her in less than perfect health, I did mention that a moment ago. Seriously; you do not wish to anger her. She’s lost all patience with anyone attempting to harm those she loves. Rogers would be unhappy with both of us if Kara turned you into a pile of ash.”

The soldier froze in mid-lunge. Interesting; his reflexes were extraordinary. “Rogers?”

“Yes, Captain America. Steve?” Loki frowned. “Come now, he was your best friend for many years and you recently saved him from drowning.”

The light eyes peered out at him from between locks of untidy dark hair. “Not my target.”

Justifying his actions…yes, the man’s programming was fractured. Natasha and Nassar had guessed correctly. “As you say. Shall we go discuss it?” he asked, gesturing to the building where Steve and Beth still watched them from the deck.
The soldier rushed forward, knife positioned to gut him if he’d been human. As it was, were he to let the blade connect the injuries would be painful. It was a struggle to turn aside the abnormally strong human’s attack and Loki felt his left foot slip off of the ledge. He twisted and the pair of them hung there, with only Loki’s right foot still connected to the building. “I’ll take you with me,” the foolish mortal hissed.

“Oh you cease trying to gut me and I’ll get us both down safely,” Loki returned as he teetered, the mortal’s struggles pulling him further off balance. The man’s eyes narrowed and Loki nodded. “I get us safely down, you answer one question, and I’ll let you walk away and will not try to follow you.”

“No.”

“And I will recall Iron Man so he does not follow you.”

Flinty eyes searched the sky and found the red and gold figure taking off from behind Avengers’ Tower and then darted to the blonde still waiting on the other side of the tower. “Deal,” the hoarse voice grudgingly agreed.

Nodding, Loki shifted them both to solid ground, several dozen floors down. He stepped back immediately upon landing to avoid an expected thrust with the knife. Much to his surprise it did not come. “You’re a man of your word, I see. Excellent.”

“What’s your question?”

“Where did Hydra take the energy weapons they appropriated from S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

The soldier stared at him, apparently surprised at his choice. Then he shrugged. “Last I am aware, to a base in Sokovia. In custody of Von Stucker.”

“I do not know the name…”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. will.” With that the assassin turned sharply and strode away. Loki stared after him thoughtfully until Stark landed beside him.

… …

Tony flipped up his faceplate. “Did it work?” he asked the god.

“Hmm? Oh, yes.”

“Iron Man, what’s going on? Why did you two let Bucky take off?”

Rolling his eyes, Tony glanced up at the tiny figures on his tower. “Part of the plan, Cap. Part of the plan. We’ll call the team together and then explain.” He turned to look up at the pensive figure of his brother-in-law. “This will work, right?”

“Hmm? It should.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

Loki shrugged. “He will not be able to detect it, but what effect his cybernetics will have is unknown.”

“Got it. Damn.” He shrugged. “You want a lift or should I just meet you in the lounge?” Tony took a reflexive step back at Loki’s suddenly mischievous look.
“A lift, if you would. It might be interesting to fly in that manner.”

“Alrighty then.”

… …

Steve glanced around the table taking in Loki’s smug smirk and Tony’s insufferable grin. “So, whatever your plan was worked, I take it?”

“Yes. When I shifted us from the ledge to the ground I phased in first and placed a transmitter into his body and allowed him to materialize around it.”

“Can you do that all the time?” Tony asked the god. “That sounds remarkably like the transporters in the Star Trek universe. Minus the sound effects and shimmery lights.”

“How did you think my shifting worked? I’m not using a wormhole, it’s a variation of sending my energy elsewhere. When your yogis speak of astral projection, they are describing the first and easier part of the process. I first project my energy where I wish to go, then transform my physical form to energy, let it follow the same path, and then rebuild itself.”

“Uh huh. You know what? Don’t ever take me anywhere like that,” the genius groused.

“I imagine it can be frightening for one who does not understand it.”

“Oh, I understand it all right; that’s why it scares the shit out of me. What happens if you don’t rebuild yourself correctly?”

Steve groaned at Loki’s ‘going into lecture mode’ expression. “Tony, can we table that until later? We really need to find Bucky.”

“J, do we know where Barnes is?”

“Indeed, sir. The tracking device is transmitting properly to the satellite array.”

“There you go, Cap. It’s handled. Now; back to that trans…”

“It’s not handled, Tony. We’ve got a limited window of opportunity before he figures out he’s being followed.”

“That’s the beauty of this plan. He’s not being followed. He’ll be checking for a tail and won’t find one.”

“He’ll find that suspicious,” Beth interjected.

“Exactly.”

… …

Kara smiled at them, feeling like the cat who swallowed the canary. “No, he won’t.”

“Why not?” Steve asked.

“I gave him a projection of extreme urgency. He won’t notice anything suspicious while he’s dealing with that. He’s going to go straight to wherever he’s supposed to go between missions without hesitating.”
“And then we’ll be able to take out the bastards that did this to him,” Steve told them. Kara had to chuckle at his ‘oh so serious’ expression.

Tony blinked. “Bad language again? Really? Beth, you are a bad influence on our Boy scout. Cap, do you kiss your girlfriend with that mouth?”

Kara bit back an outright laugh as Steve huffed at the genius. “Very funny. Tony, find something else to harp on, okay? This is getting old…and I really don’t want to hear you making a comment about my age either. Okay?”

“Geez. No one appreciates my sense of humor anymore.”

… …

Darcy rushed out of the elevator, leaving the others behind. She came to a stop in front of the freezer door and then realized she didn’t have a free hand to open it. “Damn it all.”

Bruce chuckled in her ear. “Step aside, hon. I’ll have to clear space for it.”

“Oh crap. Forgot about that.” She stepped back and watched as he moved things around to clear a shelf high enough for the box she held so carefully. They slid it into place together. “Think she’ll like it?” she asked her fiancé after they closed the freezer door on the cake for the party they’d be hosting for the official gift presentations. Seemed kind of weird to her, but Sif had assured her that it was a tradition where Asgardian Royalty was concerned.

“Absolutely. It’s Loki I’m not so sure about. You know he’s sensitive about frozen things.”

“Oh, come on…this is just an ice cream cake, for God’s sake. How could he possibly…you know what? Never mind. He’s screwed up, I know that.”

“Yes. Bag of cats. But he’s getting better about everything.”

“True, that.” She stared up at his quiet smile and reached up to stroke his jaw.

“Ah hem. If we must restrict our sharing of affection to our room, then so must you to yours,” Sif told her.

“No, I said you have to restrict sex and foreplay to your rooms. This isn’t them. This is just affection, period. You guys want to kiss…uh, no tongue, in public, hold hands, touch the other’s face, that’s all cool. Having your legs wrapped around your man’s waist as he holds you against the wall and rubs against you, that ain’t happening in the public areas, not again.”

“We were clothed,” Nyvorlas protested.

“So? You were both getting off on it, so it shouldn’t have been in public.” She frowned at them. “I mean, really. If I’m offended, it’s offensive. Sheesh.”

“Um, hon? You were practically dragging me to our room,” Bruce muttered. “I’d call that turned…”

“Offended. Seriously. Get with the program,” she snapped her fingers at him. “Can you imagine if Steve had walked in on that? Oh, wipe that grin off of your face.”

“Can’t help it. I’m imagining it. His reaction would be priceless.”

“And then I’d have to listen to Beth whine about how no one respects him. So yeah, offended.”
He threw his hands up in the air and turned to the other couple with a grin. “That’s the final word, folks. Sorry.”

… …

Loki looked up at the Ljósálfar armor that was hanging from the guestroom ceiling. “I cannot wait to try it out,” he told his brother-in-law.

“I can’t wait to see you try it out and scan the thing thoroughly while in flight. It’s even more awesome than I remember. Hope it fits you.”

“It shall. So long as one is, ah, in the ballpark, I believe the phrase is, it will adjust to the mage’s exact measurements as soon as it is activated.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.”

“Holy… that is… you sure I can’t learn your magic?”

“You may have enough time remaining to you to learn how it works in theory. But your body could never channel the requisite energy.”

“Damn. Well, you’ll be around for the next century so I’ll have a resource.”

Loki stared at the insufferable mortal, keeping his jaw clenched and reminding himself how he’d felt when the man was dying. Once he was certain he had full control of his temper he relaxed. “Do not push me, Stark. I am here to protect Midgard, not to be your personal source of entertainment.”

“Nah, I wasn’t thinking entertainment, Taz. I had the impression you liked to teach; was I wrong?”

He thought about it as he dismissed the use of the nickname. Loki had decided to take being compared to that particular animal as a compliment. “No. But it would be wasteful to teach someone incapable of learning the art in full.”

“Nope. The more you teach me, the more I can adapt tech for your use and the better you can do your job here so you’ll have more time to spend with your family to be. And protect them better.”

“You have a point. Very well, Tony. Prepare to be schooled.” Turning on his heel he headed for the lift. Kara had insisted that shifting between floors when there was no emergency was an improper use of his power.

“Hey, wait. Schooled? I see what you did there… I’m going to regret this; aren’t I?”

Loki turned as he entered the lift… elevator they called it here… and smiled at Stark’s alarmed expression. “What do you think, Tony?”

The doors closed on the mortal’s muttered “Son of a bitch.”

… …

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: Thank you all for hanging in there. 2016 has been an absolutely shitty year so far. I think I’m back in good writing form now, so we shouldn’t have any more of these long, long gaps. No, I haven’t seen Civil War yet so I don’t know if any of that story will make it into my alternate universe here.
“Sir?” J interrupted as Tony carefully trimmed his goatee. “Sergeant Barnes has settled in one location.”

“About time. Where is he?”

“Sokovia.”

He grumbled as he put his razor away. “How much am I into with Taz now, Jarvis?”

“Seven hundred and fifty thousand US dollars, Mr. Stark.”

“Bastard has all the luck, uh, with gambling. We’ve really got to take him to Vegas.” After sliding the shaving kit into its custom cubby, Tony turned and grabbed his tee shirt and slipped it on. He bounded out of his private apartment and headed down to his lab. “Let everyone know we’ve got our target. Looks like the Winter Soldier is still honorable deep down. Should make Cap happy.”

“Indeed, Sir. Captain Rogers is displaying excessively good cheer over the news.”

“Wonderful.”

… …

Bruce looked up as Tony entered the lab. “Are we headed for Sokovia, then?”

“Looks like it.” The others filed in behind the genius. “Just have to decide who ‘we’ is going to include.”

“I’m going,” Rogers told them. “No arguing.”

“Fine, not a problem. But SHIELD doesn’t have an agreement with this place, so we can’t go charging in there as the Avengers. It’s going to have to be a clandestine visit.”

“I’d better stay home and hold down the fort. My other couldn’t do clandestine if my life depended on it.”

“Kara and I will go,” Loki offered, drawing surprised looks. Loki rarely volunteered to put his wife in any kind of danger. He shrugged. “I have already built a slight rapport with the man, and Kara has proven her gifts can control him if a direct appeal from Captain Rogers fails. She’s not his target; I much doubt Hydra knows enough about her to make it so.”

“Makes sense,” Tony agreed. “Okay, so Cap, Loki, Kara, and me…”

“Why you?” Hawkeye asked.

“Oh, I don’t know…we’ll be dealing with a lot of technology since Sokovia is the place where they’re storing the energy weapons and I’m our tech expert, maybe?”
“Smartass.”

“You started it, bird brain.”

“That’s enough from both of you.” Bruce was really getting tired of people butting heads. It made
him angsty. And feeling angsty led to feeling angry.

“What about our guests?” Natasha asked.

“You’re not serious?” Tony asked with a grimace.

She frowned right back at him. “I’m serious that we shouldn’t leave them alone here.”

“They won’t be alone, they’ll have Dr. Banner,” Loki pointed out. “I’m certain he can keep them
from causing a ruckus in our absence.”

“And if I can’t, Darcy will. Besides, Nassar is here and he…”

“Is going with them,” the doctor interrupted as he pushed through the small crowd. “I know the
area and I speak the local dialects; all of them.” Shrugging at the startled looks, he added “And
I’ve accomplished more clandestine missions than the lot of you put together…ah, Mrs. Barton,
excepted.”

“Mrs. Barton; I think I like the sound of that.”

Bruce bit back a chuckle as Natasha glared at her husband. “Don’t even go there, Hawk.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

… …

Loki glanced back at the group in the main passenger area of the QJ. “Don’t take your eyes off
what you’re doing, please.” He snapped a glare at Rogers and returned to the instruments. “Things
can change in a heartbeat; you don’t want to miss anything.”

“I’m well aware of that, Steven,” he managed mildly – though intentionally using his full name to
let Rogers know he didn’t take kindly to being scolded by a human. “We do have skimmers and
other flying vehicles in Asgard, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. How come you didn’t use any in the battle?”

“They’re neither armored nor armed. Asgard does her best not to escalate warfare beyond that
which requires armies to meet face to face, putting one’s self within arm’s reach of the enemy. It
helps to keep the peace.”

“Huh. Probably a good idea. Too bad we can’t go back to that. There are too many governments
that wouldn’t honor it.”

“Agreed; however, in the other realms, Asgard is the…eh, Kara? What phrase am I looking for?”

“The eight-hundred-pound gorilla,” she supplied from somewhere behind him.

“Just so. Thank you, darling.”

“That wouldn’t work here.”
Loki sighed. “So, I’ve been told, Steve. Repeatedly. Tis our good fortune that the Mad Titan did not have enough knowledge of life on Midgard to realize my plan was impractical.” The soldier nodded agreement and checked the instruments once again. “Do you really believe I’d endanger Kara by having her on board if I could not fly this craft safely?”

“Huh? Oh, no. I’m just trying to distract myself, I guess.”

“You fear that we shall not succeed in liberating your friend from his controllers.”

“Pretty much. He just barely recognized me. Loki, we grew up together; he saved me from getting beat up all the time when I was still a sickly kid. Then after they gave me the serum we fought Nazis together. It’s like he was my brother and he didn’t really know me anymore.”

The plaintive note in Roger’s voice signaled just how deeply the soldier was affected. “Yet he saved your life when he had the opportunity to satisfy his directives and do otherwise. Somewhere deep inside he remembers.”

A few moments of blessed silence passed before Loki glanced up to see earnest blue eyes focused on him. “Thanks, Loki.”

“You are welcome, Steve.” Yes, Heimdall was no doubt laughing his backside off at his foolishness; but it no longer mattered. These more than humans had become his friends. Shaking his head at the thought he peered out into the night at the bright lights in the distance that signaled their approach to a fairly large city. “We’re almost there.”

… …

“And I’m picking up a concentration of energy that can only be our tesseract-based weapons,” Tony told them. “Huh; there’s a lot more than I’d given SHIELD blame for building. What do you think, Lokes? Did they copy them and build more or did Fury manage to hide them from Jarvis?”

“The latter. Based on the sample I inspected, the tesseract needed to be present when they were activated.”

He was going to have to tease J about missing them, then. “Oookay. There’s also a number of anomalous readings. The tech is similar, but the rate of decay in the energy indicates that the sources are a lot older than the weapons SHIELD built. I’m sending the display to the cockpit screens; take a look, would you?”

“Steve, take over.” Loki sounded distracted as he studied the readings and then refined them before examining them in minute detail. “This is not good. It seems we have a few very old objects, likely of extraterrestrial origin.”

“Oh-eight-fours,” the Widow told them over the comm. “I’ve been following up with SHIELD’s network. Apparently, Hydra raided the Fridge.”

“Thor mentioned some of the traitors carried Chitauri weapons. Why would one put them in cold storage?” Loki asked.

“Not an actual refrigeration unit, Loki. It’s a nickname Fury gave a secure storage unit that was to hold weapons and artifacts too dangerous to use until we could either launch them on a missile into the sun or find some safe way to use or destroy them here on Earth,” she explained.

“I see,” he returned with a frown that meant he didn’t see at all. Tony bit back a chuckle. “Well, then; it seems this may be a bit more of a challenge than I anticipated. Be wary, all. If our enemy
has found a way to use these artifacts, there is no telling what we might face.” He glanced over his shoulder at the passenger cabin. “The universe is a dangerous place with much that is beyond your understanding…and in some cases, my own.”

“That’s not reassuring, Taz.”

Loki shrugged. “T’was meant to be a warning, not a reassurance.”

… …

Raj frowned as he pecked at his own tablet’s controls. “There have been reports that some of the older artifacts have been used, and in one case, recovered. It gave the user the power of that Thor called a Berserk.” He looked up in time to see Loki’s shiver.

“Where is it now?” the god asked.

“Buried under the wreckage of the Triskelion, I imagine. It was locked away in a vault near the labs. The salvage team is largely composed of SHIELD loyalists who are aware of the potential dangers of items stored there.”

Loki joined them in the back and Kara nudged him with her knee as he sat beside her. “Shouldn’t we have someone there as well? I mean, someone from Asgard?”

“That’s a good thought. Just having an Æsir on site to oversee the search would be reassuring.”

“I’ll discuss it with our visitors,” Natasha’s voice told them over the comm. “I can take one or two of them there while Hawk stays here with the rest.”

“I’ll take them. Brianna needs her mom,” Clint’s voice said.

“You just want to get out of diaper duty.”

“I’m certain you’ll come to a compromise,” Raj told them, trying to keep his smirk out of his voice. “At least with all of our guests, there’s no worries about the baby’s safety.”

“No joke,” Clint agreed. “Anybody trying to pull anything here would be in for a nasty surprise.”

… …

Signing off, Natasha headed for the observation lounge, leaving Clint to monitor communications. As she suspected, it was full of Asgardians and Ljósálfar. And one human baby…scratch that. Brianna was no more human than their guests. Her breath caught in her throat for a second at that thought before she dismissed it. Bree was healthy, happy, and had a large family – of sorts – who put her safety and happiness as their top priority. A tiny grin snuck out as she spotted the dusting of reddish curls tucked against a long fall of platinum hair. “Practicing, Nyvorlas?” The grin became noticeable to the others as Sif’s eyes narrowed and her body tensed awaiting her lover’s response.

“I wouldn’t presume,” he returned. “We’ve had no discussions in that regard whatsoever.” Sif relaxed as she nodded agreement. “It so happens that other than Volstagg, I am the only one amongst us with any experience with infants. My elder siblings are nearly as prolific as my mother so there are always one or two about.”

Volstagg looked up from where he was bent over a chessboard across from Bruce. “Aye, but babies are a…” he paused and glanced at the Álfar. Natasha silently dared him to say ‘woman’s responsibility’ or some such. “…younger man’s game. I no longer have the patience.” He glanced
down at himself. “Or a lap to hold them on,” he finished with a guffaw so loud that Brianna’s head lifted up and she turned to stare at the big man, a distinct frown on her tiny lips.

Those lips trembled and Natasha crossed the room and reached for her just as they opened and let out a wail. “It’s okay, sweetie. The loud man didn’t mean to wake you.” She shot Volstagg a glare. “Did he?”

“No, my ladies, of course not.” Despite his claim that he didn’t have patience with them, his voice dropped to a soft, gentle tone. “Shall I send her back to sleep then?” he asked. “I do still manage a good lullaby.” He reached out and Natasha frowned. “Trust me, my lady. We’ll do just fine together, won’t we, sweeting?” A large index finger stroked Brianna’s cheek.

The baby stared at him and reached up for his finger. Natasha took that as a good sign and handed her over. “Okay, once she’s dozing, we can put her in her crib so I can get back to work reviewing the latest Hydra intel that Olivia uploaded before…” she trailed off, thinking about the critically injured agent’s condition before she was taken to Asgard. They’d heard nothing other than there were issues with her treatment – a bad sign. The latest messenger had only been able to tell them that Hill was out of the woods and that Fury was doing better than expected.

Hogun turned from where he’d been smirking at Volstagg’s cooing. “Should I return to check on her?”

“No. We have too much on our plates here. I need you to be part of a team to keep an eye on what’s found in the wreckage of the Triskelion. There were some artifacts temporarily stored there that Hydra would love to get its tentacles on. From the readings we’re picking up from that base in Sokovia, Loki thinks they may have originated in Asgard or one of the outer realms.” Hogun frowned at her.

“Actually,” Nyvorlas interjected. “Sif and I would be better suited for that duty.” He nodded at his fiancé. “She tells me that studying the records of missing weapons and other items that you might call ‘artifacts’ had become a pastime of hers. And I would easily recognize the energy of any such dangerous objects. We also have our own security team to enforce our collection of them and to protect the ones we’ve found while we search for others.”

Two birds, one stone. They wouldn’t need to call in help from another team. “Sounds good. I’m also going to send a Stark Industries employee or two with you. Stark generally gets called in on things like this – we can have Colonel Rhodes make an official request for it, and the ones I have in mind would be able to tell you the what areas of the wreckage you should concentrate on.”

… …

Pepper looked up at the young woman and men that Tony had sent to her. “Okay, I have dossiers for each of you. They explain your job titles and pertinent details about the projects you’ve been working on for the past several years. Tony has been the only one handling them and doing so off-site, so there won’t be any reason for the rest of our employees to recognize you.”

The woman seemed to be the group’s spokesperson. “Thank you, Mrs. Stark. We’ll get these memorized and then destroyed, pronto.”

“No need to destroy them. I prepared them in the format we use to report to the Board of Directors. If anyone asks, you had it to review for errors before we present them.”

“Memorize, then. Wow. Mr. Stark said you were amazing. I guess I thought he was exaggerating because he was in love with you.”
“You’ll learn that Tony has a gift for understatement. Now, bank accounts. I’ve taken the libert…” she broke off as her phone rang and looked at the number. Punching the button she told them, “I have to take this. You can wait out in reception.” Once the group closed her door behind them, she held the phone to her ear. “What’s up, Natasha?” Frowning as she listened, she pulled up the quartet’s S.H.I.E.L.D. records. “Okay, two of them had that kind of access. I’ll send them up ASAP.” Flicking on the speaker to reception, she asked the former S.H.I.E.L.D. technicians back in. “Sorry about that. Are you all ready to go to work?”

Laurel looked at the boys. “Sure. Where do you want us to start?”

“I need two of you, David and Ronald…”

“Um, ma’am?” one of the boys interrupted. “I’m Dave, he’s Ronnie. It’s kind of important.” She stared hard at him. “You see, two of our friends that didn’t get out, they were David and Ronald.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry for your loss, Dave.” Open foot, insert Manolo Blahnik pumps. “Dave and Ronnie. I understand you both had clearance for the labs where the recently collected artifacts were kept?”

“We did,” Dave agreed as his friend nodded.

“We need you to go up to the Avengers’ Observation Lounge and join the team that will be headed back to the Triskelion to oversee salvage in that area. Apparently, some of them are extremely dangerous and need to be removed from Earth as soon as can be managed.”

Ronnie chuckled. “I don’t think you’ll need us to get into the lab.”

Pepper tapped her pen on her desk. “Obviously. What we do need you for is to show our off-world guests where the lab was. We can’t find it on the schematics that Agent Ramos provided just before the complex collapsed.” The boy flushed…she couldn’t help thinking about them as kids. If the oldest of them was more than twenty-five she’d give up her next four spa days.

“Gotcha. Sorry.”

“Meanwhile Laurel and…” she glanced at the tablet screen, “Gary can work on getting apartments for all of you.” She handed them each an envelope to which was clipped their SI badge. “These IDs will get you past the military without an Avenger having to pull rank. Inside the envelopes are credit cards and bank information. Give me your current credit and bank cards and we’ll have any balances owed paid off, any funds you have in your personal accounts transferred and the accounts closed. While the Division used a holding company for payroll, we don’t want to chance it.” The four of them lost no time in pulling out wallets and handing over their cards, replacing them with the new ones. “What did you do with your Division IDs?”

“Cut them up and burned them,” Laurel volunteered. “There’s a crematorium, a half block down from my friend’s gym. All of the employees were out gawking at the disaster scene, so I threw them in, closed it and then opened it after the cycle ran to make sure there was nothing identifiable left. Someone’s loved one is going to have a few more ashes in the urn. Gross, I know, but practical.”

Right. These were S.H.I.E.L.D. employees. There had to be a bit of ruthless in there somewhere. “Good. One less thing to worry about.” She stood and they followed her out and down the hall to the elevator lobby. Jarvis had the doors open on the Executive Elevator by the time they arrived. “Gentlemen,” she gestured for Ronnie and Dave to enter. “Jarvis will let you out at the proper floor. Good luck in your first assignment. Oh, and don’t stare at the Álfar. He doesn’t like it.”
“Álfar?” Ronnie asked.

They jumped as a voice came from the walls of the car. “The Ljósálfar are a race residing on one of the outer realms from Asgard. They resemble Tolkien’s vision of Elves.”

Dave swallowed. “Okay, thanks…uh, Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir. Might I add to Mrs. Stark’s warning? Do not stare at Miss Darcy. Her fiancé, Dr. Banner does not like it.”

“Dr. Banner?”

“He’s talking about the Hulk, Dave.”

“Oh. Okay. Uh, thanks. We’ll do our level best not to stare at anyone.”

Ronnie looked around the room as they stepped off the elevator. A tall person with long white hair caught his eye even before a giant, bearded bulk of a man singing to a baby. The tall blonde turned and he could see that it was a guy…with pointy ears. Oh boy. He glanced at Dave who was, of course, staring, and elbowed him before walking towards the group. “Um, hi. Mrs. Stark sent us up. We’re the technicians who know the location of the lab you’re looking for. Well, what might be left of it, anyway.”

The Álfar, at least he assumed, cocked an upswept eyebrow at them. “I expected someone older,” he mused.


He flushed. “Ma’am, we were…uh…” he trailed off as he realized he might not be supposed to say they’d been with the Division.

“What? S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t hire geeks?”

“Well, yeah, but we can’t look like geeks or the muscle will beat the shit out of us,” Dave chimed in.

“Got it. Darcy Lewis,” she said, pointing to herself. “I’m the Avengers’ social media director. This is Prince Nyvorlas and Lady Sif, they’re the experts from Upstairs that will be going with you.” A tall woman with long inky hair and dressed in leather nodded. “Um, who’s going to fly the SI ‘copter?” she asked as she turned to the off-world pair.

“No one.” They looked up to where the voice had come from in time to see Agent Barton…well, former Agent Barton, dropping from a spot near the ceiling. “Coulson gave us the codes for a spare QJ stored in the city. He said Fury had it parked there right after the invasion in case we ever needed it.”

Ronnie looked at Dave who shrugged. “Um, Phil Coulson?” he asked. “How could he tell anybody anything after the invasion?”

“Yeah, kid; Phil Coulson. Welcome to Level 7. He’s alive.”

“Hawk, you don’t have authority…”
“Anybody with authority is either dead or Upstairs. If they’re going to be handling oh-eight-fours, they need to have that clearance level, Nat.”

“Good point. Want to toss a coin for it?”

These people were nuts, Ronnie decided as he watched the infamous Black Widow stroll over to the bearded giant and take the now dozing infant from him. “Nope,” Hawkeye returned. “I’m flying. You’ll stress too much over Bree’s safety when you’re away, even if I’m here with her. I’ll be okay because I know that no one and no thing will get by you to hurt our baby, and you’ve got back-up that can kick any intruder’s ass from here into next week while you’re busy protecting her.”

… …

Clint held his breath as Nat gave him her death glare and returned it with one of his own, just to let her know he was serious. “Fine,” she muttered and headed towards the elevator with Bree. “I need to work on that data.”

“Master Archer, might I suggest that you make use of Sir’s Hulkbuster armor? It may be needed to move rubble.”

“I’m too tall for it, Jarvis.”

“Agreed, sir. However, I am capable of operating it on your behalf.”

“Excellent. Just let Tony know. I don’t want him getting on my ass about it.”

“Already done, sir.”

“Doc, you going to come with us? Uh, for the science stuff. If we’ve got the armor, that’s all the muscle we’ll need.”

“Fine. Darce…”

“Yeah, I know. When you’ve gotta, you’ve gotta. I’ll keep the bed warm.”

Smothering a laugh, Clint looked anywhere other than the now blushing Banner. “Okay, kiddies, let’s go. We’ll take one of the cars to the QJ.”

… …

Tony was staring at his tablet muttering something about ‘his stuff’ as they came in for a landing behind a warehouse. Kara shook her head and smothered a grin. “Problem?”

“Yeah, Jarvis gave Barton my Hulkbuster armor. My state of the art armor is going to be used to move rubble.”

“Did you not use it for such at the Triskelion?” Loki asked.

“Yes. I used it. I hate…”

“Having anyone touch your stuff as much as being handed anything. We’re aware. Kara, is there a cure of this OCD your books spoke of?”

“Not really. At least not one that we could get him to spend the time to undertake.”
“I am not OCD,” Tony claimed. “I just don’t want people ruining my work and If I take stuff that’s handed to me, I usually lose it.”

“Of course.”

“Ha!” Kara pointed at her husband. “You rolled your eyes. Don’t ever again tell me you don’t do that.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Yes, Loki, you did,” Raj told him.

Loki treated them all to a long-suffering look. “Kara is an undue influence. I’ve never done it before.”

Steve stood up and joined them in the cabin. “Okay, we all ready to do this?”

“Yes.” Tony piped up. “I’m going to take to the sky and try out my new stealth tech.”

“Don’t you think you should test it somewhere else?” Steve asked.

“Nah, no time like the present.”

“He means he’s already tested it backwards and forwards and it’s fine,” Kara told them when both Raj and Steve shot Tony alarmed looks.

“You’re with me,” Raj told Steve. “You don’t speak the language and you don’t have anything to compensate for that. Loki and Kara can go together. Loki, can you make yourselves look like generic tourists? I know your all-speak takes care of the language barrier.”

“I can. We’ll keep that knowledge under wraps and claim to be lost newlyweds should we be questioned and perhaps use a few broken phrases of their language to get that idea across.”

“Excellent. You all have the coordinates, let’s get moving.”

They stepped out of the QJ and the ramp closed. “See?” Tony crowed as they lost sight of it. “My stealth tech works perfectly.”

“Unless someone walks into it,” Steve muttered.

“Do you have anything to make people avoid the area?”

Loki frowned thoughtfully as he considered her question. “No, but I can make it look like something else is here. Stark, go ahead and turn it off.” The QJ faded back into view…sort of.

“Oh my god, it looks like a garbage truck.” Kara shook her head. “I think that will do it.”

“Then let us go.”

… …
Chapter End Notes

This one is just to get people in place for the next bits of action and to get my typing fingers working again. 2017 wasn’t much better than 2016, but I can’t wallow forever. Thank you for hanging in there.
Vengeance is Mine

The Asset stared at the building to which he had been in such a hurry to report. The urgency had fled and his doubts had returned the further he had gotten from New York. Pulling back into the shadows as a limo stopped at a plain side door, he waited as his secondary handler climbed out, held a device over the lock of the door, and then pushed it open. An itch settled between his shoulder blades; since there was nothing behind him but a brick wall, he looked up into the empty sky. “Should report; need new instructions,” he muttered. Two young people, one male, one female, followed the handler into the building and the door closed behind them with a metallic clang that told him exactly how thick it was. After scanning the brick covered wall around the door his gaze followed it up to the flat roof that was all but covered by sharp spikes between rows of barbed wire. He slowly made his way to a point where he could examine the next side of the building.

“This city is kind of, um…”

“Anachronistic?” her husband suggested.

“Yes, that works. Not quite third world, just more like it got stuck in the 1950’s.” Kara turned to look behind them as horns honked. “Seriously, look at those cars. Not even the ones in Havana are as old-fashioned as some of these, and they’ve been cut off from imports for something like forty years.”

“I wouldn’t know. New York looks old-fashioned to me.”

“Well, excuse us for not living in golden palaces on a floating continent.”

Loki sighed. “It’s not a cont…”

“Don’t want to hear it.” She stopped. “Let’s not argue, okay? I just want to get this handled and get home. It’s been a really crappy week and a half.”

“Very well, darling.” He laid a hand along her cheek and kissed her softly. “We’ll punish our enemy for disturbing our honeymoon and then return home.”

“And hurting our friends.”

“Your friends. Fury and Hill were not mine.”

“Olivia is; at least she’s trying to be.”

“True. Look, our destination should be about a quarter-mile east of this intersection.”

“Can the energy from those weapons affect me?”

“Why? What are you feeling?”
“It seems like I’m getting a migraine headache.” Kara shrugged at Loki’s sharp glance. “I know, I shouldn’t be able to, that’s why I said ‘seems’.”

He reached up and touched the comm button in his ear. “Gentlemen, stay back from the building. One or more of the energy weapons are not properly containing their fuel. It is hazardous to human health at this point.”

Kara listened as Raj responded. “What about your and Kara’s health?”

“Unknown. Stark, if you pick up anything on your scans, read me the statistics. Have Jarvis give you both an extra-armor and intra-armor reading so that we will know if it is safe for you to approach.”

“Will do.”

… …

The next wall had no openings of any kind, but it stood flush against an old abandoned factory. The Asset hurried over to the crumbling building and slipped inside. There were no sounds other than his own heartbeat and breathing. Empty. He made his way room by room until he reached the point where the buildings should connect. Using an old piece of pipe that he broke off of the rotted plumbing, he chipped away at the bricks. Behind them was a wall of far newer bricks. Those soon gave way to a steel wall. There would be no entry here.

Following his instincts, he descended to the factory’s sub-basement. An old sewage pipe passed through the factory’s walls. While the smell of feces and urine lingered, the pipe was dry and tall enough for him to crouch down low and walk into. Several minutes later he nodded in satisfaction. It passed under the newer building, and it didn’t appear that the floor above was anything more than some type of floor covering on top of plywood supported by steel beams set about sixty centimeters apart. Checking the sturdiness of the plywood as he crab-walked beneath it, he finally located an area that was damaged by leaky plumbing. He set to work pulling it apart with one of his knives.

… …

“So, on top of those findings, the external readings are fluctuating enough that Jarvis is predicting the kind of explosive yield that Hellbringer can manage at her best. Internally, I’m not getting much of anything. That ore I added to my titanium alloy seems to be what’s repelling the energy.”

“The ore you received from Odin, I suppose?” Loki asked.

“Yep. Good stuff.”

“Yes. It won’t protect you from impact, however, so keep watch for a sudden spike in activity. Nassar and Rogers, don’t move any closer. I highly recommend you return to the QJ.”

“Ah, I seem to have lost Rogers,” Raj told them. “He was beside me until a few seconds ago. I turned to suggest we backtrack and he was gone.”

“Shit,” Tony said. “He’s dumped his comm. It’s in your pocket, Raj. I thought you grew up on the mean streets of London? You must have been one hell of an easy mark for pickpockets.”

“I was doing the nipping, Tony.”

Loki set his jaw and refrained from calling them all fools. He should get some kind of award for
dealing with this nonsense. “Nassar, just get back to the QJ. You’ll only endanger yourself if you look for him. Rogers is a big boy, any injuries he suffers are on his head.”

“Agreed. I’ll report in to the Tower.”

… …

After using an amplifying device to listen for activity in the space above, the Asset removed the section of flooring he had uncovered then waited to see if the slight noise it made had been heard. Nothing. He set it aside and lifted himself through, placing the hard rubber tile back in place and smearing a bit of blacking on it so that he could find it quickly. The room in which he emerged was an office and the door was propped open with a wedge. Sidling up to it and listening for any approach, he ducked back behind it as voices carried down the hall.

“I don’t like it, Baron. The Winter Soldier should have returned here days ago.”

“Are you certain there are no reports of his capture?”

“Positive. We still have people on the inside…well, in the area who are still connected to reporting by what’s left of S.H.I.E.L.D. and from the military.”

Von Stucker paused in silence for a moment. “Perhaps he was caught in the collapse.”

“That would be better than the alternative, considering his continued absence and Pierce’s death.”

“Ah well, we had good use from him. Send word to keep an eye on the bodies that are retrieved and activate our two secondary Assets to hunt him down. Have them instructed to work as a team; if he’s still alive, he will take them out if they do not. Meanwhile, increase security and issue arms to everyone here but the twins. If he has been turned, we need to be prepared. We know that he will be.”

They meant to terminate him. Hadn’t he done everything they’d asked? He waited, mind reeling, until he heard one pair of footsteps hurry down the hall. A male armed with an energy weapon strode into the room and looked around. The Asset grabbed him from behind, snapped his neck and carried him over to the marked tile. After lifting it he dropped the body down and followed, carrying the weapon. After donning the dead man’s uniform, he reemerged into the office and set off down the hall in the direction from which his victim had come. The store of weapons must be that way.

… …

Fine. Their priority was the weapons. He could understand that. He only hoped they would understand that his priority was…had to be, Bucky. The locator signal indicating Bucky’s direction was on his phone, and if he needed help he could use the phone to call for it, so he’d felt safe dumping the comm button. He didn’t need them telling him what to do, not now. He stopped and ducked behind a parked truck to check the signal. By the direction and distance, Bucky had to be in one of those two buildings catty-corner to him. “Jarvis, can you map the signal against those buildings?” he asked.

“Captain, there are dangerous energy levels in the area, you should retreat.”

“No retreat, no surrender, Jarvis. Can you map it?”

The answer seemed reluctant. “Yes Captain.” He watched the screen as an outline of the buildings was shown, along with a moving dot.
“Thanks. Wait, is he below the building?”

“He seems to be; however, the signal has changed locations within the two buildings three times in the past twenty minutes. Several of the locations have been at street level.”

“Must be a way to enter from beneath. I’m going in.” Steve turned off the volume so that any responses or warnings Jarvis might give wouldn’t alert anyone to his presence and darted across the street and into the older of the two structures.

… …

“Dr. Nassar; Captain Rogers checked in. He is in the danger zone and has refused my advice to remove himself.”

Raj sighed tiredly. “Of course he has. I wish we knew what kind of damage that energy might do to him. I don’t think we can count on the serum to keep him from suffering consequences.” He looked at the screen that displayed the city map and the rising energy levels. “Jarvis, is the QJ close enough to be affected if that place blows?”

“It is, doctor. I recommend you withdraw immediately, the energy source is destabilizing at an alarming rate.”

“Take it out of there;” Tony’s voice advised. I can get out under my own power and…”

“I can get Kara and myself to a safe distance without assistance,” Loki agreed. “Retreat to a point well beyond Jarvis’s calculations. This energy may not react how we might assume.”

“Shit, Cap just went into a rat trap of a building. I’m gonna go down.”

“Negative, Stark. Get yourself out of there. The captain has made his own choices and I do not wish to explain to your lady wife how I allowed you to be injured.”

“Aw, Taz, you do care. It’s okay, J will take over and get me out of there the second it becomes necessary. I already gave him his orders.”

“If they’re rescindable orders, they don’t count, Tony,” Kara chimed in.

“Eh, I’m not suicidal. Right, J?”

“If you say so, sir.”

… …

He’d had to pull back as Von Stucker and six other men passed through the halls, all carrying weapons. The main door opened and then closed again. Edging around the corner, the Asset came to a sudden halt. Even with the building’s occupants arming themselves, there were still a considerable number of energy weapons on shelves in the storage area – as well as a half-dozen armed guards and the two youngsters who had been in the limo. A screeching noise above him caught everyone’s attention. As he looked up, the soldiers began yelling in multiple languages, took shots at the ceiling, and then ran in his direction. He tensed to meet them only to stare as they dodged around him and fled as though their lives depended on it. A quick glance up told him why. What looked like a metal blade was slicing through the steel reinforced concrete of the ceiling. He blinked at the impossibility of it as a blur approached him. The fast moving…object…clipped his shoulder as it passed, half spinning him around. He looked back at the now empty room. A portion of his mind registered the fact that the blur had to have been the now missing youngsters,
regardless of how impossible their speed had been. A new noise redirected his attention to the ceiling.

The blade glinted like metal, but it had a soft radiance as it continued to slice the concrete and steel fairly easily, like a knife through cheese. The ceiling began to separate and the weapons on the shelves and the one in his hands began to glow. After a sideways motion of the blade, a piece of the ceiling pulled up at one edge. He watching in an alarming mix of curiosity and shock as the fingers of a luminous hand folded around the raised part and began pulling it up towards the outside. “No instructions,” he whispered to himself as he set the malfunctioning weapon down and slowly backed out of the room, his eyes never leaving the strange sight. A loud wrenching sound followed as the opening enlarged and a figure dropped through.

It landed with its…her back to him. A tall shining woman with wings and long dark hair, armed with what appeared to be a medieval-style weapon, landed lightly on the floor and examined the shelves of weapons. Searching his mind, he identified the long-hafted blade as a glave. She began to turn and he bolted.

… …

“What the hell?” Tony spat out. The building was within un-augmented view and a horse stood on top of it. Not just any horse, oh no. This one had wings and it glowed. “Oh, fuck.”

“Tony, what’s wrong?” Kara asked.

“You guys still in view of the building?”

“We will be again after we turn this corner,” Loki advised. Tony waited and a moment later he heard that distinctive “Bloody hell.”

“I’m not imagining it, am I? That’s a freaking Pegasus?”

“Yes.”

“Which are only ridden by Valkyries?”

“Yes. Tony, get out of there now. If a Valkyrie is on the premises we want to be as far way as we can manage. Come, Kara, we need to run.”

“Son of a bitch.” If Loki was that perturbed…damn. “Okay, I’m getting.” He started to pull back, but after checking the readings hovered behind a water tower to watch. It wasn’t every day you got to see an honest to Asgard Valkyrie, after all.

… …

The Asset pulled aside the floor tile, dropped into the sewer pipe and began to hurry back towards his exit only to come to a halt as he reached the end of the pipe underneath the old factory. Steve Rogers, the man who claimed to be his best friend, backed hastily out of his way as he came through. The Asset looked back down the tunnel and saw that the glow previously limited to the weapons storage area had made its way to the office.

He grabbed Rogers by the arm and turned him towards the exit. “Run,” he told the man and pulled him along to get him started. They reached ground level quickly and headed out onto the sunlit street. No, wait. That wasn’t the sun. Turning, he saw the female figure back on the roof and looking in their direction. He swallowed and pulled at Rogers again. “Faster,” was all he managed and he ran full out.
“Bucky? What in heaven is that thing?”

Rogers was still calling him by his friend’s name. No time for debate. “Don’t know. Powerful, dangerous. Just run.” They all but flew down the street. It felt so familiar. They dashed as one around a corner and then cut through an alley. Turning another corner, they skidded to a halt. The winged female stood in their path, a winged horse behind her. He began to cautiously back away.

… …

“We’ve got problems,” Tony told the others.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Nassar snapped.

“Cap found Barnes and they just came face to face with that Valkyrie.”

“Damnation, Stark, I told you to get out of there!” Loki yelled.

“Sorry, Taz. It’s like an accident; you can’t look away.” He checked his readings again. “Damn it, J, that building is going to go…”

“In less than two minutes, Sir. I took the liberty of notifying the local police of a dangerous gas leak in the area when we first encountered the abnormal readings. Fortunately, it is a Sunday and most of the businesses in this area are closed.”

“Good deal, J. It’s mostly warehouses, so that makes sense. At least Hydra didn’t put their base in a heavily populated area.” He swallowed and watched the confrontation on the street.

… …

The glowing woman pointed her weapon at Bucky and took a step forward. Steve moved in front of him and she stopped. Odd, but...his eyes widened as he stared at her features and realized not just what, but who she was. “Oh, crap. Olivia? Oh, dear Lord...did you...die?” She vanished and then reappeared to their left. He moved back in front of her target. “Bucky, she’s a Valkyrie from Asgard and is after you, probably because of Hydra. Stay behind me.”

“Foolish,” he rasped.

“Yeah, maybe. But I don’t think she’ll hurt me.” Again, she vanished and he spun in time to see her advancing from behind them. “No,” he told her, yanking Bucky back and moving between them again. She halted. “Olivia, it’s not his fault. They brainwashed him. I swear, he’s not with them willingly.”

“You know nothing,” Bucky said.

“Not helping.” He hissed back. “He doesn’t even remember who he was. Please; let me help him. Let the Avengers help him.” She stopped moving but the weapon was still pointed in their direction. “Try backing up slowly, Buck. Put your hands up in surrender.” He felt his old friend move, but didn’t take his eyes off of the Valkyrie to check.

His phone started vibrating in his pocket just as a repulser blast shattered a portion of a wall nearby. The Valkyrie glanced in that direction and he grabbed the phone and turned on the speaker function. “Run, dammit. Put some distance between you and her so I can pick you up,” Stark told him.

“Come on, Bucky, Stark’s coming for us,” he said, and gave his friend a push as the next repulser
blast hit the street between them and the woman. They ran, not daring to look behind them.

… …

“Idiot,” Loki fumed.

“We need to go back and help them.”

“Jarvis, timetable on the overload?” he asked.

“No more than 60 seconds, best estimate, your highness.”

“Kara, I’m sorry, we must go.” She stopped moving. “Darling, we cannot help them! They would not wish you to risk our child, now hurry.”

Her sob echoed as he half-dragged her down the street. Focusing his senses, he could feel the access to Yggdrasill’s branches ahead. Too far ahead for them to reach in less than a minute.

… …

A high-pitched tone was filling the air and making his ears hurt. The Asset risked a glance back towards Hydra’s facility. A sickly glow filled the sky. “Not far enough,” he told Rogers as they continued to run.

“Just keep moving.”

“Cap, run abreast, leave about two feet between you,” Stark’s voice told Rogers over the phone. The Asset followed the instructions and paced himself to match Roger’s stride. His heart all but stopped as the female appeared ahead of them. He glanced at Rogers who continued to run toward her, a determined look on his face. As they got far too close for comfort, something solid hit his back and closed around him. He felt his feet leave the ground and grabbed hold of the metal gauntlet that held him by his waist.

“Gotcha,” Stark said. “Let’s get out of here.”

He looked back as the whine tipped into a crescendo and was replaced by the distinctive sound of a massive explosion.

… …

His ears hurt and a rumble replaced the sound they’d been hearing. They weren’t going to make it. Grabbing Kara and pulling her against his body, he shifted as far down the street as he could see, emerging, thankfully, steps away from the access point. “Don’t pull away from me,” he told her. “We’re going onto the Branches.” They stepped through and the sound of an explosion was abruptly cut off. He sagged onto the surface of the branch and looked up at his wife. Tears filled her remarkable eyes. “Perhaps Tony reached them in time,” he soothed.

“Maybe reached them, but he couldn’t possibly get them out of there fast enough.”

His eyes closed with a sigh. “No. Not likely.”

… …

Tony could feel pieces of masonry and other less identifiable items hitting the back of his armor. As Jarvis counted down the seconds he’d carried the two super-soldiers over a large building and down into a concrete delivery access area, pressed them into a corner, and covered them as much
as possible. The explosion had shaken the ground like an earthquake…at least a five point oh. The sound of steel reinforced concrete groaning reminded him far too much of the Triskelion’s fall, but at least the debris had stopped flying. “Raj, where are you?”

“About five kilometers northeast of your position. What kind of readings are you getting?”

He checked his HUD. “Stay where you are. We’ll come to you. It’s a radiation-type of fallout, mostly gamma which I would never have guessed from the weapon specs, along with something Jarvis can’t identify.”

“Are you both in one piece?”

“Yeah. Looks like all three of us are fine. Have you heard anything from our newlyweds?”

“Nothing. I’m not picking up a signal from them either.”

“Same here. Their signals disappeared at the same time, so I’m guessing Loki used his mojo to take them elsewhere. Be with you in a few.” He stood and looked down at the two old men in young men’s bodies. They seemed shaken. “Wow. We finally found something that got to you,” he teased Rogers.

“You saw that, right?”

“The Valkyrie and the Pegasus? Yeah. I’m pretty freaked. Let’s get out of here.”

“Bucky, no arguments, you’re coming with us.”

The Winter Soldier stared at them, his eyes showing something Tony was sure that Romanov would give up a lifetime supply of premium vodka to see. Fear. The man looked back in the direction of the explosion. No, not of them. Of what he’d seen. Tony tapped him on the metal arm. “Don’t sweat it. We’re scared shitless, too.”

… …

“Do you think it’s safe to go back?”

“No, love. We’ll exit elsewhere. Don’t let go of me, you remember what the Grand Vizier and I have told you about the branches,” Loki reminded her.

“Of course, I remember. I remember everything.” Kara gave him a sideways glance and snickered at his disbelieving expression. “It’s just that sometimes I choose to ignore what I remember.”

He reached into nothingness and a leather belt appeared in his hand. After fastening it securely around her waist, Loki wrapped his arm around her and curled his fingers through the belt. “And that is what terrifies me.”

“You don’t think we’ll run into Malekith, do you?”

“Of course not. The branches are much like the Bifröst in that way. One who falls off enters the void. The only way to escape that is through a wormhole that someone else opens.”

“Um…”

“That’s how Thanos captured me. He opened a wormhole to send one of his minions somewhere and I fell out.”
“Great. So, if anybody opens a wormhole, Malekith could fall out and make his way back to Asgard or Earth and screw with us again.”

Loki shrugged. “Very few beings can open a wormhole…”

“Jane can.”

“Ah…perhaps she should be advised to refrain from doing so again.”

“You think? Geez, what if we’d had him dumped in our laps when we were trying to get you and Rhodey back?”

“It did not happen, so let us not dwell upon it. We want to go this way, love.”

... ...

Fuck it, Tony decided and got out of the armor. If their ‘guest’ wanted to kill him after he’d saved the man’s ass, so be it. He was freaked and being in the suit was not doing its usual good job of reassuring him. The armor folded up into its briefcase shape and he moved it under the bench. Dropping his head to the cushioned back, he sighed. “That was too damn close, even for me. And we didn’t even get the damn weapons.”

“All of you escaping harm is miracle enough,” Nassar murmured as he finished taking readings from the super-soldier and super-assassin. “Jarvis, are you seeing anything I am not?”

A moment passed as the AI likely rechecked their conclusions. “No, doctor. There seems to be no measurable damage to either gentleman.”

“We’ll have Bruce double-check when we get back to the Tower,” Tony told them. “He’s our radiation and cellular alteration expert. Pretty damn intuitive with it, too. Still wish we could have done something about those weapons, though. I saw some Hydra personnel escaping from the building with some before it blew so they’re still out there.” He frowned as the assassin abruptly stood and made his way to the cockpit area. He stared at the array for a bit and then started punching buttons. “Uh, Cap?”

Spangles was already on his feet. “Bucky, what are you doing?”

“He’s not touching anything to do with the operation of the vehicle,” Nassar commented quietly. “Only the external scanning equipment. Let him be.”

Shortly a hologram popped up showing a satellite view of the city. Smoke rose from over a dozen different areas in addition to the thick column at the location of the former Hydra base. “What the…”

“I’ll zoom in,” Nassar said, then looked up at the Winter Soldier. “If I may?” The man shrugged and went back to his seat. The view focused in on one of the bigger plumes and zoomed until things on the ground were easily visible. The frame of a large, dark colored vehicle was folded in half into a crater.

“Von Stucker’s limo,” Cap’s buddy rasped. “Check the plate number.”

Tony hurried up to the console and zoomed the view back out with one hand and queried Jarvis with the other. “Were you in a position to see how many of their people escaped with weapons? I only saw a few after I arrived.”
“Yes. Eighteen or more.”

“Damn. I saw five people with weapons pile into that limo. You’re right about the plate, too. Huh, that might account for all of them. Guess that Valkyrie did us a big favor. Asgard could have told us they were sending one.”

“I don’t think they sent her,” Cap muttered. “Don’t the legends say that Odin transforms women into Valkyries who are dying and want revenge?”

“Um, yeah,” he dragged the word out, waiting for the Boy Scout to elaborate.

“She was, or used to be, Olivia. I think.”

Fuck. “Wait, no way, she was too tall to be Olivia. That girl barely comes up to my eyes, and I’m not exactly tall.”

Rogers shrugged. “Kara’s weight tripled and she got thinner. Her eyes changed too. Why wouldn’t Odin make a Valkyrie taller than she was in life.”

“Why not, indeed,” Nassar agreed.

… …

Chapter End Notes

Hey, the words are still flowing…yay! Thank you for all the welcome back comments. They really made me feel great.
Answers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Answers

“Prince Loki!” a young footman exclaimed as they emerged from the branches in the heart of the Valhall. “Your highness,” he acknowledged Kara as well. “I did not realize the two of you were in residence. I’ll have your chambers seen to immediately.”

“Don’t bother. We aren’t in residence. Do you know where I might find my parents at this hour?” Loki asked. Time passage within the branches was tricky, and he had no idea whatsoever what time of day it might be in Asgard.

“The All-Father is in Council, making assignments for the time he will be spending on Midgard. Her majesty is visiting patients in the Healer’s Hall.”

“Thank you. Carry on.” Loki tucked his wife’s arm into his elbow and led her towards the Healers. “This isn’t of enough importance to interrupt a Council meeting.”

“True. Besides, Frigga always know what’s going on anyway. Plus, we can check on Nick, Maria, and Olivia.”

He stopped and looked down at her. “Olivia or Maria, love. Valkyrie aren’t sent to Midgard for any reason other than personal vengeance or to gather heroes bound for Valhalla. Only a woman killed by Hydra would seek vengeance by attacking them upon becoming a Valkyrie. One of them has died…and has made history.”

“Oh. Damn. What? Made history, how?”

“There’s never been a human-born Valkyrie before now.”

… …

By the time they’d landed back at the tower, Tony was ready to sleep…for a week. No matter how he’d tried to relax, he kept stealing looks at Cap’s old buddy. They actually had the notorious Winter Soldier in custody. Well, in a manner of speaking. Steve had refused to use any kind of restraints on him. Surprisingly, or maybe not, Nassar had agreed with him. He looked over at Rogers. The blonde was sound asleep, his head resting on Barnes’ shoulder, no less. Tony jumped a bit when the assassin spoke. “You fear me.”

“Considering your kill count? Damn straight.”

“He does not.” Barnes glanced down at Steve.

“He still sees you as the guy who saved his ass over and over again when you were growing up in Brooklyn.”

“I do not remember.”

Nassar looked back at them from the cockpit. “Tony, now is not the time for questions; you don’t know what response you might accidently trigger.”
An odd rasping sound drew Tony’s eyes back to Barnes. One corner of his mouth was crooked into a smirk and he was…laughing? “You are correct,” he told the doctor. “Not even I know.”

“Oh, shit.” He looked around the cabin, noting where weapons and other useful items had been stashed in their haste to leave Sokovia. “I don’t suppose you’d be able to warn us if we’re pushing your buttons…you know, in consideration of us saving your ass back there?”

Those cold eyes looked at him as the smirk disappeared. “I will try.” Tony nodded at the response. That was all they could hope for.

… …

One of the apprentices directed them into an area where their Midgardian patients were being cared for. As they stepped through, Kara saw several beds occupied by humans in various stages of recovery. She didn’t know any of them personally. One young woman, half-sitting in her bed, looked up at them. “Princess,” she said softly. “They tell me you saved my life.” The sheets were flat where her left leg would be.

“I’m sorry that’s all I was able to save,” she told the woman. “What’s your name?”

“Noelle Hauptmann,” she responded. “Most people call me Ellie.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ellie. Is that a married name?” Ellie’s skin was a deep cocoa shade, but that name was definitely Germanic.

“No, I took my stepdad’s name after he married my mom. He adopted all of us kids.”

Kara had to smile. “Another adoptee, Loki,” she said, nudging him.

Loki shot her an admonishing look before giving Ellie a charming smile. “There seems to be a great deal of that going around. Ellie, do you know where the Director is being treated?”

“Um, through that door a-ways, I think,” she said, pointing to a door in the far corner. “At least they took him back that way last night.”

“What happened last night?”

“Not sure, sir. They never did tell us. He looked pretty pissed, though.” Ellie looked down at her hands with a frown. “They haven’t told us much of anything; not even when we’ll be well enough to make the trip home, or anything about what happened at the Triskelion.”

Kara nodded. “They probably don’t know a great deal. Other than Hydra being involved, we haven’t sorted it all out.”

“I saw that Helicarrier coming at us. Was it sabotaged?”

Now she was getting into an area that bordered on ‘need to know’. “I don’t even have all of the details yet. We’ve been waiting for the Director or Deputy to be well enough to sit down with everyone who was involved in the event to sort it all out. Right now, we’re busy chasing down enemy survivors.”

“Makes sense. Thank you, ma’am. ‘Preciate it.” Noelle settled back against the pillows. “You both stay safe. We really need you.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose as Kara covered her mouth with a hand. “We shall,” he promised. “Let us go
discover what has put Director Fury into a… fury, this time.” Noelle chuckled as they headed through the back door.

… …

The asset stared out at the tower they were swiftly approaching. Everything he knew told him that he should fight, kill, and escape, but a nagging feeling insisted on reminding him that he had nowhere to escape to. Rogers was still dozing against his shoulder, his body totally relaxed. It would be a simple thing to snap his neck, use his body as a shield, and then kill the others and take over the aircraft. His automated response training sputtered to silence every time his strategizing reached that point. He’d be free, have an aircraft, but nowhere to fly. He was wanted on every continent by every country and organization that didn’t believe him to be a mythological “boogie man” cooked up by Interpol to excuse their poor record of preventing key assassinations.

“There’s no place to go,” the man at the helm commented softly. “Is there?”

He frowned at the man with the Indo-European features and speech pattern then deliberately turned his gaze back to the skyline without responding.

“You’ve no backup safe house?”

Remaining silent, he noted that Stark had taken an interest in the one-sided conversation. The surprisingly short man stared at him thoughtfully. “You could stay with us,” he offered. The asset flashed a glare at the man causing him to lean back and raise his hands in surrender. “Just a suggestion. You know that Stevarino isn’t going to be happy with any of us if you take off again. I’ve got to at least make the offer or he’s going to stare at me with those baby-blues and that sad hurt puppy expression as if it were my fault.”

A scene formed in his tattered memories. A much shorter and rather scrawny boy with blonde hair and startling blue eyes was staring at him, his expressing begging for the asset’s younger self to intervene when bullies were picking on some poor kids at the park. When he didn’t move, the weaker boy ran to the group and put himself between the bullies and their targets. He’d reached them just in time to prevent the fist of a bully from connecting with Stevie’s face. Stevie. Who was…he looked down at the blonde super-soldier that Stark had called Steve. Had he been the Stevie the asset remembered in flashes of the past? The sickly kid with the heart of a giant? He closed his eyes and dropped his head back on the headrest to think.

… …

The room they entered was actually kind of an anteroom. Kara looked up at her husband, silently questioning. “It’s used when members of the court need healing. Generally, if any of us are injured, there are multiple injuries and injured. This gives an area where we can have privacy and still remain guarded.” He gestured around the anteroom as he spoke then guided her to one of the doors. “There was one point where Thor and I were both injured and Mother hurt herself running to us when we were brought home. She was so distraught she literally fell, head over heels, down the palace steps and hit her head on the edge of one. Odin was then the distraught one. He lectured us both for frightening our mother.”

Loki subsided with a small smile. This was a good memory of his parents. “Well, he does adore her. And I’ll bet the two of you were busy getting into trouble when you got hurt.”

That brought out a full-on laugh. “Guilty as charged, my dear,” he finally managed. “We were up to no good…but damn, it was fun.” His smile had widened. “Mother was kept in the room on the right, it has an excellent view out the windows. Thor and I shared the room on the left. There are
no windows and no way out of it except through the waiting area so they could be certain we’d stay there until Eir approved our departure.”

Hel glanced up at the closed door a moment before it opened. She set his hand down and stood, facing it. “Father, it is good of you to visit,” she said to the pain in the ass that haunted his worst nightmares…well, his second worst.

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “Am I to believe you were simply standing there?” he asked. Nick buried his surprise at the playful note in the god’s voice. He glanced down to see the indent where Hel had been sitting moments before.

“I know better than to lie to you. Of course not. But I did think it respectful to stand to greet you.”

“Hmm. Close enough to the truth, I’ll accept it.” The green eyes drifted to Nick’s face. “Can you see out of the injured eye any better?”

“Yes. Not sure I believe what I’m seeing up here, but I am seeing it.”

“And what did you see?” Loki’s eyes narrowed; he was looking for a specific answer. He might as well tell him. The prick would figure it out soon enough.

“I saw my agent give up her life to your dad’s hocus-pocus in the hopes of getting revenge on Hydra,” he grated out.

“Nicholas! Her life was already lost, you know that.”

Damnit. “I don’t know that, Hel. I know what I…”

“You know it because I have told you so. Of all of us, I know best when someone is about to die. Even if they are not bound for my realm, I feel their energy approach the line between life and death. Nothing could have saved her.”

“Knock it off with the guilt, Nick. You know damn well it’s not your fault.”

Another woman contradicting him. He didn’t have anything against women, it just…shii-it. It hurt his pride to be wrong. Kara frowned at him, daring him to disagree. “All right. Yes, I know you told me that,” he directed to Hel. “I just have a lot of trouble accepting something that I never thought was possible my whole life.” He glared at the redhead. “I can feel guilty if I damn well please. It’s better than feeling sorry for myself for not being able to save the kid.”

Loki sighed. “It was Olivia, then?”

“Yeah. She had some harebrained idea she could become a Valkyrie and take on Hydra. Now she’s nothing but dust on the floor of your pop’s practice arena.”

“Not so harebrained after all. We had an encounter with the Winter Soldier and followed him to a Hydra base in Sokovia where they were storing the weapons stolen from your ‘Fridge’. A Valkyrie arrived and was in the process of destroying it when we had to escape the energy being released as the weapons broke down.”

“Olivia? Did you see her?”

“No, just the Pegasus. I imagine Rogers or Stark saw her, though. They were still in sight of the
building – Stark muttered something about seeing the Valkyrie confronting Rogers and his old friend. The building blew up just after that and we stepped onto the branches of Yggdrasil to escape the fallout.”

“I don’t see who else it could be,” Kara said. “Unless there are Valkyrie that have a grudge against Hydra that we don’t know about.”

… …

“There, Nicholas. You see? We have confirmed Olivia’s success, just as I told you,” They all looked over as Frigga swept into the room, followed by Fandral who was pushing a hovering chair that held Maria Hill. Kara nodded to them as Fandral took Maria over to the empty bed on the other side of the room.

“Yeah, sure. I guess that’s some comfort.”

“I would take it as such,” Loki told the disgruntled man. “She will still have life as a hero and protector. It will simply be elsewhere.”

“Exactly,” Frigga agreed. “Unless, of course, more of your people die heroes. Then she would likely be given the privilege to escort them to Valhalla.”

“Yeah, well, I’m outta the damn hero business. I’m too damn old for this shit.”

Hel laughed at him. “So, you say now. You would sing a different tune were I to try to hold you to that claim.” Her expression sobered. “I do wish I could think that you truly meant it.”

“Sorry, just an old warhorse, I guess. Look, I promise I’ll do my best not to get killed doing something heroic, okay?”

Loki touched his daughter’s arm. “And we promise that we will do everything we can to help him keep that promise.”

“Thank you.”

… …

Frigga beamed at her youngest and his bride as she walked with them to the Valhöll’s gates. A stableman was awaiting them there with three horses as she’d decided to accompany them to talk to Heimdall. She was certain that their friends had survived, but as it was part of a larger vision, she could not share that fact with them. The black stallion Loki favored leaned his head forward to nudge Kara’s shoulder. “My, Svartlyn has taken quite a liking to you.”

“Why shouldn’t he? We both love Loki.”

“You do not see him fussing over me.” They mounted and started over the bridge at a casual pace. “Your father is still packing for our visit,” she told her son. “And he thinks that I am the one who dithers over clothing choices.”

“He’s probably hoping to frustrate you so that you’ll leave him behind,” Loki groused.

She laughed. “No, not at all. He’s so looking forward to presenting your nuptial gift.”

Loki turned his head to stare at her. “That does not bode well.”

“Trust me, you’ll be pleased.”
“Can you give us a hint?” Kara asked.

“I can, but I will not. Do you not enjoy surprises, daughter?”

“Not really. Most surprises in my life have been bad ones.”

From everything Frigga had heard about her daughter-by-marriage’s life, this was true. “Perhaps this one shall change that trend.”

“If you say so,” was Kara’s dubious response as the arrived at the Observatory.

… …

“Oh no he’s not,” Natasha snarled after switching the comm from a connection to the QJ to the PA for the Avengers’ portion of the tower. “Hawk, get your ass to the Communications room. Now.”

She paced back and forth, her anger growing. “Nat, what’s with the cussing, I thought…” his voice cut off abruptly as she spun to face him.

“Stark is bringing the Winter Soldier here.”

He looked as shocked as she felt. “Seriously? They caught him?”

“No.” She forced herself to stop grinding her teeth. “They rescued the sookin syn, can you believe this? How dare they bring a threat like him here as a guest? We have a baby here!”

“Whoa, hon, calm down. We also have a herd of off-world bad-asses. Brianna is in no danger with them here. And they adore our kid. No way would they let anyone hurt her.”

“It’s an unnecessary risk,” she ground out.

“Come on. Wouldn’t you rather have him here where we can all keep an eye on him and shut him down instead of having him no-one knows where, and he’d have the advantage of surprise?”

There was that. “I don’t care what Cap says. His ‘friend’ is not having the run of the tower. We’re keeping him under guard at all…”

“Madm Romanov,” Jarvis began and Natasha winced. Since their elopement had been revealed, the AI had changed how he addressed her. First it had been ‘Mrs. Barton’, then after hearing her use every curse word she knew in every language she spoke, Jarvis had modified it to Madam Romanov. Still unnerving, but better.

“What?” she grated.

“I am advised by Mr. Stark that our new guest will not have the run of the tower. The tracking device is still in place and operational. I will be able to keep you informed as to his whereabouts at all times. Additionally, when he is not confined to a room on lockdown, Captain Rogers will accompany him.”

“Nat, it’s gonna be okay. Even without the other Asgardians here, Loki and Kara could take him down in a second.”

“That’s the problem. No one knows where Loki and Kara are…they didn’t get to the QJ with the others.”

Clint’s eyes widened. “Oh. Shit.”
“Language, Hawk.”

… …

“Heimdall, what’s the word on our friends,” Kara asked as she dropped from the gelding’s back.

“They are on their way back to New York, Princess. It does not appear they suffered any ill effects”

“Oh, thank go...” she stopped in mid-word and turned to stare down Loki. “Goodness,” she finished.


“That’s a story best left for them to tell, my Prince. I am certain if you ask both Rogers and Stark you will receive two very different but highly entertaining versions of the tale.”

“I’ll be certain to do so…separately, of course. Well, Kara, everyone is safe after all. Other than Hydra’s people, of course.”

“That’s no loss. Heimdall, did you see the Valkyrie?”

“I did. Valkyrie have not left Valhalla other than to collect the souls of heroes or to visit the Valhöll in my memory…until now. It was surprising, even to me.”

“We’ve never had a human become Valkyrie before,” Frigga told him. “While her friends mourn her loss from their lives, it is also a cause for celebration. Now, my dears. Let us return to the Valhöll, the evening meal will be served shortly.”

“We should probably go back home…to Midgard. They don’t know where we are and are probably worried.”

“Some are quite worried, Princess,” Heimdall agreed. “The others are somewhat concerned, but feel that you are simply delayed.” He turned his far-seeing gaze to her husband. “The trip through the Branches took you nearly a full day, their time. It is now the next day in New York.”

“I was afraid of that. The route to that particular egress is convoluted at best.”

Kara stared at him. “It only seemed like a half hour or so to me.”

“Time does not run quite the same way on the Branches. While it is passing at what might seem to be a normal pace to its travelers, it can either hurry by or move far more slowly to those outside of its influence. Tis hard to predict which might happen.”

“Why haven’t I noticed it before, like when you took Tony between realms and Pepper and I traveled through the Bifröst?”

“Those were paths I’d trod frequently. I knew how time would react for the two of you and adjusted my timing accordingly.”

Frigga coughed delicately to get their attention. “I suppose you’d best return, then. Your father and I shall be with you by morning.”

… …

The asset looked around as he was escorted from the aircraft. They had not even suggested any
type of restraints, much to his surprise. Stark was strolling unconcernedly ahead of them. The fool
appeared carefree. The Indo-European man, who Rogers had addressed as “Doc”, seemed watchful
but calmly so. That one had nerves of steel, he suspected. And while Rogers seemed troubled, he
also seemed…happy.

Ahead of them a redhead stalked through the sliding door, grabbed Stark by the throat, and
slammed him up against what must be reinforced glass. She began berating him in Russian. He
blinked as he recognized the Black Widow; one of the Red Room’s most infamous ‘graduates’. He
stopped walking and looked at the two flanking him. “Should we break it up?” Rogers asked the
doctor.

“No. Let her run out of steam. Stark isn’t fighting it; he knows her anger is reasonable under the
circumstances.”

That didn’t make sense to him. Why would an assassin as formidable as she be angry at his
presence? As he would be in their custody, the Black Widow would have an even chance of taking
him out. Or better. What was causing her…fear? He frowned at the blonde on his right. “Why?”

“Um, that’s not for me to say, Bucky,” Rogers told him as the Widow let Stark drop and turned to
them with an expression of disgust.

They watched as she stalked toward them. The Asset’s instincts screamed at him to either attack or
run…he did neither, deciding that Rogers wouldn’t allow him to be targeted. She reached out with
one hand and poked him in the chest. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want you anywhere.” He
stared her down, unmoving. The Widow snarled and then flexed her wrist and electric blue lines
raced from her wrist to her hand. He moved back, but not in time, as a powerful jolt of electricity
struck him in the chest.

“Natasha!” he heard Rogers yell as he lost consciousness.

… …

“That was totally unnecessary,” Steve told her.

“You bringing him here…”

“Was necessary. Look, would you rather we’d dropped him off somewhere?”

“You should have let him die with the other Hydra…”

“Damn it, Natasha. He was my friend. I’d never have made it through my teens without him and he
saved my life when we fell from the Insight Helicarrier.”

She fumed in silence for a moment. “Fine. You get one chance with him, just one. If he gets out of
line and endangers Brianna, I will end him, friend of yours or not.”

Steve sighed. “I get it, really. I swear he won’t be able to hurt the baby. He’ll have to go through
me first, and I’ll do anything and everything necessary to stop him if he tries.” She opened her
mouth to start another rant. “And yeah, I know that if he even tries you’ll hold me responsible.”

“Exactly.” She spun on her heel and stalked back through the sliding glass doors.

“Captain?” Nassar began, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I suggest you have a discussion with Mr.
Barnes and make him aware of what is expected of him here. He might just surprise us – his
programming is fractured and badly. It’s possible that he has far more independence and control
than even he believes.”

“Can we help him break fully out of it?”

“It’s possible. Normally, I’d simply put a S.H.I.E.L.D. resource on the job.” He shrugged. “That’s no longer wise, even if it were an option. It may take me some time to find a reliable expert to assist.”

“Understood. Let’s go hit up the Asgardians; maybe they’ll have a few ideas.”

… …

Kara moaned and held her tummy as they stepped down from the egress onto the grass in Central Park. Loki had decided to conserve his energy and use the Bifröst rather than take another trip through the Branches. “I think I need some of that stuff they gave Natasha,” she told her concerned husband.

“We’ll check the box of medical supplies that Eir sent with us; I’ve no doubt she thought of it.” He pulled out the cell phone Tony had given him and tapped one of the speed dial buttons. “Clint? Yes, we’re at the Park egress. Yes, we’re fine. If you don’t mind, I’m a bit tapped out at the moment. Good.” He tucked the device away and looked down at her. “It will be about twenty minutes. The others are dealing with securing their new visitor.”

“New…huh?”

“They took Barnes back to the tower with them.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, wow. Nat must be about to blow a gasket.”

“So, it seems. Do you have a problem with him being there?”

“Seriously, Loki? I could drop him in seconds. Besides, what else can we do with him…other than put him down like a rabid animal, and Steve would never stand for that.”

“Good point. Perhaps you can reassure Natasha that we will see to Brianna’s safety.”

“Of course. I’ll talk to Steve about his friend. Do you have a problem with me trying to help him?”

Loki looked up from where he’d been rummaging in the box that Eir had insisted they take with them. “Ah ha. I knew she’d include it.” He measured out a cap full of liquid and handed it to her.

Kara drank it down quickly. “Not going to answer?”

“I don’t like the idea, but I do not have a better one. Let us discuss it once we’ve had a chance to have a chat with the fellow and have you read him.”

She blinked. “Wow. That…good job, you remembered to ask and not to just tell me something.”

“I do try, love.”

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she reached up to kiss his jaw. “I know. Thank you.”

… …

He awoke in a strange place. The only thing that prevented him from immediately going on the attack was the fact that he was so physically comfortable. That turned out to be due to the decadent
bed he was lying on. A glance around the room showed that Rogers was ensconced in an armchair close to the bedroom’s door. He caught him just glancing up from the tablet he held. “How are you feeling?”

His eyes closed for a moment as he took stock. “Muscles ache, nerves tingling. Otherwise one hundred percent.”

“Good. Sorry about that. I knew Natasha wasn’t going to be thrilled, but I didn’t think she’d, well, react that badly.”

He shrugged in response and sat up. Rogers put down the tablet, stood, and held out a hand to him. He ignored with a curt, “Don’t need no help.”

“Fine. Come on out here and have a seat, we need to talk.” With that the blonde actually turned his back on him and moved to the outer room. He followed and sat down on a sofa that graced its center. “You know the Widow, right?” He hesitated before nodding. That was something they could ask her and likely would if they hadn’t already. “She’s very protective; even more so when she’s got something to protect. I asked her if I could tell you why.”

“You fear her?”

“I fear any mother with a child to protect if I’m not on her good side. And you should too.”

That…wasn’t possible. “The Red Room…”

“Yeah, so we’ve heard. Either they didn’t with her intentionally, or they messed up. She has a baby girl. I want your promise that you won’t so much as have any intent to hurt that baby or use her for a shield or do anything else that would endanger her.” The Avenger sighed when he didn’t respond. “That wasn’t a request, it was a demand. You don’t give me that promise and they’ll restrain you, lock you up, and drug you into compliance if that’s what it takes to insure the kid’s safety.”

Hurting children. They’d told him to kill children before. Tony Stark was supposed to be in the vehicle with his parents when they died. His absence hadn’t been luck. The asset had entered the home and had broken a picture of Howard Stark with a World War Two hero that the boy had been holding earlier. Howard had gone into a fury believing his son to be responsible. Called Tony jealous and then told the boy he was grounded and would not be accompanying them. The Asset had told his handlers that he hadn’t noticed that the younger Stark was not in the vehicle until it was too late. His handlers had decided that killing the teenager afterwards would tip their hand. “I’ve never intentionally hurt a child, or even a teenager,” he muttered. “That much I can remember.”

“Well, that’s something. You’re remembering a lot more now, aren’t you?” He nodded. “How long has it been since you reported in for, uh…”

“They called it debriefing. About a year. I don’t have no other string of memories this long.”

Roger’s eyes closed. “Sweet Jesus, man, Buck, I’m so sorry.”

That made no sense. “For what?”

“That they found you and I didn’t get back to look for you before they did…and that they’ve, crap. Bucky, they turned you into a, a…”

His eyebrow lifted. “Assassin?” He thought of some of the things he’d heard handlers say over this
past year. “A killing machine?”

Another sigh was the reply. Finally, the blonde looked up. “Yeah. I feel responsible not just because you were my best friend, but because you were lost on my watch and they found you before we could. I’m so sorry.”

Events flashed through his mind. Dangling from a moving vehicle…a train? By one hand, looking up into impossibly blue eyes before his grip failed and hearing an agonized shout of a name… Bucky. “I-I remember.” He shook his head. “Wasn’t your fault. My arm was already injured; I couldn’t hold on.”

“You remember? That’s great!”

“I remember that. And a playground. I think. Were you, kinda, a wimpy kid?”

Rogers was grinning at him like a fool. “Yeah, I was. You’re remembering, thank God. Bucky, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I still don’t…can’t, remember, well, us. Not really.”

“That’s okay. We’ll take it one step at a time.”

… …

Kara blinked in surprise when Beth stepped out of the QJ. “Welcome home!” she called out cheerfully.

“I didn’t know you could fly this thing.”

She shrugged. “Well, as Raj’s deputy, I learned to do a great many things you wouldn’t generally expect.”

“It’s not that difficult, Kara. You could learn quickly,” Loki told her.

“Uh huh. Like you’re learning to drive a car quickly?”

“That’s different. Your road system is overcrowded and has no consistency to it. Neither do your driving laws.”

“Point taken. Okay, let’s head back.”

They boarded and took seats. Loki took the helm and Bethany sat in the copilot seat. They lifted off quickly and were on their way to the tower with no issues. “There, you see? Simple.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Um, guys? I’ve got to warn you. Natasha is on the warpath and everybody’s on edge. The guys brought the Winter Soldier back with them.”

“Heimdall mentioned that. How are the off-worlders taking it?” she asked.

“Volstagg has taken over babysitting duties. He’s even cut down on his eating times. Sif assured us that he’ll just eat more and faster when he’s on a break. The guards that came with her and Nyvorlas are on duty in the hall, and Tony sealed the vent accesses in the room they’re holding him in and Jarvis is monitoring the venting to be sure no one is in them other than Clint. He’s also monitoring air flow and chemical content to be sure no one puts anything bad in the air.”
“Is this Winter Soldier a mage of any kind?” Loki asked.

“Um, no. purely human…well, as human as Steve and Natasha, anyway. Oh, and they searched him while he was out.”

“They knocked him out?”

“Not they, Kara, she. Natasha got in his face and then used the Widow’s Bite on him.”

“Ouch. I almost feel sorry for him. Almost. Considering how bad Maria was injured…If it hadn’t been for Fandral being with her and then his buddies being dropped in by Tony, she’d be dead.”

“How’s Olivia?”

“Uh…the guys didn’t…um, she didn’t make it.”

“Oh, geez.”

Tony looked up as the doors to the outside deck slid open and his honorary sister and brother-in-law strolled in. He grinned; yeah, gods considered him a relative and invited him to do the same. It was always great to one-up the competition. Not that he really had any. Loki looked at him and nodded. Kara grinned and said “We’re ba-ack.”

“Wait, you can quote eighties movies but I can’t?”

“Yep. Because I only do it strategically and you do it incessantly.”

“Uh huh. So, you’ve been to Asgard, I assume, since you came back by the Bifröst.”

“We have,” Loki said with a frown. “We need to get the team together for a debriefing.”

“Um…”

“Nyvorlas, his guards, and Sif can keep an eye on Steve’s guest. We need to have everyone here who was at the Triskelion together. Anything pertinent Sif and her intended need to know about can be shared later.”

“Okay. Jarvis, set it up, would you, buddy?”

“Of course, Sir.”

“A great deal has happened and it is far from over,” Loki concluded, looking grim, especially for him.

“Damn. That’s what I was afraid of.”

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Notes: Hey, the words are still flowing…yay! Thank you for all the welcome back comments. They really made me feel great.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!