Catch and Release

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Relationship: Loki/Tony Stark, James "Bucky" Barnes & Natasha Romanov, Jane Foster/Thor, Pepper Potts/Tony Stark (minor), Loki/Tony Stark/Trust Issues
Character: Tony Stark, Loki (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Erik Selvig, Pepper Potts, Thanos (Marvel), The Other, Natasha Romanov, Clint Barton, Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner, The Ten Rings, Odin (Marvel), Frigga (Marvel), Hel Lokisdottir, Skurge, Amora (Marvel), Skye (Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.), Nick Fury, A'Lars, Mar-Vell, Fenrir (Marvel), Angrboða - Character, Sif (Marvel), Fandral (Marvel), Volstagg (Marvel), Hogun (Marvel), Sasha Ling, Grant Ward, Phil Coulson, FitzSimmons (Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.), Melinda May, Fin Fang Foom, Victor von Doom, Monica Rambeau, Maria Hill, Kronos, Gamora, M.O.D.O.K. (mentioned), Býleistr | Byleist, Farbauti (Marvel), Dream of the Endless, Matthew the Raven, Loki (The Sandman), Peter Parker

Additional Tags: Obscure bits of Marvel-616, The Mandarin was a double-bluff, The Ten Rings - Freeform, Beware of Dragon, Loki is a BAMF, Tony Stark is a BAMF, Slow Build, Titan, Tony Stark is a Technomage, More than one Loki, Double Penetration, Sex Magic, Not Thor 2 Compliant, The Dragon the Dragon the Dragon [clang], Loki makes deals with everyone, The Beyonders, Cosmic Cube, Dreamwalking, Dream Sex, Original Character(s), Jotunn History Lessons, More than one Jotunn Loki, Extremis, Temperature Play, all of the temperature play, all of the worldbuilding, Breathplay, war games and snark, Pining, I decided that when Morpheus died the MCU might have been caught up in a resulting multiverse warp, on accident, I needed to borrow Dream, Multiverse fuckery, The Shadow Proclamation, shameless borrowing from all the fandoms, canon-divergent Thor 2 spoilers, sorry, various Jotunn OCs, Torture, graphic description of drowning

Series: Part 1 of Catch and Release, and related Keepsakes

Catch and Release

by Like_a_Hurricane

Summary
Here unfolds a tale of war, desire, and warring desires.

After the invasion of New York, Tony figures out Loki’s game, and he lays out an ultimatum that he realizes the trickster can’t escape from, maneuvering Loki into agreeing to be an ally, rather than a foe, if only when the time comes.

A god’s sworn word is a promise that the god cannot break, but once Thanos’ head is parted from his shoulders, all bets will be off: no protections, no alliance, Loki free to do whatever he pleases, so long as he can still evade recapture at Asgard’s hands. So it’s simple, Tony tells himself: trust the war, not the god.

It should have been simple. It was doomed to be anything but, because infatuation has no place in a war-zone, but Tony is prone to impropriety at all sorts of slightly impractical times, or he wouldn’t have wound up with the god of lies in his bed so frequently in the first place. Practicality and safe-distance plans are all going wrong, and Tony likes it too much to stop.

Notes

I have given up on the prospect of posting this all in one go. It's already too big for that, and still growing. I swear this was accidental, and it was never meant to get this massive all for the sake of later drama, but I like it, so it's staying.

Yes, the AU-History of Jotunnheim I made for the story posted just before this one is now deeply, deeply ingrained into my personal head-canon, so you can expect to see more stories like this that will reflect bits of it too. Because I like it too much.
If this had been anything simple, maybe it really would have begun at the beginning, when Loki crashed S.H.I.E.L.D.’s tesseract party with a dramatic entrance, dragging himself to Earth from somewhere entirely else (they still didn’t actually quite know where it had been, precisely—just that it was possibly as mind-bogglingly far away as the opposite arm of humanity’s native galaxy, and that it was apparently cold and dark and nightmarishly horrible) using that little blue box of pure power. Maybe Tony would’ve had the sense to notice earlier on that it wasn’t just in terms of megalomania that they had turns of thought in common, he and the god of lies, and taken greater pains not to be charmed by it, and the whole fiasco could have been averted altogether. Of course, a lot of things would be very different if either of them had better impulse-control in the bad-decisions departments, and if the clusters of chaotic events in their respective lives had been any less staggeringly complicated.

With the invasion foiled, Tony took apart Selvig’s machine slowly, because something was bothering him. Several somethings were bothering him, but this one involved a brilliant and unique bit of technology and so it seemed somehow more comfortably familiar, and like something he could solve without getting blackout drunk and having long, long talks with Pepper and Rhodey about existential angst and newly cosmic-levels of paranoia and nightmares he might have to look forward to after all this. After the Chitauri had fallen, Tony had been in a sort of fugue for the remaining hours of the day until Pepper had persuaded S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and JARVIS to coordinate Tony’s return to a base camp, crash landing, and subsequent sedation. He had not been allowed near his badly-damaged suits again since, by JARVIS. But... So much was still left.

The whole city had to finish clearing things up, patching everyone up. Tony and Bruce were left finishing a few final tests on the tesseract and Loki and Thor, and some of their weaponry and armour, for scientific curiosity’s sake, before they would all escort Thor back out of the shadows and into the daylight the day after, allowing the tall blond viking god to take himself and his brother home safely.

After that, Pepper would be able to get back home (Tony thought of her being in reach as his own version of arriving at home, in any case) either by bullying S.H.I.E.L.D. into upping her security clearance, or by bribing her way into one of their helicopters. The city was a hive of repair activity, and Tony’s poor battered tower was at the heart of it. It made travel difficult, unless you could fly around in a suit of armor, which she had declined when Tony offered to send one to pick her up.

He realized what it was about the machine that bothered him sometime around midnight. He then spent most of the next few hours hunting down a traumatized physicist. Getting past the nurses was the trickiest part, but he did manage it.

Thor was speaking quietly with the still-ghostly-pale Dr. Erik Selvig when Tony appeared in the doorway of the private medical suite looking sleep-deprived and fiercely intent. It wasn’t surprising to find the god there; he’d been watching over his mortal friend since the fighting had stopped.

To Tony’s eye, it seemed possible Erik might be freshly awoken from a nightmare. The mad inventor waited for Thor to notice him and trail off (the god been saying something about a woman named
Jane; Tony didn’t care) before asking sharply, “Why was the portal only a third of the size that it could’ve been?”

Dr. Selvig’s brows furrowed. “What?”

Tony took one long step into the room, letting the door swing closed behind him with a muffled snap. “The amount of iridium you had, and all the potential possessed by that machine, that portal should’ve been bigger. Much bigger.”

“I think I... before telling me to start it, Loki made a few adjustments to it,” Selvig said. “He said it would stabilize the situation, balance it for what he needed of it.”

Tony Stark suddenly felt like a fool. “I wasn’t actually expecting him to use the tower, and open the portal there, you know,” he said quietly. “He got his scepter back, and it’s clearly powerful enough that it could’ve kick-started your machine as well as my tower’s power sources. Even disregarding that, he could’ve stolen the power-cell Stark tower uses and run with it. Either way, I just expected he’d bring the army down on us there for the sheer showmanship. I didn’t think he’d still be opening the thing, not by the time I finally got there in heavily damaged armor. Did something stall him?”

“I don’t know,” said the doctor. "I just got the orders, back at his base, to pack up and be ready. We were taken straight to your tower.”

“Where was the base?” Tony asked sharply

Selvig told him.

The inventor looked at Thor, who appeared troubled. “Penny for your thoughts, big guy?”

“My brother—does nothing by halves. When he last sought to wipe out a world, he nearly succeeded and only failed to underestimate what lengths I would go to, in order to stop him from committing an unforgivable crime that he somehow did not think I would consider to be a very great loss,” the thunderer said slowly. “He nearly destroyed their planet. He has always been—he does things in great sweeping gestures. He persuades people to trust him, to go along with whatever he wishes them to. He does not... he does not usually make things obvious, which has been puzzling me since my arrival here, because he was not very subtle at all. I worry for his sanity as I always have, for my brother has always been mad to degrees very common for wildmages, but admittedly this worry has grown acutely deeper just of recent.”

“Unless he’s playing a different game than he’s let on,” Tony murmured.

“What could that possibly be?” Thor snapped.

“I don’t know. The times don’t add up. By the time I got my suit operational enough to leave the helicarrier and arrive at the tower, I was thinking that I’d be late for the party. I thought an army would be dropping from the sky already, having gathered their forces like a sanely practical bunch, and letting Loki lead them to the first target of conquest. And on the other side of that portal, there were ships, and those soldiers of theirs on their little scooters weren’t troubled by being in empty space so they had shields or are a race capable of surviving a vacuum, because they weren’t waiting around on-world anywhere. Loki could’ve kicked off the machine on the international space-station, and opened a portal above it, sending them down from space. We would’ve had no chance to close the portal, and if he’d opened it to full width, those ships would have fit through, bringing far greater numbers down on top of us all at once. We would’ve been massacred. Instead, he opened a narrower portal, within our reach, in a populated area, conveniently at my house where my new armor was, and he was waiting for me. He didn’t play this to win at all, so what’s losing get for him that winning
“Away from the Chitauri and the Other?” Selvig suggested.

“Other?” Tony asked flatly.

“He was... I don’t think he was mentioned, but the tesseract showed me things. He was... he had some connection to Loki, and wanted the tesseract. He worked for someone else as well, though, wanted the cube for... I think it was Thanos?”

Thor inhaled sharply. “Repeat that?”

“I believe it was Thanos. That feels-” Selvig rubbed at the side of his head. “It was his ambition, his desire for the tesseract, that made him visible. He knew a lot about it, but had never been near it before, as Loki had, and hadn’t seen just how to tap into its power as Loki had, so he couldn’t control it from such a distance, but if he could’ve been given it, he could’ve done... anything. Recreated the whole of reality;” Selvig murmured, sounding half-dazed but all too certain. Then he shook his head sharply. “I’m sorry, what was I saying?”

The thunderer rested a hand on his arm. “You require rest, my friend. S.H.I.E.L.D. has promised to bring a doctor capable of loosening the tesseract’s hold on your mind, so that it may no longer whisper through you.”

“What did I say this time?” he asked, nervously.

“Much. I cannot explain why it is important, just now. I must seek audience with my brother.”

“Because that’s gone well so far,” Tony remarked dryly.

Thor shot him a glare, which the inventor ignored.

“Sorry to disturb you, Dr. Selvig,” Tony said, opening the door. He waved for Thor to follow him out, and with visible reluctance, the tall blond god did so.

Shutting the door again behind them, the inventor said, “Let me talk to you brother. You keep an eye on him from somewhere out of sight, and if you see any sign he’s recovered enough of his magic to try escaping, or anything else, then you have them fill the room with knockout gas so he can be re-muzzled. You’re the only one who knows him well enough, and knows his tricks well enough, to have a chance of spotting that, but he knows you too well to let you see it if he knows you’re watching. He’d hide the trick just out of your line of sight, and there would be nothing we could do to prevent him escaping, or possibly killing whoever is in there with him unmuzzled. Got it?”

After staring at him appraisingly for a long moment, Thor nodded. “You are afraid, this time.”

“It’s been a long few days, Sparky. I’m the best Earth has, okay? I’m the genius so ahead of the curve it’s ridiculous, and I’m the smartest, trickiest fucker with enough ruthless streak to stand a chance against this sort of thing, and if I’m in over my head, there’s no fallback right now: game over. S.H.I.E.L.D. can’t handle it without me and they might even admit to it one day. After me, the next resort is trying to find out where Reed Richards and rest of his Fantastic Quartet vanished to a month back in that incident with a mutant called Gateway and a Super-Skrull, and if they still can’t be found, our next-reliably-locatable hope is a guy called Doctor Doom, and he’d still have to collaborate with some pompous ass with the ridiculous job-title ‘Sorcerer Supreme’ if he wanted to have any hope of survival. Now that said: I’ve met ‘em both and that just won’t fuckin’ work out without Doom taking over most of the world somehow.” He then made a show of shrugging this off. “So, yeah, no pressure or anything; nothing to stress out over at all, right? So you can understand...
why, at this point, I’m a bit stretched thin and not looking forward to finding out that nuking the Chitauri by hand maybe still wasn’t enough to protect my planet from whatever or whoever it was that tortured your brother, and also to protect everyone I’ve ever known and ever loved, who are all fragile and could be gone in a blink if I fuck up!” He realized he was just shy of yelling and took a few, very deliberate deep breaths. “Right. Okay. Let’s-” He stopped when the god grabbed his arm. He didn’t have much choice: that grip still was unfairly strong.

“Are you sure that you are in a state to challenge my brother?”

“Are you kidding?” Tony turned his gaze sharply back to Thor’s. “I’m pissed off, I’m terrified, I’m tired and nearing the end of my rope, and everything I care about is potentially under threat, here. I’ve never been more dangerous than I am right now. Let me go, or I’ll find a way to break you. God or no, I’ll find a way or I’ll make one.”

Thor held his stare, taken aback, and gently let him go. “I see.”

“No, you really don’t,” Tony warned softly. “And hope you never do.”

“If that’s true, then you are indeed more than fit to question my brother, I think. Possibly more so than I, presently.” His expression was sobered, and mournful. “I no longer know him and he no longer wishes to be known to me, while I am too familiar and know not how to change that.”

“Yeah. I got that impression.” Tony turned away again, stalking down the hall.

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Thor watched the camera feeds into the cell, gaze flicking over different camera-angles now and then. He stood with one hand over a switch that would fill the air of the room with sedatives safe enough for a human, but also still potent enough even for the likes of Loki. Maria Hill stood behind him, also watching, and occasionally murmuring quietly into her S.H.I.E.L.D.-issue comm device, in contrast to the Stark Industries earpiece the thunder god now wore, allowing him (so he had been assured) a more unfiltered audio feed than Stark felt comfortable sharing with S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence. Thor’s private theory that Tony Stark might be a mage was quietly born, that day.

Tony strode into Loki’s cell with a small key. “So. Let’s chat.”

The trickster was in a heavy steel chair, wrists and ankles chained but not bound to the chair. They connected up to a collar about his throat. The muzzle was a separate piece from the rest and, they had been told, equally vital as all the rest in its own right. Or it would be, once Loki looked a bit less freshly-thrashed and had some of his magic back. He’d been forced into reliance on the tesseract-bound scepter instead of his own magic reserves, according to Thor, because the trip to Earth via tesseract had depleted all of his magic reserves. Only while resting in the helicarrier had he recovered enough to manipulate light again, and create illusions, but Thor and other S.H.I.E.L.D. magic resources both insisted, at Tony’s pressing inquiries, that manipulation of light required the least energy of almost any other tricks. Loki was masterful enough at it to seem as though he were teleporting even when he wasn’t. Thor estimated Loki wouldn’t be capable of teleportation again for another four days.

They were all still taking few chances, until then: hence, the muzzle.

Well, all except Tony, who knew about a dozen ways to escape the room the Trickster was in with
nothing but wit alone, a bit of metal the size of the little key in his hand (easy to use as part of a lock 
pick along with wire that might be yanked from the innards of one of the two security cameras 
vulnerable enough to take apart) and a single well-timed power surge through the right part of the 
surveillance systems. He also knew that Loki would probably have a few tricks better than his own, 
as well as the added resource of centuries-honed trickiness in using the capability to create complex 
ilusions. Even so, he strode over, pulled up a chair in from of Loki’s, stepped a bit closer and 
reached out to unlock the muzzle Loki wore.

Catching it when it fell away, Tony took a half-step back, counted to three, and set the thing on the 
bare wood table in the middle of the room. “So you don’t need to escape in order to get what you 
want out of this, I see. Good. Duly noted.”

Loki’s eyebrows raised and he donned an intrigued expression that might almost have been innocent-
or unaware-seeming if not for how his eyes narrowed just a little as he watched the inventor sit down 
across from him. He didn’t say a word.

“And you don’t need to talk, yet, yeah, but I’m asking you to, because I know you lost your little 
war on purpose, and I’m impressed, but also considering killing you before anyone in this base can 
stop me,” Tony said softly.

“That would be more convincing, were they not listening.”

“Hacked the sound feeds,” the inventor said. “They’re getting an edited version. I covered that ahead 
of time with JARVIS what statements to overlay instead of threats or other questionable things I 
figured it might good to have contingency plans in place for, if I decide to say them. It’s a pretty 
comprehensive list.”

The trickster’s cool green eyes glittered, and he rested his elbows on the edge of the chair’s arms as 
he sat up a bit, leaning a little forward almost conspiratorially, hands settled lightly together between 
the chair arms, as though the heavy chains were made of lightweight plastic he could barely feel. 
“You have my attention.”

Tony examined that pale, still slightly bruised face for a long moment. “What have you got planned 
for Thanos and the Other?”

All the wicked mirth drained from Loki’s expression. “Who told you of them?”

“Well, y’know, what with Selvig still having bouts of ‘lost time’ when he talks about certain subjects, 
a curious genius like myself can’t help but put a few key pieces together. It’s a knack I’ve got, called 
‘asking all the wrong questions.’ I’m sure you know a thing or two about it yourself.”

"Only perpetually. What is it to do with the piteous Selvig?"

"Things the tesseract was ‘showing’ him seem to have stuck, but they have a sort of mind of their 
own. Whatever it is, in the tesseract itself, that he keeps ‘tuning in’ to—well, I think it was scared out 
of its mind of Thanos. He wanted it, and you conned him into thinking you’d give it to him. Now 
you’re here, off to home and hearth to be securely incarcerated until you figure out a way to escape, 
because the quiet and the lack of things to do will drive you crazy, after all this. And it certainly 
won’t help with the nightmares from what they did to you.”

“So you do still dream of caves and blood?” the trickster shot back.

“Yeah. And being very carefully brought a hair’s breadth from drowning, again and again, until my 
stomach was full of water and I thought I’d never get all of it out of my lungs, and was so irrationally
panicked about that, my coughing worsened almost until it was as much blood as air. I was lucky to have a doctor on hand to bring me back down; I’m not sure you did,” Tony said, slow and deliberate, despite having never before described those key details to anyone else. “And let’s not get started on the humiliation bits. You?”

“Stripped of all coverings, subjected to ice for the amusement of my tormentors, who then applied fire, electricity, and occasional plasma for experimental purposes. It was not until I was fully categorized, assessed and recorded—insofar as my species, genetic and epigenetic makeup, the contents of my blood, my physical limitations, my capacity to take pain, and my recuperative powers—that they bothered to ask for my name. After that, I was ‘allowed’ what their masters judged to be a more ‘luxurious’ recovery from my long fall, in that I was spoken to instead of around, for a time.” Loki shot back, his voice flat, cold, and without inflection. “It was an upgrade from biological specimen, to potentially useful tool.”

Tony nodded slowly. “They’d not seen your sort before?”

“Aesir, Thanos knew already. I am not Aesir, and was therefore less familiar. So he let the Other, the breeder and engineer of the whole race of the Chitauri, see if any of my blood or my powers might be compatible and useful to add to his collection of traits to give to his soldiers. All tissue samples of mine were in a laboratory at the heart of that armada, I did make certain.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to look forward to any armies with bits of cloned DNA from you in them,” the inventor said, with grave sincerity. “One of you, and whole, is still more than enough.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Loki mused.

“Not yet, yeah, I know.” Tony leaned back against his own seat a bit. The challenge-you-to-be-as-sincere-about-torture-as-me gambit had worked better than expected. He’d thought it might drag a bit longer, but the trickster seemed not only aware of the gambit, but like he might also be aware of how much he needed to speak of it aloud, to acknowledge it. Neither of them offered pity or sympathy to the other, only cold understanding and shrewd assessment. It should have been uncomfortable but instead, the clinical regard on both sides made it somehow easier than it would have been otherwise, if anyone had tried to comfort one or the other of them. “But that leaves those two big ones still on your shit list. And you on your way home.”

“Asgard knows an important resource when they see one, or they would have disposed of me long ago no matter how sentimentally Thor might have regarded me. I have never been the favored prince, but few problems existed within Asgard itself, and the other realms, that Thor’s particular confrontational style alone could fix.”

“Well, they won’t execute you, I got that, but they also won’t let you go easy.”

Loki smiled bright and sharp, but it did not reach his eyes. “I am capable of immense patience.”

“What’s Thanos?”

“A Titan.”

“A what?”

The trickster rolled his eyes. “They’re from your solar system. In fact, they’re a very old offshoot of human genetic stock, albeit with a lot of alteration; although, I wouldn’t blame them if they’re still keeping to themselves, waiting for all of you to catch up to their culture and technological advances.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I’m working on it. What are they?”
“They are not very unlike Aesir. Very powerful. Very advanced technology; and yet while they do not make very much use of higher magics, they have a respect for it and understand it fairly well for how young they still are as a race, compared to those in Asgard. They’re also very, very long-lived. Almost immortal.”

“And Thanos is one of them?”

“Sort of. He is not quite so... perfect, as most of his kin, in appearance. And he has very morbid fascinations. He was banished from amongst them long ago. Since then, he has very nearly destroyed several races on multiple occasions, at one point destroyed two thirds of all life in the universe, and almost successfully unmade all reality once. Luckily, in both latter cases, most of those lives unmade in the unreality storms were later re-made as the fabric of reality was re-wove by an ancient Warlock of an unusually selfless bent.”

Tony took a deep breath. “That... sounds pretty bad.”

“You have a few years before he is of concern to you all directly. Loss of the Chitauri and his faint connection to the tesseract both, will cripple his ability to travel vast distances for quite some while, and he is far, far away from the nine realms,” Loki offered. “You have time to prepare.”

“As do you?”

The god's smile switched back on. “Mayhap so.”

“And the Other? He was connected to that scepter of yours.”

“Which the lovely Agent Romanov pushed through the unique energy shield around the portal-generating device,” Loki added with a shrug. “That cut off all sorts of interesting connections wrapped up in that scepter.”

“Including some to you?”

The trickster tilted his head a little. “You’re quite sharp, Mr. Stark.”

“You were under observation.”

“All the while, yes. Did you expect them to rely on the loyalty and the good word of a god of lies without any means of collateral or insurance that I would not make new allies and turn on them instead?”

“Would you have asked for help if they hadn’t?”

“Not from the likes of Earth.”

“Where’d you go before delivering Selvig to my tower?”

“None of your business, man of Earth.”

“They saw you go wherever that was.”

“They did.”

"They didn't stop you."

"They could not have, after a certain point."
Tony slowly raised his eyebrows pointedly in silent questioning.

Loki said nothing for over a full minute, neither smiling nor unsmiling, to an unnervingly stoic degree.

“You don’t get to avoid this one.”

“You’re now too inclined to value what knowledge tidbits I might have mercy and wicked whim enough to share with you, to continue threatening to kill me now, Stark.” His eyes glittered with unkind mirth. “Same as Asgard. So don't be tedious.”

The inventor shrugged and gave a curt nod. “That doesn’t mean I lack leverage with you. You just said that Earth has roughly three years before Thanos maybe comes around to see just how we managed to be the ally you needed to foil his tesseract plans, even while wasting a lot of our energies on you and your games. What’s to stop us allying against you and all of Asgard in exchange for the Earth being mostly left alone?”

Loki looked surprised and curious and a bit wary. “You can hardly trust him.”

“Of course not, but we’ve got a couple of ways we might contact... the Titans, you said? They probably know the Kree, if they’re as you described, because they’d be a good source of trade, and have probably been the main source of Kree assurance that the Skrulls won’t take the Earth by any direct and obvious routes, which has been hinted at by our main Kree ambassador. We let Thanos have you, and wreck your city a bit, then we let the Titans take care of their own on a more permanent basis this time, which just little old me alone could persuade them was their duty, once we get them listening and I ensure that we can't be ignored. You aren’t the only silver-tongued liar here, Loki.”

“Apparently not,” the trickster murmured, his eyes narrowed. “You are correct, in that they know the Kree, and are on stable diplomatic footing with them after resolution of their initial military clashing when they surprised each other at a Kree Outpost near Uranus, which caused them to settle on the moon of Titan in the first place. The Titans also know of Odin, and respect him well. They do some prosperous trade with Asgard some of the other realms, on rare occasion that they have resources we might desire.”

“Sounds like they have the more raw end of the deal, but if Asgard is weakened by Thanos, they might see it as opportunity to revive that market, since you’ll need aid with repairs and there they will be, dangerous and grinning at you.”

“Hmm.” Loki folded his chained arms across his chest. “The Queen of Nornheim might overthrow Odin, then. She would not miss such a chance. If he were too busy fighting to safeguard the certain parts of the Odinforce from the likes of Thanos, she might even entrap him, keep him as figurehead bound to his powers and Yggdrasil as he is now, but without the freedom to act, speak, and travel as he wishes. She would not hesitate to make that conquest one of many, without Odin to stop her.”

“Could you?”

“You presume I would still be present?”

“Your home would be under threat. Last time you thought that was the case, I hear you almost destroyed a whole planet. How are you supposed to enjoy making miserable the people who made you what you are if they’re all dead, and how are you supposed to rule them from the shadows through trickery when they need a good reality check now and then, if the kingdom turns to ashes?”
“You think those my plans?”

“Call it an inspired guess.”

“Thanos’ death will be mine to deliver. I care not where or when it happens, nor with whom I might have to ally, so long as mine is the last face he sees, and I am the one who separates his head from his neck, in the end.”

“So ally with us.”

The trickster hummed. “No, I think n-”

“Then I look forward to destroying you later.”

“Let me finish, you impatient man,” Loki sighed. “I will not ally myself with the Avengers, nor S.H.I.E.L.D., nor any organization on your world; however, I offer you, Tony Stark, my solemn word that you will know when Thanos’ arrival is due, and that I will be your ally when that time comes.”

Tony’s eyebrows raised slowly. “Allies share plans, you know. And information, and resources. That’s part of the fine print here. You don’t pull disappearing acts or fail to explain the reasons behind your actions to me, from the moment you know he’s coming and inform me of it, until he’s dead at your feet.” He slipped into deal-brokering mode faster than he’d expected of himself, given his limbs still felt almost tingly with shock. The god of lies really knew how to maneuver, and it was fairly brilliant: keeping S.H.I.E.L.D. out, putting Tony in a position of veto power over what the rest of the Avengers did and didn’t need to know. “Also, you accept input and modify plans when it’s important, unless you can come up with better alternative options.”

Loki nodded. “I can accept those terms, but again, only from you.”

“Clearly, you’re a man of discerning tastes,” Tony mock-preened, but felt his skin grow a bit warm at the casually blatant and leering head-to-toe appraisal that the trickster god aimed at him in response. It was a disconcerting moment, suddenly realizing that his enemy/future-temporary-ally was actually quite good-looking, and somehow wore his bone-deep exhaustion in such a way that he moved with all the lazy elegance of a panther in a sunbeam, in order to execute the performance-art of their conversation this whole while. In fact, Loki’s stare was intent in way that caused the pain-gaunt lines of his cheekbones to give his whole expression a singularly lean and hungry look, which seemed to be having an alarming affect on Tony’s libido. The inventor had genuinely been too pissed off and occupied before to really notice the acute sexual tension hanging in the air, more than fleetingly and absurdly sarcastic in his own fearful acknowledgement of the potential temptations no one needed to know he could be tempted by.

As a professional lifelong hedonist and billionaire, Tony Stark saw temptation absolutely everywhere, but most of its advertising was unappealing to his very refined (and mostly healthy in regards to respecting the common dignity of individual humans to life, liberty, and the pursuit of good drinks in strange places) tastes in day to day life—except when the temptation in question was too fine for Tony to resist. In this case, between the haggard exhaustion etched into every line of the god’s posture and expression alongside flirtation suggesting that Loki might be potentially be making this play out of more desperation than Tony would be comfortable with, and the inventor's firm conviction that he wasn’t anywhere near to liking this god enough to offer that fringe benefit anytime soon, if ever, no matter how tempting the nickname Silvertongue might be? For once, resistance was surprisingly easy for Tony, despite the high-quality seductive factors in effect being successfully tempting, artfully presented, and a gloriously terrible idea: “Down, boy. I’m taken.”
The trickster snorted, amused, but raised both hands, palms-forward, in a gesture of harmlessness. Lie though it was, it let the momentary sexual tension fade out and the air seemed to grow three times lighter and easier to breathe through. “We have a deal, then, Tony Stark?”

“I think we might. Your brother might just try to kill me once I leave here, though.”

“He should know better, but diplomacy has never been his strongest point, and particularly not the dirtier tricks necessary to achieve the sort of ends you here sought to achieve.”

“I guess, for the sake of argument, let’s assume maybe you’re still incarcerated in Asgard when this contract kicks in?” Tony inquired.

“I am bound to my word, and may contact you via dream-walking, though the distance will make it an effort. They cannot prevent my mind wandering as it will while I sleep, imprisoned or no. Once informed, you may request they release me for the completion of my sworn duty.”

“How will they make sure you come back home when you’re done?”

“Nothing that would hinder me from my purpose.”

“Where’d you go before delivering Selvig to my tower?”

“You may ask me that again when Thanos’ arrival is imminent, and the terms here laid out become active.”

Tony stood slowly, and proffered a hand. “Well then, Loki, you have a deal, if you still find it acceptable.”

Loki extended his own, and shook it. “Yes, I accept your terms.”

Tony bowed his head a little. “I look forward to seeing how they’ll play out.” Releasing the trickster’s hand, he stepped back, and picked up the metal muzzle again. “You got the wrong key from my sleeve, by the way.”

“What is it a key to, actually? I’m curious.” Loki held it up between his fore- and middle-fingers.

“My car.” He plucked it from Loki’s hand lightly, and pulled the key for the muzzle from another pocket along the way. “Lean back, please, or your brother with use knockout gas on us both.”

Loki winced at that. “I had wondered what that contingency plan was.” He did, however, lean back and glare at the muzzle as Tony lifted it.

“You saying I should’ve opened with that threat?”

“It would not have made me more amenable to you. Particularly given that nightmares were mentioned early in our conversation as well.”

The inventor frowned a bit at that. “Yeah, that’d be a bit clumsy.” He then replaced the muzzle and locked it. “You are an evil rotten bastard. Glad you’re wise enough to catch on that you’re not the only one in the room.” He winked, then turned and left, gripping the cold metal key to the muzzle tight in his hand.
The future-alliance should’ve been the start of it. That was certainly where they both got a feel for each other’s cleverness, but there wasn’t quite respect there. There was wariness and disbelief and frightening competence on both sides. They were competent, but jaded enough to not even acknowledge something within themselves like a hope-born thirst for a mind able to keep up with and challenge their own, all the time—let alone that they might find that thirst less acute in one another’s presence.

So it wasn’t the start. Not quite yet.

Time passed. Pepper moved into Tony’s house. The Mandarin debacle erupted. He sacrificed all of his armor in exchange for a bit of peace with the woman he loved, and who loved him. He designed a way to reverse-engineer and safely remove Extremis from her system, then got the arc reactor removed from his own chest, and replaced with a bit more metal in the places his ribcage hadn’t benefited from the reactor’s presence. Muscle and sinew took a while longer to recover.

Everyone heard about the next Thor-related debacle to happen, saw footage of battles involving the thunderer, and the brilliant Dr. Foster, and a tall lithe figure in green and gold with even longer wild black hair than before. Tony watched the footage curiously. He was almost disappointed when neither of the two gods dropped by for a drink after it was over. Then he found out Loki had escaped all bonds at some point, and vanished into thin air once the nine realms were saved.

Tony wasn’t surprised by that part at all. Still disappointed by a lack of visit.

By the time two years were up, he and Pepper were still loving, but had grown distant. They had slipped into being friends again, almost without noticing, as Tony became absorbed in diplomatic and technological preparations for a certain Mad Titan. She still pulled him back to earth when he needed it, sometimes literally, but there was less and less sex, and then they were both at a gala and looking other people up and down with interest before their eyes met and there was sudden awkwardness.

“I love you,” Pepper said softly.

“I love you, too, Pep.”

“This...”

“You won’t lose me. Not ever.”

She smiled at him warmly. “You’d be lost without me.”

“I would.”

A long pause followed.

“I, uh, already have an apartment,” she said softly.

“I noticed longer trips away.”

“How... how is this our break-up?” Pepper sputtered, caught between laughter and something softer and sadder. “I always imagined we’d just... explode or something. Chaos! Destruction! Horror!”

“Because I could never hurt you like that, and you figured that out a while ago. I have hurt you, and been an ass, and sometimes I know I’ve been horrible, but I—I’ve been terrified of losing you for a
long time.”

“Are you still?”

“Whenever the world is in danger, yeah. What else do you think I really keep fighting for, when I’m at my most cynical and self-loathing and hopeless?”

She smiled at him softly. “Me too.”

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “Never stop being part of my life.”

“Same to you, asshole; you’re supposed to be the genius whose brilliance my company is riding on,” she shot back, every inch the offended CEO.

He laughed, and she did too.

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Loki started making appearances on Earth about eight months before the three-year anniversary of his promised alliance with Tony Stark.

It was minor stuff, at first—or seemed like it, at a glance. Shortly after a Loki-related appearance or several within sights of the right shady organised crime circles in several Chinese cities, S.H.I.E.L.D. was subject to a series of attacks from numerous for-hire criminal organisations worldwide, all of whom sought to steal secure databases belonging to S.H.I.E.L.D., compromising them in increasingly vast sweeps, further obscuring their primary goals.

Tony was distracted by other rumors, mostly just within S.H.I.E.L.D., especially the ones suggesting that the Chinese company who purchased the remains of AIM, after the Extremis debacle and legal proceedings completed, might have some deep criminal connections. Tony remembered seeing their new CEO talking to Pepper at a gala a few months back: Sasha Ling, pretty and reserved, standing next to her mother Mei, who was darker and lacked her daughter’s lighter brown-grey eyes and faint dusting of freckles, but still smiled more often and seemed more animated.

Pepper said they had seemed sharp, and quite competent.

Tony wondered how deep they might be in the shadier end of the wheelings and dealings at work, behind the curtained-off songs and dances of PR appearances and charity galas.

S.H.I.E.L.D. was keeping more than a few suspicious eyes on the new AIM accordingly, muttering about the Ten Rings possibly being less dead than expected. The resulting paranoia afflicted Tony’s brain with a similar itch, which his own research couldn’t exactly assuage satisfactorily. Suspicious holes in press release stories began to form unnerving patterns.

Meanwhile, members of the Hand went on a string of unusually high-profile thefts of artifacts and rare mineral resources around the globe that suggested they were getting paid very well for their services indeed, to the point they had apparently been able to afford some very nasty technological upgrades. Several of the artifacts they stole made Dr. Stephen Strange so uncomfortable that he informed the Avengers, telling them that he suspected the recent arrival of a being not of their universe, somewhere on Earth. He was convinced the artifacts related to an old spell, barely hinted of in books, for a resource of unlimited power.
That was all well and good, but still mostly rumors.

Then, finally, right on that eight-months-till-anniversary mark, came evidence too loud to miss, aimed with precision.

It came in the form of footage pulled from the records of a mostly-decimated Doom-bot that had been found in the wake of a raid on a hideout of the Hand in a town not far from the border of Latveria. That the Hand had apparently had a clash with Doom suggested they didn’t have much to worry about from Doom getting new contracts with them too soon, it seemed. Then S.H.I.E.L.D. handed it over to Tony Stark after their own methods of data extraction failed. Within five minutes, the inventor had JARVIS steadily reconstructing and decrypting the information recorded by the doom-bot in the final hour and a half before it lost its body and had its self-repair mechanisms very deliberately fried by some energy that none of the available experts recognised easily, and which Tony had about four different theories about so far. The footage showed the bot following a pair of lieutenants from the Hand into a location, and taking a particular object or two while the ninjas of the Hand subdued all occupants of the laboratory. The objects he collected glowed strangely, and were placed in a small but thickly armored and insulated briefcase. They looked like small shards of something.

The Doom-bot emerged from the location, and had been discussing cover-up and evidence removal with one of the Hand raid-leaders when something cut off feed to the body of the bot abruptly, with a sound of shearing metal and someone’s horrified yelling for backup in Japanese.

The bot-head located its body, and started commanding it when it suddenly became unresponsive, and was shattered to pieces. The audio was choppy, but the voice that said, “Impressive indeed, Doctor,” was still recognizable, just like the face visible when the voice’s owner crouched beside the robotic head and turned it to face himself. “Repairing yourself, altering. Very adaptable.” Then a flicker of light, at all the key points of repair mechanisms, all of which ground to a halt. “You’re watching now, are you not, Dr. Doom? Terribly sorry, but these objects are not meant for you or yours.” Loki’s smile was bright and wild and gleeful, just before he killed the rest of the electronics throughout the robot, but didn’t damage more than 70% of the bot’s memory storage.

Tony had no plans to give the head back to the messenger, after watching that recording with the odd girl—even, if not especially, for a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent—who had delivered it, while she continued to stare at him creepily. He fast-forwarded through most of it, but lingered on the last few minutes. As soon as the clip ended, Tony burst out laughing.

“My, uh, commanding officer, I guess, said you knew that guy?”

“Yeah. Listen, Agent... sorry, what was your name?”

“I’m a, uh, civilian contractor,” she corrected. “I’m Skye.”

“Right. And who is your commanding officer?”

She thought about it. “Maria Hill.”

“Lie.”

“Well, they told me to lie.”

“Fair enough.” Tony tapped the screen. “You’re looking at the Norse god of lies who brought an
alien invasion to New York.”

“They, uh, mentioned that, too. How the mighty have fallen?”

“I think he’s been around a while, before this; though I dunno how long. This is just him letting himself get caught. Any idea what those things were that he nicked off Doom and the Hand?”

“Not much. The Hand keeps most of their stuff off digital records, and they never leave a paper trail. I dunno how they do it.”

“You know who got around Doom’s encryption? Last time S.H.I.E.L.D. gave up and handed things over to me before they got anywhere near as far into his security as you guys managed to crack before me, with this one.” He tapped the screen for emphasis.

“That’d be me.” She grinned at him broadly.

Tony nodded at her. “Good work. He’s a tricky son of a bitch.”

“Think you can find out more about this guy’s, uh, magical zapping energies from one of his robot heads though?” she asked.

“I’ll let you know if I have any luck.”

“Thanks. Can I just...” She raised a hand as though to gesture, then dropped it. “I was gonna ask for an autograph, but actually can I seriously just hug you?” Skye said very quickly, like the words were afraid of going unsaid at all if she stopped or slowed.

Tony snorted. “Yeah, sure.”

“Really?” she all but squeaked, but was squeezing him around the waist before he could actually confirm.

The inventor squeezed back lightly. As expected, she did the awkward-lingering thing. She also might be slowly inhaling his scent where her nose touched his shoulder and that—well, she was more subtle than most about it, at least. After a few seconds of humoring her further, he patted her shoulder-blade. “You can let go now.”

“You’re really huggable,” she muttered.

“Please let go?” Tony tried.

She did so, blushing a bit. “Sorry. I—I’m just a really big fan.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I’m sure you do, and, sorry, I’ll just... go.” She waved at him and backed out of the lab slowly. The door shut and there was a muffled high-pitched squee emitted behind it shortly after, followed by her partner (S.H.I.E.L.D. buddy system, probably an actual agent) complaining loudly that she could’ve burst his eardrum for fuck’s sake.

Tony chuckled a little and turned back to the footage. “So you’re back from outer space?” he asked the video lightly.

A flicker on the screen: green-gold from otherwise black-and-white footage. Very disconcerting.

Tony rubbed at his eyes and looked back at it.
“I am, actually, yes,” said a voice just to his left.

The inventor nearly jumped out of his skin. “Jesus FUCK could you warn a guy?!”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Loki all but purred. He looked healthier than he had even in Germany, or on the Helicarrier, when he’d been at his most clean and composed in Tony’s memory up until then. His eyes were bright and his expression seemed less stiff, full as it was of faint smugness and recent mirth. “You look well, Stark.”

“Call me Tony,” the inventor corrected automatically. “Don’t tell me it’s doomsday already. You’re looking far too cheerful for that, and I’ll suspect you’ve secretly switched sides if you keep that up.”

“No, not quite. I have been keeping eye and ear out, and my daughter sweeps the skies in her own ways, but has had no visions or premonitions regarding the time of Thanos’ eventual arrival, as of yet.”

“So you’re here why?”

“You owe me a drink, and if we are to eventually be allies, I need to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, which have, from what I’ve been able to tell so far, changed quite a lot since we last met,” Loki explained.

Tony gave an amused huff. “Locator spell in the footage, targeting me?”

The trickster nodded. “Of course. A quite literal ‘for your eyes only’ as it were.”

“At some point, I’d really like an explanation as to how that doesn’t break physics,” Tony drawled. “And if you want a drink, the penthouse upstairs still has the best view, and the best-stocked bar. I’m sure you remember where your crater was, up there, and lack the patience to take an elevator.”

“Both true,” the god conceded, and teleported them up.

To Tony, the sensation was of being enveloped in something darkly whirling, spinning, full of cold vapor and wind, just for a second, before it pulled back, and the room around them was his penthouse. He watched Loki take in the remodeled aesthetics with mild interest. It was then that the inventor noticed the lack of full armor, and that the god was actually in a black suit of Earthly style and impeccable cut, with a green shirt, top two buttons open, and a bit of folded gold silk in the jacket’s breast pocket, bringing attention to the fairly subtle, thin traceries of gold-and-green embroidery on the lapels. There was something, though... “Did you... did you actually go to my tailor?”

“He is not yours alone, and I find that he does fine work.”

“From someone who can magic up their own custom duds, that’s gotta be complimentary for him,” Tony mused.

“He deserves it.” Though even as Loki said it, he slipped off the jacket while striding over toward the bar, letting it hang off his forefinger a moment before vanishing it and perching on one barstool, ignored Tony moving back behind the bar, in favor of rolling up his sleeves casually.

Tony carefully did not stare at long pale fingers and green silk. “Have a particular drink in mind? Found any you like while loitering around Earth?”

“I am inclined to see what you think I might like.”
“Hmm. I need a few hints. Sweet or dry?”

“Either, but not too sweet.”

“Sour or bitter?”

“Both, or bitter, not sour alone.”

“Nice. Fruit?”

“I’m not averse.”

Tony nodded, and crouched, opening a small freezer under the bar and pulled a slightly frosty bottle from it, as well as a chilled highball glass and two ice cubes, which he dropped into the glass musically. Then he added a slice of lime a couple more pieces of ice, pushing down with a spoon so the ice forced out a bit of lime juice. He poured a shot of the only gin he’d ever liked over it, and roughly two shots of the Metaxa from the freezer, then a splash of pomegranate juice to fill the glass within a finger’s width of the brim. Lastly he got a sprig of rosemary, twisted it so the leaves bruised, and dropped it in as garnish. “Try this on.” After a brief stir, careful not to let the garnish sink, he slid the glass over to Loki, then made one for himself with a dash of bitters and a little less rosemary.

Loki sampled it lightly, eyebrows lifting a little. “This is quite excellent, actually.”

“I just made it up.”

The trickster nodded. “You improvise quite well.”

“All the better because I know the ingredients. Ally.” He smiled sweetly.

Loki seemed amused, though his half-smile was a little self-deprecating. “I suppose I should have seen that coming.”

“I think you did.”

“I did.”

Tony put away the ingredients in question, and strode around the bar. “So. What’s in the pot to look forward to cooking in the months ahead?”

“Your world is not exactly unprotected. Your primary sorcerer is more respectable than his reputation led me to believe, though I’d never give him the satisfaction of hearing me suggest as much. The number of abnormally powerful protective beings has increased substantially just in the past two years. The team of humans with powerful mutations, what are they called again?”

“No, no: the moral ones.”

“Oh, the X-men.”

“Yes. They’re quite promising, as groups of heroes go. They work well now, with only a few of them jaded, but enough to keep them alive and for the younger members to strengthen and grow with most every possible advantage to develop their powers and their loyalties.”

“Do I... do I hear nostalgia?”
“I was once young and a fool. It is easier, being a fool. That is all.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Tony muttered. “It’s more fun, though, being less innocent and going further, becoming more.”

“Yes, there is indeed that,” Loki mused. “I had restrained more that I had realized, attempting to be that which I am not naturally inclined to be, for the sake of others.” He grimaced very faintly for a moment. “Others who were more my fools than I had ever actually wished them to be.”

“Mundus vult decipi,” Tony intoned.

The trickster made an amused sound, and sipped again from his drink.

Tony, too, had a bit more of his own. “Better than I expected, actually,” he mused, swirling it a little. Loki nodded.

“You had a fallout with Thor?”

“That could well be the understatement of the decade.”

“Well, I mean a more recent revelation-y one. You’re all thoughtful and contemplative on it, and it’s a bit oddly open for you.”

“Know your ingredients,” Loki chided.

“Yeah, how aware is Thor of this one?”

“He now believes that there is nothing left of the brother he knows in me, and that’s at once a deep relief and a sore disappointment.”

Tony mulled that over. “Huh. Well, at least he stopped trying to save you?”

“Yes, finally,” the trickster sighed, rolling his eyes.

“That really fucked with you, didn’t it?”

“I don’t need saving from what I’ve always been, but never had reason to be very sincere and open about because I happened to care and had been tricked into being ashamed of so many aspects of my nature that come to me because of what I am, as well as who I am. I loved those parts of myself for their cleverness, their usefulness, and because they helped me to survive despite being raised in, and living for so long in, an environment naturally hostile toward frost Jotunn, though I did not for most of that time know that I was one,” Loki explained in brief, clipped tones. “Add that to your formulae.”

“He did mention you were adopted, but uh, not a different species?”

“Different species implies a lack of biological compatibility. Many Aesir have some old Jotunn ancestry. It’s the particular elemental tribe—the ice specialization—and all that they did to their world, Jotunnheim, and tried to do to others like Midgard, which makes them so distant that most of the realms wish frost Jotunn into being lesser and animal. Really, I don’t blame them. Laufey was an utter fool who seemed to have no idea how much wealth and knowledge and power was wiped out and how many cities and people were eradicated when all of Jotunnheim was iced over by his father, and was too proud to consider the horror anything but some grand victory. I only hope my other parent from that world had more sense, but may never know for certain. Aside from my small size, I
was also abandoned as an infant because she supposedly committed some treachery and was executed not long after my birth.”

“Wow, that’s... pretty fucked up,” Tony said, after a long pause.

“Quite.” Loki’s lips curved in bitter amusement.

“No clue what they considered treasonous there?”

“They did not keep records.”

“What, seriously?”

“Laufey and his followers were a cult of brutish force. Other Jotunns, even others of ice to make the journey from Nifleheim back to the main home-world of their race, were not so. To judge all Jotunns by their example would be as much a disservice as to judge all of planet Earth based on Germany during your second World War.”

“Ouch. Jeez. And they wiped everyone else out?”

“With an artifact that accompanied myself, amongst other spoils of war, to Asgard when their war with Jotunnheim’s conquerors was over,” Loki added. “It contains as much potential power as the tesseract, but a more limited range of applications: cold, ice, and darkness, mostly.”

“Charming.”

“Not at all.”

“So Odin still has that?”

Loki hummed noncommittally.

“That’s so not a yes.”

“It isn’t,” the trickster conceded.

“Who has it?”

The trickster said nothing, slowly finishing his drink and setting the glass aside.

“You have it!”

“I am... aware of its location, and may or may not still have access to it for emergency purposes,” he offered.

“Where?”

“Nifleheim. With some distant relatives and one less distant one. It’s—not important,” Loki said quickly.

“Relatives.”

“Yes.”

“I assume one is Hel?”

Loki nodded.
“The others... newly discovered?”

“It’s really not important,” the trickster said quickly. “I would prefer not to discuss it, actually, as I’m still reeling a bit from all of it, but I should be more than fine after a month or so to process.” He leaned back against the counter. “Though this, at least, is far easier and more natural to accept than the initial ‘you are adopted and a Jotunn from the line of kings who wiped out all that was once interesting and powerful in Jotunnheim with one fool’s ambition and an artifact he could not hope to control the wielding of’ revelation. It’s actually strengthening, rather than foundation-shattering. I’ll be fine.” He shot the inventor a defiant glare and was a bit surprised to find the mortal already accepting the news with a bemused but thoughtful nod.

“Alright. Yeah. You look better than when I last saw you, by a long shot, so I’ll take you at your word on it for now, but at some point I’m going to ask about it further. Not soon. I can’t drop it entirely, though, because it’s just too shiny and interesting. You know how it is.”

Loki nodded lightly. “I suppose so.”

They stared at each other for a slightly too-long moment.

Tony realized just how kind of stunning the trickster’s cheekbones really were, and cleared his throat. “So. What updates do you need on news down here, since we’re looking at Earth being the battle-field if things don’t go our way?”

“Your weak points are still mostly those closest to you? Your ‘girlfriend’—” he said the word like he’d gotten the same no, calling someone’s girlfriend ‘his woman’ really is rude with unsavory implications here on Earth, speech that Thor had, and still felt bitter about the whole thing—‘your childhood friend with his own armor, your old friend who has also been your bodyguard, and your AI?”

Tony blinked. Most people forgot JARVIS counted as a person on his list. The fact Loki assumed it without being told was... interesting. “Yeah. She’s not my girlfriend at this point, though. She moved out a few months back. She’s still one of the most important people in my life, just—not romantically.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “Noted.”

Tony resisted the urge to glance at the trickster’s collarbones. “So Thor has sort of lost hope in you, in a way that suggests he believes the aspects of you that he remembers most fondly were your true self, when in fact a lot of that was feigned or mocking and he just never realized... but he still knows about our ally deal.”

“Right.”

“He’s also still an Avenger. He even stays here for a couple weeks at a time, every month or two, when he’s not home or in New Mexico.”

“I’m aware.”

“How’s that gonna go, oh ye escaped convict?”

Loki snorted. “He cannot make any attempts to capture me while the terms of our agreement apply. Shortly after that, no doubt we may run into problems, but I plan to enjoy making him miserable should that occur.”

“You think he might just let you go?”
The trickster shot him an incredulous look. “Suddenly I wonder how I ever mistook you for a creature of sense.”

“Look, he’ll be an Avenger. You’ll be our ally. There will be time when we aren’t all busy preparing because a lot of us are still mostly mortal and we need mundane things like food, sleep and downtime to recover from shit if we get injured. Use that to your advantage, maybe? It’s not like you’ll have another forced peace like this to try and make him see sense one last time before you give up on him entirely too.”

“I’ve already given up on him,” Loki snapped.

“No, you haven’t, or his trying to ‘save’ you wouldn’t have affected you even half as much,” Tony shot back. “Accept that, and either give up without a fight, or show him just how stupid he’s been for millennia to earn every bit of the tidal wave of exasperation that hits you whenever you have to deal with him these days.”

The trickster god rose to his feet suddenly, invading Tony’s space. “Do not. Presume. To advise me. In this,” he said very slowly, his tone hard and cold.

Tony considered his options. “Fine. I won’t say another word about it tonight.”

Eyes narrowing, Loki all but snarled. “Not ever.”

“Look, Loki, this reaction you’re having here is further evidence you need to deal with this, because you two are going to clash in close company unless you have a plan in place for how to deal with it that isn’t ‘ignore it until it can’t be ignored, then lash out’ like you’ve been doing,” Tony said, calm and clear, every syllable enunciated with stern deliberation. “You picked me to be your advocate on this planet when you decided to offer an alliance, and that means killing or maiming me, or even just traumatizing me, before you can keep your word, isn’t something you can do right now.” He saw the surprise flicker in the trickster’s stare for a moment and continued, “Yeah, Harry Potter, I read all the fine print, and Thor was happy to tell me all the ways I might have an upper hand here that you wouldn’t be inclined to tell me yourself, concerning the oaths that can naturally bind Jotunn and Aesir alike. So unless, as we agreed, you have better options to offer instead of my suggestions, you might want to seriously consider modifying your plans.”

Loki held his stare for a long moment, breathing slow and controlled, and still leaning too close, his hands resting on the bar out to either side of them both. “Thor is all too willing to believe in the lies used, before my fall, on myself and him alike, and on the rest of Asgard, when I still wished for them to be kinder to me, or otherwise be forced to at least accept me. I lost any true desire for such things over a millennia ago when I fully embraced my contrary and amoral nature, and that façade saw only sarcastic use since then—a mockery, a parody, of the old lies and the old games, delivered with wry humor when it was necessary to be more civil than I truly felt. He has had centuries during which he did not notice that I was not this less bitter, less twisted and more ethical brother he remembers even now. He prefers the lie, and has already mourned that lie’s death.”

“Then maybe show him what actually murdered it so he stops believing it was you and that you’re an unrecognizable cipher with a familiar face,” Tony suggested. “Just what you told me here, about Jotunns, reminds me of enough similar crazy shit humans have done over and over again in our own history, that’s still causing us problems. I’ve been lucky to have a few really good friends who liked me enough, despite my being a ridiculously privileged white boy, to tell me what it’s really been like for them to struggle against nonsensical prejudices that people have against them for no reason other than their sex, their skin-color, or both, and I’ve made an effort to be sure they don’t think it’s their responsibility to teach everyone like me, when all we should need are eyes to see, an understanding of other people as complex and valuable with motives we cannot presume to know at a glance, and a
penchant for doubt, to see that something like that is so wrong as it really is. So I get why you don’t want to have to teach him; yeah, he should have gotten the memo long before now, but he’s had his world-view shaken a few times since then. I think going back to Asgard might have dulled the effectiveness of what he learned before, but he’s more vulnerable to reason when he’s out of that context and I know you’ve seen that. Hell, give me a little material to work with, and I can probably manipulate him into thinking it’s his idea when realization finally hits, or I can just inflict it on him via bluntness, but if you’re hostile to the idea of even giving him another chance, it still won’t work out.”

“You’re asking if this would be enough for me to forgive him: for him to realize all of his wrongs,” Loki said slowly.

“It would make the prospect of working with both of you less of a headache if you had a heart filled with sufficient quantities of kittens and rainbows for easily providing forgiveness, but that’s not what I’m expecting, no. I just need you to be satisfied that he’s kicking himself enough for being stupid, that you can handle being around him while he’s looking contrite or apologetic or emotional at all, without having to threaten or attack something to still feel like you’re in control and appropriately angry.”

Loki pushed himself back from the bar and Tony, straightening up a little, looking almost startled, like he was seriously caught off-guard.

“What?”

“That...” The trickster shook his head slowly. “You scarcely know me.” He sounded disbelieving, yet uncertain.

“I’m perspicacious.”

“Yes... I think you are.”

“I think you know a useful resource when you see one.”

Loki continued to stare at him.

“You’re really not used to someone reading you, are you?”

“As you say: Asgard has a stagnant culture. They are at a comfortable plateau for the advancements of magic and technology, our population does not age and few die, so it has become natural for fewer people to have children, so fewer among us experience and recall the harrowing learning experience of raising such a strange creature as a being like ourselves in earliest stages, who will possess a new and unique understanding of the world around them, ever-changing and growing more complex as they develop, and few understand that thinking of people as still being full of unknowns and mysteries is the only way to truly understand and comprehend their actions and motivations. This does not make a culture full of people who can easily fathom a creature like me, particularly to this extent. There are some, but usually only the wisest: the very old, and the very young.”

“That... sounds really boring.”

“It was, once I had learned all of the history of all the realms, and all of the magic in all of the libraries, and many books that I should not have actually been able to find, let alone memorize,” Loki concurred. “Then I began to take control, began to take pleasure in my dissatisfaction with the way things are there, and people began to distrust me, as I became more myself. After that, I traveled a
great deal. Sometimes, if I thought it might amuse, I took Thor, with or without his friends.”

“My god, you’re a DM,” Tony gasped in tones of mock-horror.

“What?”

“It’s a... game reference.” He briefly considered trying to explain Dungeons & Dragons to the god of mischief and had to swallow a hysterical laugh at the thought alone of how that might play out. Thus, explaining that DM stood for ‘Dungeon Master’ was also not an option. It put him in mind of Loki wearing the sort of leather outfit that even Asgard would question and that—that should be a thought under the ‘never again’ column but Tony filed it away in ‘for later consideration’ instead. Totally on accident. Totally. “It’s uh... the person in a particular style of game on this planet, who designs a quest, a campaign, or an adventure, and leads a party of people through it, without actually being the leader of the party. Usually their part in the quest itself is as another member of the party not center-stage, if at all, but that’s a sort of avatar of theirs—part of the game as much as any events in the quest, which was, like I said, the DM’s design.”

Loki blinked. “Oh. Well, yes, that would be an apt comparison.”

Tony bit his lip at the image of the trickster leading a D&D game. He would be a complete dick, too, and deliberately mess with people... but to do that in real life, Loki would’ve been risking life and limb alongside Thor, without the total control over all of the venture that a DM would have by means of role-play. It sounded potentially interesting enough to pass the centuries playing around with. “No wonder you got a reputation for being a manipulative dick, just saying.”

The trickster shrugged languidly and returned to his bar stool. “By the time I had such a reputation, I was quite proud of it.”

“Like silver-tongue?” Tony asked, before he could stop himself.

Loki chuckled. “Yes, quite.”

“I do have to ask about the horse-”

“No. I have never been pregnant, nor have I ever given birth,” the trickster snarled.

“Sorry. Sorry. I had to.”

“I will never forgive Sif for starting that horrible rumor on this planet.”

Tony sniggered.

“I will end you,” Loki intoned gravely.

Tony laughed harder. “Oh fuck, don’t use memes I can’t take it!”

Smirking a bit, Loki leaned back against the counter with the air of a cat in a sunbeam as the inventor regained his composure. “I must take my leave of you, soon. I have been busy, whiling away the time between preparations for war.”

“Yeah, I remember. What were those shard-things on the tape?”

“Something that shouldn’t be on Earth. I’m curious as to their origins as much as you may be, if not more.”

“Is it to do with Strange talking about something ‘From Beyond’ that showed up recently?”
Loki froze, looking like realization had suddenly dawned. “He said what?”

“Oh, are you out of the loop?” Tony sounded a bit smug. “Which keyword there got your attention.”

“Someone ‘From Beyond’?”

“I said something. Why do you think it’s someone?”

“Because I’ve dealt with Beyonders before. They were more direct in giving me insights into the workings of the tesseract, when I first studied it, than Odin’s writings on the subject.” He gestured vaguely. “I might have been choosing to do the taboo thing and went to the people who taught him how to make it to ask, rather than Odin himself, and then blamed it on the quality of his pedantic writings. It was a bit of a debacle when I returned home,” Loki explained.

“Wait, he didn’t abuse the English language and ‘Beyonder’ is actually a legitimate name of some people ‘From Beyond’? Are you shitting me?” Tony groaned.

“It would explain a great deal, if one of their kind were recently arrived here. Did Strange know where they might have landed?”

“He said something about a crash site near Mongolia.”

Loki leapt to his feet and swore, rubbing his hands together. “I need to go. I have to find out which one of them is missing, because if it’s who I think it is, his mother knows of me and will find a way to blame this upon myself. I have a bit much to do before dying a horrible death between worlds and dimensions with creatures of the void gnawing through my organs because of that woman.” He seized Tony’s face. “You’ve been very informative, and challenging, and interesting. Thank you.” He then kissed the inventor firmly on the lips, like it was a perfectly normal farewell between acquaintances who have tried to kill each other and are still sort of enemies, then vanished almost before pulling away.

Tony remained very still, his empty glass in hand, for a long few seconds.

Slowly, he realized that the other thing he was feeling, aside from shock, was a short catalogue of disappointments: at how brief the kiss had been, that there hadn’t even been tongue, and at the abrupt end of the conversation.

“Oh shit,” he sighed aloud into the now-empty penthouse.

That was when it really started.

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Loki didn’t show up anywhere for about a week, recognizably. It was a strangely peaceful week all around.

When Loki did return, he was in full armor, albeit with many holes in it, and dents, scuffs, and even a bit that was burnt. It was clear that some, but by no means most, of the bloodstains weren’t from his own wounds. His eyes were blazing with anger and he seemed to aggressively radiate cold as he stormed through Tony’s lab toward the mortal inventor who was by now looking up at him in surprise and mild, instinctive fear for his life. When the trickster stopped, he stood on the other side
of Tony’s work table, a bunch of pieces of armor stacked between them, and rested both hands on the edge of the work surface. Leaning over the table, Loki snapped out, “You did not mention an arch-nemesis of yours with a Makluan dragon at his command, Anthony Stark, and if you have any other gross oversights you’ve perhaps left for me, do please throw suspense to the four winds in favor of keeping your throat and entrails intact!”

Tony blinked a few times, shook his head as if to clear it, and said, low and calm, “What the actual fuck are you even talking about?”

“The Ten. Rings,” Loki hissed. “They were the ones your godfather hired to kill you, and they have continued to be a thorn in your side as you try to cleanse the world of your murder-easing arsenals of weaponry. Your own long-term arch-nemesis. Do keep up, Stark!”

“Yes, but they were—” He hesitated. “Wait. You’re saying they’re deeper than AIM. You’re saying they’re still around. Even S.H.I.E.L.D. is 80-90% sure that they were wiped out, and the remaining members and bits of their organization still alive and free scattered to join other radical militant groups.”

Loki’s seething anger banked a bit as he studied the inventor’s face closely. Then he looked exasperated. “By the Norns, you really only know about the farce.”

“The farce was targeting me a lot, and hurt Happy, and—you don’t just mean the Mandarin and Aldrich Killian, do you?”

The trickster slowly shook his head. “I mean the Ten Rings. Their flag has been in use and pictured in S.H.I.E.L.D. evidence logs for ten years as they grew, before Aldrich Killian even created AIM. It just requires a reverse-image search, you dunce, I’m not from this planet and I thought of—”

“Wait. When did S.H.I.E.L.D. add that feature to their archives?”

“I may have manipulated a few algorithms to suit my purpose—”

Tony held up a hand. “You reprogrammed S.H.I.E.L.D. temporarily. Where did you learn to program?”

“I read quickly, and a lot of the mathematics involved are slightly similar to the concepts of animated illusions and maneuvering wave-forms of light particles under certain conditions, which I’ve been able to do since I was a child. What part of ‘advanced civilization’ has yet to get through to you?” Loki scathed.

“I ask because this leads direct to me asking why you kissed me last time you were here and how averse you’d be to doing it again, for a longer period of time, and without clothing, because your intelligence is making me hard,” Tony riposted.

The trickster blinked at that. “Pardon?”

“Well, also, you’re gorgeous, but you hacked S.H.I.E.L.D. and mapped out the history of an intelligent and highly organized criminal organization that’s been conning me since I first heard of them, and that—that yes is a major turn-on. Just saying. If you’re interested, later.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “So, then, S.H.I.E.L.D. really does believe that their leader ‘M’ has been a sort of illusion, as the Mandarin was, all the while?”

“I’m gonna go with a strong ‘yeah probably’ on that.”
“Then he is truly a talented creature. More so than I’d credited him with before now. No small wonder he thought ahead to ambush me as soon as I made any appearance near his personal stronghold,” Loki mused.

“He ambushed you? Wait—you said a dragon?”

“Survivor of an old empire from the world of Kakaranathara, in the Maklu star system. One of few left in this part of the galaxy now, possibly the last,” Loki said. “They’re a reptilian race, strong and clever, masters of powerful magics on par with mine, particularly shape-shifting, and telepathy almost strong enough to challenge my personal shields.” He tapped at his left temple. “He is kept mostly catatonic by the Ten Rings’ leader, and when woken after a dose of a certain herbal mixture I may have gotten a sample of, he can apparently be commanded by a telepathic bond. The telepathy of his ‘master’ is not quite so strong as the dragon’s latent power, but his bond to the dragon is old and profound, such that it would surprise me if his mind does not have more than his own memories in it, any longer. This, Stark, is a worthier adversary for you than Killian could have hoped to be. More powerful, more shrewd, and with an empire to lose on par with your own.”

“You sound like you’re enjoying the idea.”

“I’m admiring another artist’s work. He has great potential.”

“What else?”

“Ancient alien technology. As an aside, I do not think the fallen Beyonder is still in their possession. Even before the incident with the dragon, I was able to detect no trace of his presence at any of the Ten Rings’ bases I checked. That said, I think it a strong possibility that the ‘Ten Rings’ of their namesake relate to alien artifacts based on Makluan technology.”

“Could you mark the bases out on a map real quick? I... might have a pertinent interest in checking out what else they have.”

“Shall I start with the ones that have impressive stockpiles of your weapons?”

Tony looked at him sharply. He touched a piece of armor on the table. “Pack up.” The pieces of armor rose like a small swarm back over to one of the display units n the far wall, where they arranged themselves into an only slightly battered, but recognizable Iron Man suit. “JARVIS? World map projection, lower lights to 40%.”

Staring at Loki in the glow of the map, Tony said, “Please show me.”

“I suppose I might do you that favor.” Loki sounded curious, and a little predatory. He reached out over the map with one fingertip and tapped several locations, narrowing down the precise coordinates when prompted by the map’s interface. “This is their main stronghold, oldest and most well-fortified.” He tapped it twice. “Beware of dragon. I recommend that you perhaps do not tell S.H.I.E.L.D. about that one—at least, not right away. It would seem suspicious of you to suddenly know it, in any case. The place is well hidden, despite its long history, in plain sight. These two—” He revisited two of the dots. “—have a great deal of Stark Industries technology, some of it is altered.” He glanced up at the Inventor’s face through the projected light. “I might even go so far as to say they advanced your original designs, in the time since you stopped manufacturing some of the larger missiles, among other things.”

Tony’s jaw tightened. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

“It wouldn’t be, if not for this one.” Loki added one last dot to the map. “When you shut down your
weapons manufacture, the machines which made your parts had to be destroyed, refitted, sold, or quietly ‘vanished’. I believe Stane must have preferred a combination of the latter two options, to judge by how much equipment, and in such excellent condition, they have for continuing to build and only slightly alter your weapons designs.”

Exhaling heavily through his teeth, Tony glared down at the location. “How heavily fortified are they?”

“Are you asking if you could take that one out alone?”

“What do you think?”

The trickster hummed. “You could. They were barely aware of my visit, but unconcerned until I provoked that reptile. I am a known quantity to them, to some extent: a strange god, with a recent penchant for being nosey and peripatetic, but not allied with the likes of their enemies... yet.” He offered the inventor a thoughtful look. “They are near a larger manufacturing district, so that the amount of smoke and other byproducts they emit are not very notable or unusual for the area. They are lightly defended, no nuclear waste or radioactive materials in use. They are deep enough within mainland China to feel securely surrounded, but not far enough from the sea and other routes of trade to make their business tricky, and they possess excellent governmental connections keeping them safe from prying eyes local and foreign. Their government contacts believe the operation is Russian but supplying Chinese interests, the workers believe the company is Chinese, the soldiers who have barracks there, and all of the management, are from the Ten Rings. The last thing they might expect would be an abrupt ambush. I recommend just before midnight, when there is a brief cool-down time for the equipment before the pre-dawn shift arrives to start things back up.”

“Thank you,” Tony said, low and cool. “That gives me a few hours, then.”

Loki stepped around the table toward him, to stand slightly behind him almost as though to look over his shoulder. Tony felt long, cool fingers trace down his throat and shut his eyes, too angry to quite enjoy it like he’d wanted to earlier, but not so far gone that it wasn’t still pleasant. He leaned into the caress just a little.

Then, cool and soft by his ear, lips and breath almost tickling, the trickster whispered, “Yes, if you were wondering, I am interested, Tony. Another time.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“I as well. Enjoy your vengeance.”

Tony felt, rather than saw, when the god of lies vanished.

He stared at the map for a long few moments. “JARVIS, prep me a suit. I think... I think it’s time to test-drive the new hulk-buster model, and what better way than by smashing a bunch of things?”

“Right away, sir.”

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“Stark, do you want to tell me why there have been high-ranking Chinese government officials screaming about terrorist attacks from the west in my ear for the past three hours?” Fury roared down
“Relax, the official news all over the place around there is that it was a bad deal with the Russian mob, and they arrested a few of their own who were making money off of keeping interest away from the place. JARVIS has been monitoring and updating a news ticker about it for me.”

“Stark!”

“Why didn’t you tell me how much older the Ten Rings is than AIM?”

A long pause followed. “It was suspected, but not fully verified.”

“But you didn’t think to mention it.”

“I had a feeling you’d do something like this!”

“I have a few more interesting points on my map of their strongholds, Fury, that aren’t anywhere in any of your files. This one today had all the weapons-manufacturing factory equipment Stane ‘cleaned out’ when I turned my company policy on its head a while back, and they’ve been in good use, and maintained, all this time. This one was mine, Fury, and I’ll share the rest if you’re man enough to admit you couldn’t hold that one against me even if you wanted to, or even if you tried.”

A sharp intake of breath, followed by an exasperated partial exhale, followed. Then the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. asked curtly, “How many others?”

“Six more,” Tony said, not counting the main one, the one with the ‘Here there be Dragon’ note next to it. “Two more have big stockpiles this one was supplying and maintaining. We take them out fast, before they have time to prepare for us. Within 24 hours, and we can put the Ten Rings into a position they can’t help but expose more of themselves just to survive. We can mortally wound a shadow you’ve been chasing for almost two decades, Fury, if you let me lead this initiative.”

A long, thoughtful pause followed. “How did you find them, Stark?”

“It’s a long story, and I’m not inclined to get into it. It’s taken me a while to get all this lined up, without them catching on until just now that I even know they still exist, and they still might not quite know the truth of that quite yet, for certain,” he explained, lying only a little. “I might have made a lot of effort to be mistaken for the Hulk. Yes, I’ve already apologized to Bruce, and no, he doesn’t have a problem doing it himself on one of these other locations if you and I can agree on it.”

“Send me your map.”

He sent a copy to Fury: one lacking any trace of their dragon-guarded main stronghold.

“Hold please.”

Tony patiently waited about fifteen minutes, humming his own hold music as Fury doubtlessly scrambled together a hasty strategy meeting with Agent Hill and a few others. Tony examined his nails, thought briefly about Loki’s hands on his neck, which wasn’t as unnerving a thought as it was when his only prior memory of it involved strangling and defenestration—especially since the caress was only a little more arousing than the other memory, these days.

He snapped back out of his thoughts when Fury came back onto the line. “Get your ass back here to New York, we’re getting this done before tomorrow is up.”

“I congratulate you on this example of great decision-making.”
“Like that’s actually a compliment coming from you, Stark. You still just outside Beijing?”

“Actually, I’m in another province now. Stopped for Dim-Sum.”

“Just get your ass back here.”

“As soon as I pay my check,” Tony promised sweetly. “Bye!” He hung up, not even letting Fury finish swearing at him.

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After a week of warfare and the rest of the Ten Rings going deep, deep underground, further than he or S.H.I.E.L.D. could follow or even keep tabs on, Tony returned to the penthouse of Avengers tower exhausted and a bit haggard, in dire need of shower and shave. He paused at the sight of something odd draped over the back of his couch and stared at it until he slowly realized it was a very bloodied bit of Loki’s usual armored outer-war.

Padding closer on near-silent bare feet, Tony regarded the mess occupying the seat-cushions of his couch.

Loki was in bad shape, this time, to judge by the sluggishly-healing deep wounds on his sides, the dried bloody traces of smaller healed-wounds over the rest of him, and a lot of colorful, deep bruising; he was stripped only to the waist. The less-bloodied half of his main outer coat was under his back, providing a little protection for the fabric from the blood he was still leaking a bit of. The rest of his armor was scattered on the floor, thankfully away from any rugs. The trickster had one arm draped over his eyes as though light from the windows offended him, but at Tony’s approach he lifted it enough to reveal one bloodshot eye. “Skrulls know me too well, these days,” he rasped, by way of explanation.

“Apparently so, if their weapons can slow your usual healing.”

The god muttered something only half-comprehensible under his breath.

“Sleep it off. I’ve been at war with M for a week, and I smell like I spent most of that time in armor, so I’m going to shower and pass the fuck out accordingly. When you’re a bit more upright, you’re welcome to the shower and anything in the fridge up here. If any other Avengers drop by, maybe hide, I guess. G’night.”

“Sleep well,” Loki mumbled. It then sounded like he tried to roll over a bit and wound up in more pain than intended, hastily returning to his prior position, only to hiss as the haste compounded his discomfort still further.

Tony shook his head a bit and headed for the shower.

It was only halfway through scrubbing the machine grease and other debris out of his hair that Tony realized the god of lies and mischief felt safe hiding in Avengers tower while gravely wounded, and some of the greater implications thereof. It was probably due to the future-alliance agreement they had making Tony’s penthouse official neutral ground, but it was still a bit disconcerting. He was being relied upon, he realized, as a safe place for a convicted interplanetary criminal mastermind to hide when vulnerable.
While rinsing his hair, something else occurred to him. “Hey, JARVIS?” He heard a faint reply through the spray and belatedly remembered to lift his head out of it. “You didn’t mention he was here, I noticed.”

“He seemed disoriented on his arrival, as though unsure quite where he was, then swore a great deal when I spoke to him. He stated that he had not intended to arrive here again, and that his teleportation must have been interfered with, sending him to the last location he’d been on Earth rather than the one he was aiming for directly. He politely requested that no one know of his presence, and stated that he wouldn’t stay very long. I believed that truly his intent, as he took care to leave little evidence even cleaning his rather extensive wounds, so I refrained from interrupting your business abroad or any of the calls that you were occupied with on your way here.”

“Why did he fall on the couch, if he’d planned to leave?”

“He mentioned a mild poison in his system, and I ran a few scans. His temperature was near freezing, and I informed him of as much, at which point he lost his balance somewhat. I advised him that teleportation while in his current state did not seem advisable, and he reluctantly agreed, and made his way to the nearest horizontal surface he might stretch out upon.”

“Poison. I guess they do know him a bit too well. How’s he doing on the scans?”

“His body temperature seems to fluctuate between near-freezing, and fever, with alarming frequency. Given the lack of available knowledge for ice-Jotunn physiology that we have on hand, I do not know what to make of that. His heart-rate slows when his fever drops, and flutters quickly when he is too warm. His sweat does not seem to occur when his temperature drops are severe enough to change his coloration—”

Tony shook water from his ears. “Sorry, repeat that? Color change?”

“When his temperature drops to below 3º Celsius, his skin changes color, yes.”

“I was not aware that was a thing.”

“Also eye-color.”

“Got video?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Huh. I’ll have to check that out.”

“Was I wrong to allow him this access to the penthouse, sir?”

“No, JARVIS, you did good. He’s... an ally. Or will be. Tense is uncertain.”

“Are you at all uncertain about his intentions?”

“Well, yeah, but not against me in particular; not for a while yet, anyway. It goes without saying that keeping the others away while he’s around is what we’re doing though, right?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then yeah. I guess he’s clear for visits like this.”
“You sound surprised by this.”

“It wasn’t exactly what I signed up for.”

“Neither was flirtation with mad gods.”

“Singular. Just... just the one, so far.”

“Of course, sir. I apologize for not acknowledging your flirtation to be of monotheistic inclinations.”

“You’re a riot, JARVIS,” Tony deadpanned, unamused, as he turned off the water and stepped out of the shower.

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Tony didn’t sleep too well, mostly due to feeling stiff and sore, and having so much fresh fire and violence in his memory, flickering behind his eyes as he tried to find rest, find enough peace in his own head to let go, just enough to sleep.

He did eventually manage a few good solid hours in, after dawn. He slept past ten, and woke to the delicious sensation of hands moving over his back with a touch that seemed to drain all the tension and pain and bruised aches from his muscles, leaving him to groan softly with bone-deep satisfaction. Then, a bit belatedly, he realized he was on his stomach and someone was straddling his hips. Then those hands reached back and ran down his legs too, and he made another helplessly relieved noise. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but it’s amazing,” he groaned, as the touch ran back up his thighs to his hips, to drop to his outstretched hands and run up and down his aching arms before settling particular focus on his shoulders.

“I am being polite,” Loki said.

“Mm?”

“I think it only polite to see to it you are relaxed and comfortable before I inquire whether or not I may fuck you through the mattress,” the trickster offered in light, cheerful tones.

Tony may have shuddered and been suddenly wide awake and fully aware and also very, very hard in his boxers. The weight of Loki over him maintaining pressure between his stomach and the sheets was an added distraction. Very unfair, all around. “I want you to,” Tony said, a little roughly, as he sat up a bit, his weight on his forearms, arching up a little as Loki’s body settled over him close and smooth and surprisingly warm for a so-called frost-giant. Recalling the footage he’d watched, of pale skin darkening to blue and those startling red eyes, Tony’s breath quickened a little, recalling exactly what Loki was—god, alien, beautifully monstrous when angry, and unfairly beautiful when too cold somehow, and brilliantly clever too—and feeling all too greedily inclined to touch all of it.

“Think you can handle a god, Tony?” Loki whispered hot against his ear.

“I’d like to find out what else your hands can do, yeah.”

The trickster took hold of his chin in graceful fingers and turned Tony’s head until the inventor’s mouth was in reach at the opportune angle for him to capture. Tony hummed into the contact and parted his lips eagerly, his tongue sliding lewdly past Loki’s shortly after as that polished silver set
out to conquer him—and that was when his brain shut off except for intense focus on the marvelous
things Loki’s mouth was capable of.

By the time they parted, Tony was panting a little, and moving his hips a bit, just for a bit of friction.
“Your tongue really might be the most dangerous part of you, and I’m saying that compared to your
eyes and your abs, which are some serious competition, but I’m wiling to withhold final judgement
until I’ve become more acquainted with all that you keep in your pants.”

Loki chuckled, low and dark, against his mouth. “Well, let’s set about that.” He slid off Tony’s hips
to stand beside the bed, his fingers tugging at numerous buckles on the over-complicated leather
pants that usually accompanied his armor.

Taking in the view, Tony slid his boxers off in the same movement that he pushed the sheets down
the bed and kicked them out of the way, before sitting up and taking in the view as the trickster
finally slid those pants down. *Okay, his tongue has seriously stiff competition,* he thought, and
managed not to either giggle or roll his eyes at his brain’s own choice of words. He slid to the edge
of the bed as Loki stepped out of his pants, abandoning them on the floor. *Those legs really go on
forever, too, sweet mother of science.* When the god stepped close enough for their legs to touch,
Tony glanced down at the impressive offering before him and smirked a little, grabbing Loki’s hips
and bringing his head down.

He heard the sharp intake of breath from Loki over him, at the feel of clever lips wrapping around
the head of his cock, soon followed by suction and flicking tongue. Tony felt long-fingered hands
slide into his hair and grip firmly, but not enough to steer him, not demanding, even as the inventor
slid down the god’s length tortuously slow, forcing his throat to relax like it hadn’t in years as he
managed to take Loki to the base, his nose brushing the trickster’s groin. Breathing slowly, he pulled
back a little, and swallowed once, then twice more, hearing Loki give a harsh gasp in surprise and
pleasure.

“I really am inclined to fuck you properly,” the trickster breathed.

Tony shot him a wicked look, even as his cock throbbed appreciatively at the thought. He started to
pull back, slow, then sucked hard and pulled Loki closer by one hip, sinking back down with a long,
appreciative hum.

Loki’s hips bucked despite himself and he thrust into wet heat so good he couldn’t help but do it
again, only to give a hissing groan as Tony dragged the slightest hint of teeth up along his base,
making his eyes almost roll back in his head. “Fuck, Tony,” he panted, and rolled his hips again,
harder.

The inventor met his stare again and let him feel teasing, fricative pressure from the flat of his tongue
as he dragged back up, and went pliant as the trickster pulled him back down sharply, not quite all
the way, breathing hard and uneven. Tony swallowed hard, one hand now playing with the
trickster’s balls, and Loki began fucking into his mouth in shallow, fast thrusts, until Tony thought
his jaw might actually give out for a few hazy minutes; although the sounds Loki made were
exquisitely worth it. Then the trickster came hard, forcing Tony to swallow quickly, which pulled a
pretty and utterly incoherent noise from Loki’s throat, before the fingers in Tony’s hair tightened
their grip decisively and tugged his mouth away.

“Like you gods don’t have a ridiculous recovery time. I swear if I hear one more brag about that
from Doc—”

“If you utter her name, I will leave you like this immediately.”
Tony snorted. “Touché.” He sat up and back, scooting away from the edge, smirking as Loki leaned over the bed to follow him until they were both taking up the middle of the mattress, and the trickster settled between his legs once he’d steered them a bit so Tony’s head rested against the headboard lightly. “I’m not done with you yet, y’see.”

“I could say the same.” As he leaned forward, Tony felt that yes, the ridiculously quick recovery time was not unique to Aesir, but pretty much an across-the-board godly perk, now hot and slick against his hip.

“You certainly could, but why when this is an option?” He caught that mouth with his own again, the kiss deep and wet and all the right kinds of filthy this time as Loki pushed the mad inventor’s legs apart and slid long hands up his inner thighs. Tony arched his hips a bit into it and in the next second had time to wonder when and where Loki had gotten lube, before he gave up on any thoughts even half so coherent because he’d been right to think Loki’s hands seemed dangerously talented. He surged into the kiss with renewed hunger and few small moans as two long fingers did things to his prostate that he hadn’t realized were quite possible, but oh so good.

“So very eager,” the god murmured, their lips still touching. “I begin to suspect you’ve thought about this before.”

“Only—only about seven or eight times,” Tony panted. “You—hands, fucking brilliant,” he groaned.

“I’m going to have to remove them, now.”

Tony managed not to whimper, but it was a near thing. He considered requesting a fourth, but after a quick glance down between their bodies, the inventor was fine with trading fingers for something even more fun, and he had no doubt whatsoever that Loki really knew how to use it. “How do you want me?”

The trickster’s teeth dragged across his lower lip and his fingers executed a complicated fricative gesture all pressure, twist, force, push against Tony’s prostate to earn one more shuddering moan before his hand reluctantly retreated, settling instead on his own cock. “I think I want to watch your face as you’re fucked senseless,” he purred, settling on his knees and dragging Tony’s hips up along his thighs until the inventor’s ass met his lap, trapping his erection between the inventor’s cheeks briefly. “Brace your forearms against the headboard behind you.”

Tony felt exposed and overpowered as he obeyed the order, and it shouldn’t be so exquisitely good, but it really, really was. He used the leverage to roll his body and hips against Loki hard, and enjoyed the way Loki’s eyes darkened and the grip on his hips became almost bruising, before the trickster let one hand relax and slide between them, guiding him to press against Tony’s entrance, barely the head slipping in.

“Do that again,” the trickster challenged.

Breathless, Tony did, hard and controlled so that Loki’s cock drove into him hard and slick in one rolling motion that had them both making ragged, pleased sounds. Then Loki seized him by the ass and began fucking him in earnest: rough and deep. And Tony was left gasping by it, trying to roll with it, keep up a little counter-rocking of his own, and the results had him almost seeing stars.

He could hear utterly raw lust in Loki’s voice as the god gripped the top of the headboard with one hand and changed the angle of Tony’s hips with the other so the next few thrusts made the inventor almost scream. The trickster’s litany of obscene encouragement telling him to come finally drove him over the edge not long after, with another sharp cry, followed by a series of softer ones as Loki rode
him through it, and past it, and into what should’ve been discomfort but Tony just shuddered with it, wondering how long Loki could keep this up. *Hours? Days?* The thought alone made him breathless. *Another time. After I’ve seen you come like this.* Tony tightened deliberately around the trickster’s length, biting hard at Loki’s neck as he felt the god shudder and break rhythm for a moment. Not letting him recover, Tony growled, “I want to feel you come, Loki, give me all you’ve got.”

With a broken moan, the trickster thrust twice more and came hard, his whole body shaking and wrecked, green eyes sharp and glassy and his pale face a little pink from exertion along those pretty cheekbones.

“You’re a gorgeous mess, you know,” Tony panted, and tugged at his shoulder. “C’mon, lay down.”

Eventually they settled on the bed side by side, catching their breaths. Loki absentely gestured, removing all uncomfortable stickiness from them.

“That’s fuckin’ useful.”

“It has proven one of the most sensible spells I’ve ever learned, yes.”

Tony snorted, amused. “You, are a really good fuck.”

Loki made a slightly smug noise of contentment.

“And in twenty minutes, I want to fuck you over the side of this bed. I’m curious how much of a mess I can get you to make on my sheets.”

The trickster stretched a bit with a thoughtful hum. “I wouldn’t be averse to this.”

Even with the sense that he was making horrible life-decisions, Tony was extremely happy with that answer. “Excellent.”

“Alternately, of course, I could improve your recovery time with magic.”

The inventor’s mouth went dry. *This is the very best bad decision.*

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Tony had imagined, at first, that waking up naked with a former-/current-/pseudo-arch-nemesis in his bed might be a bit awkward at some point, and started out with a plan or two for how to avoid it. After about round four, though, when he’d managed to fuck Loki through three straight orgasms after figuring out a convenient trick of timing regarding the trickster’s recuperative capabilities (and that was when he’d discovered that the god had a thing for being held hard against the agonizing edge between *too-good* and *too-much*) Tony concluded that the pair of them were both a bit too shameless for the usual awkwardness Tony was used to with a lot of one-night stands. In fact, to be quite honest, the mad inventor was hoping to skip it, and perhaps wake up to Loki-the-insatiable starting another round of creative, mind-melting sex. He might have even been looking forward to it.

He hadn’t counted on his real life interrupting his sexual encounters with the god of mischief before it was even nine in the morning. On a *Sunday.*
Pepper, to judge by the stunned, bemused, and strangely resigned look on her face where she stood in the doorway with a tablet in one hand and stylus in the other, hadn’t expected to interrupt any more-epic-than-usual-sexcapades, either; although, Tony mused, her look might be less shocked if there had been sex going on, instead of a slightly sleepy mad genius being spooned by an (admittedly hard against his ass before he fully woke at the sound of the door opening) attractive but slightly sleep-mussed god of lies and mischief. Both brilliant men blinked blearily at her, then woke up a bit more and tensed slightly, but did not move.

“Well, this is new even for you, Tony. You’re Loki, if I remember your mugshots correctly?” Pepper asked, light and professional.

“Yes,” the god replied, watching her warily, but with curiosity.

“I need Tony from you, given I have his company to run,” she said simply. “If you don’t mind disentangling?”

It occurred to the mad inventor that Loki was still hard. And it was beginning to affect him, even as he felt a foreign sensation akin to actual acute embarrassment. Really, the idea that Pepper being Pepper at him might be a contributing factor actually made Tony really, really want to do something like roll his hips back encouragingly to see how the god might react. “Give us half an hour.”

“Tony,” she warned.

“Do you want me to be able to focus?”

Pepper’s eyes narrowed. The look she gave him was unimpressed and irate.

“Fifteen,” Loki offered, with a wink. “He may not remember his own name, for a short while after, however.”

Tony turned his head and shot the trickster a dubious look. “I’m not that easy.”

The god only beamed at him beatifically.

“No really.”

“Trust me.”

Intrigued and challenging, Tony turned an imploring look Pepper’s way.

She might have been a bit flushed, but after clearing her throat, her voice remained quite even as she said, “Fifteen minutes. Twenty, tops, or I’m coming back in.”

“With or without your clothing?” Loki inquired lightly, sounding interested.

Tony made a noise that defied translation.

Pepper’s blush deepened. “Maybe on a special occasion,” she said, still crisp and unflappable. “Nice try, though.” She shut the door quickly.

“You are evil,” the inventor groaned.

“I think you like a bit of evil in your bed,” Loki mused. “And in you.”

Tony licked his lips at the feel of Loki’s fingers pressing into him. “I’m going to guess you were a teenager when you learned the spell for magic lube.”
“And it’s been useful ever since,” the trickster concurred. “As well as this.”

The sensation that followed—slick and improbable and deep and sudden—left the mortal gasping harshly. “Holy shit, holy—just—fuck do that again!”

“Magic is a wonderful thing, is it not, Tony?”

“I’m increasingly f—ffuck—yes, ’s wonderful.”

Loki chuckled and pulled his fingers back, then bit not-reassuringly at Tony’s neck when the inventor whimpered at the loss. Rolling Tony onto his stomach and pulling his hips up, the trickster then pushed into him, rough and fast and good, while his still-slick hand wrapped firmly around the inventor’s cock.

Pliant and writhing a bit shamelessly, Tony tried and failed to catch his breath as the god fucked into him hard and relentless, clever fingers stroking him tight and slick and perfect to unravel him inside and out. “Fuck, Loki, so good, please, oh fuck.”

“Much though I like to take my time with you, do you know how good it is to take you apart like this, as you desperately cling to control even as it melts out of you, Tony?” the god hissed in his ear. “You feel it, don’t you? Slipping away as you take a pounding from a god you once defeated, now at my mercy—what little I may have.”

A groan escaped Tony’s throat. “You have any?” he managed, barely, his voice uneven as his breath came in ragged, shallow gasps.

“I’m merciful enough not to stop and leave you like this, am I not?”

“You’d f-f-fucking better be,” the inventor shot back, even as he shuddered.

“I could leave you this desperate for me to fill,” Loki added, tugging Tony’s hips back harder, changing the angle to strike that little bit deeper. “This hungry, this full of need for release, with no relief.”

“Don’t—mmh—don’t. You. Dare,” the inventor managed. He made a slightly panicked noise when Loki’s hand on his cock slowed, lingering wrapped around the head. Then the trickster murmured something indecipherable against the skin of his shoulder before closing that clever mouth over the spot and sucking hard, speeding up his pace. Tony gave a startled half-scream, because he felt that tongue and suction on his shoulder, but also an identical sensation on the head of his cock, while fingers stroked down his length slow and tight-gripping.

The inventor came so hard he saw stars for a moment. He was dimly aware of Loki following not too long after, but it took him a long moment to recover, his whole body still shaking a little. “Magic. Is cheating,” he said after several long seconds of heavy-breathing once they halted.

“As though you wouldn’t if you could,” Loki chuckled.

“B’side the point. JARVIS? Timer?”

“Nine and a half minutes exactly, sir.”

“Fuck, you’re good,” Tony groaned, and slowly collapsed down onto the mattress again, face-down.

“Your CEO awaits, I believe,” the trickster reminded.
The inventor shot a glare his way. “You. Evil.”

Loki grinned, pliant and sated for the time being. “I was actually inclined to agree last night, with your assessment of my temperament as selfish and chaotic-neutral.”

Tony muttered half-coherent syllables into his sheets, not bothering with actual words when petulant gibberish would suffice; however, he did manage to pry himself out of bed and make his way to the bathroom, smirking a little at the brush of Loki’s fingers along his lower back before he stepped away, and the increasingly familiar prickle of magic across his skin: soothing sore muscles, and banishing uncomfortable stickiness.

There really were far too many perks to bedding a god.

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Five minutes later, Tony emerged from the bedroom to find Pepper on the couch, arguing with someone in rapid-fire French. He smirked a bit appreciatively and leaned against the back of the couch to wait. She eyed him a bit suspiciously, as though expecting to see some obvious outward signs of recent indecencies, but aside from the biting- and suction-inflicted bruising up one side of his neck from last night, the mad inventor was otherwise no worse than usual: Black Sabbath t-shirt, designer jeans, hair artfully mussed rather than rucked up from sleep and recent sexy-times.

She finished her argument with a foreign investor with a few curt demands, and then hung up, cutting off their slightly panicked-sounding reply. “So. Is it imminent alien threat time, or is this a pre-contractual visit?”

“It’s catch-up-on-Earth’s-defenses pre-gaming, as it were.”

“With sex.”

“Yeah, that’s a new addition but, uh, not unwelcome.”

“And he stayed the night?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Well, we might’ve, ah, barely stopped at dawn. More sort of mutually collapsed unable to move, or think very coherently, let alone string words together into tricky things like sensible phrases,” the inventor admitted, rubbing the back of this neck. “And I was sort of hoping to get in another round or two in the morning, with some success, so far.”

“He really got to you in under...” She re-assessed his state of dress and estimated about five minutes of rapid personal grooming. “Ten or eleven minutes?”

Tony cleared his throat. “He’s really good. Really, really good.”

Pepper looked deeply amused. “So I should’ve interrupted you, and been conveniently naked?”

The inventor’s eyes glazed over and he opened his mouth to respond, but no sounds came out. Then they did, and it wasn’t quite coherent: “Urgh... I... words.”

She nodded thoughtfully, blushing only a little. “I wouldn’t, not really, but thank you for the fantasy fodder; I’ll have to take some time to properly appreciate it later.”
“You’re evil too,” Tony all but whimpered.

That caused her to giggle at him outright, and his ensuing frown only exacerbated it further.

“It’s not that funny.”

Wiping the corner of her eye, she sighed, “You’re insane.”

“You knew that before I hired you.”

“At least you were sane enough to eventually make me your boss.” She picked up her tablet and selected a few things. “Electronic signatures, please, and we need to discuss your schedule for the next two weeks. I wouldn’t have dropped in today if I didn’t have a feeling you’d already forgotten about your design consult with S.H.I.E.L.D. and Dr. Connors.”

Already speed-reading the documents, Tony sighed. She was right; he’d forgotten. “Has he still got the, ah...” He gestured at his arm left arm and face with the tablet. “The ‘skin condition’ he said was nothing we should worry about last time?”

“Dr. Connors has gotten rid of the lizard DNA, yes,” Pepper confirmed. “He’s also been working with Selvig, lately, and they seem to get on well.”

Tony tried not to imagine them trading horror stories. It was actually a pretty amusing scene, as it played out in his head. *I have been robbed of my full sentience and reverted to a base animal state by forces I thought I could control, says the lizard-man. That’s cute, boy, but I was enslaved by mind-control to an evil god, and stared into an unholy abyss no mortal should ever witness, and was given grand and horrifying visions by a source of limitless power that warped my psyche. Now, about the layers of this material you’ve created that allows grip on nearly any surface save teflon: how do you prevent inconvenient particulate interference? the Scandinavian physicist would inquire. Well, it’s based on a sort of dynamic hyper-extension, which is why it has to be able to peel up like this to detach. It’s based on the feet of geckos..."

“You’re lost in your head and haven’t heard the last eight things I’ve said,” Pepper sighed suddenly.

“Sorry. Lizards and physicists. You were saying?”

She rolled her eyes, and tapped the tablet. “You’re done signing?”

“Yeah.”

“Then pull up the calendar and you read it off to me, and I’ll tell you the rest.”

“Your ability to force me to pay attention to mundane life details through clever presentational tricks remains a marvel,” he muttered.

“You love it. Now read.”

Reluctantly, he did.

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Loki had vanished by the time Pepper left, which didn’t surprise Tony much in the least, but the god
reappeared with a few bruises and some more organic samples of some strange herbal-mix he’d nicked from somewhere in the ‘Ten Rings’ main stronghold, which he demanded Tony set about making Bruce break down the components of, and recreate if possible. Recreation would turn out tricky, since a few of the compounds were complete unknowns, but seeing their molecular structure and some of their properties later the god of lies would give them ridiculous-sounding names that Tony would claim had to have been made up, but that wasn’t the point. The main point was that the trickster delivered a resource, and they argued a bit over the physics that had to be involved with a reptile of the size and relative mass Loki described being able to shape-shift into a much smaller and less conspicuous (human-like, for instance) shape, and they wound up making out on the couch like teenagers for a long while before Tony flipped the god onto the floor and fucked him less than ten feet from the same spot the Hulk had shattered Loki’s spine a few years before. It had been rough and hot and Tony had scratches and bites all over him the next day, because the trickster hadn’t been about to let them stop at one round.

And then three weeks later when he returned for Bruce’s results and named the unknown compounds, claiming they were mystical, it somehow devolved into Tony being pushed up against glass the god had once thrown him through, being taken with his bare ass visible to anyone within range with a decent set of binoculars because he hadn’t had the breath to ask JARVIS to put the glass on Privacy Mode. He was surprised and almost a little disappointed that no enterprising paparazzi managed to hold out hope against the notorious Stark anti-press-and-unwanted-public-exposure measures and captured some of those pictures for the papers.

It became a pattern. That wasn’t to say that they had sex every single time Loki appeared, which became a frequent enough occurrence on its own, but it was at least 80% of the time. And it was good. Really good. Really, it was a marvel that it took anyone over two months to catch on that something was up.

It started with an Avengers mission that had started out reconnaissance in the stealth suit, flying low through a mountain range looking for a possible Hydra outpost hidden in the area, since it was suspected they’d be opening doors wide to accommodate the arrival of something large being delivered to them by The Hand, and had turned into a near-massacre as whatever was meant to be delivered managed to break out on the delivery bay before the doors quite shut, and it had turned out to be someone not-quite Asgardian who was really really pissed.

Thor—when he’d shown up just ahead of the rest of the cavalry as Tony tried to avoid capture and figure out if the big axe-wielding guy, who was wearing a bit more fur amongst his leather and armor than any Aesir Tony had yet seen, was friend or foe—identified the guy as Skurge. By ‘identify’, Tony meant he’d bellowed it like an accusation and a war-cry and hurled himself at the guy. Chaos had ensued.

As though summoned by it, a figure in green appeared and grabbed Skurge by the scruff of the neck, blasting Thor onto his back briefly with a blast of green-glowing energy. “Open those doors,” Loki snarled, watching his adoptive brother leap back up to his feet and hesitate at the sight of him. “Lie-smith?” the massive alien viking inquired, sounding wary, but not violent.

“Open them, please.”

“Loki! This is not yours to interfere with!” Thor shouted.

The trickster ignored him, watching Skurge pull back one muscled arm and hurl his axe at the heavy doors of Hydra’s outpost. They creaked and bowed as the axe-head pierced them, and stuck fast, the blade landing right in the center where the two heavy steel vault-like doors pressed together, axe
parallel to their seam.

“Bring me my axe, trickster, and those doors will open,” he mocked.

Loki rolled his eyes and waved a hand.

The axe twisted slightly with a sound of screaming metal, then yanked back, pulling the doors open and forcing Thor and Iron Man to step back or be hit by them as they flew by; Loki deflected them with another hand-wave, as Skurge caught his axe and grinned widely, just before he and the trickster god both vanished.

Thor swore impressively just before panicked cries escaped the base and big scary weapons—old tesseract-based ones, the good stuff, to Tony’s chagrin—began shooting at them from the exposed passageway leading down into Hydra’s base.

“C’mon, buddy, we got other fish to fry!” the inventor shouted, tugging sharply at the thunder god’s cape to bring him to one knee for a moment, as a shot passed over him that might have otherwise hit his pretty bearded face.

“Of course,” Thor muttered, grudgingly, but then whirled his hammer and hurled himself through the burst-open doors. A blinding blaze of lightning and a deafening thunder-clap fit to make the earth shake for a hundred yards around, followed shortly after that.

“Tony, Thor seems unusually disturbed, and we’ve lost our lock on the big thing you two were fighting,” Natasha said over the comms. “What just happened?”

“Apparently the big thing’s name is Skurge, and he and Thor might have some violent history, because he doesn’t even go after Loki with quite that bloodthirst,” the inventor recounted. “Speaking of, guess who teleported him who-the-fuck knows where?”

“You’re kidding,” Clint snapped, over the same channel. “What the fuck was he doing out there?”

Tony suspected he might be under some sort of observation, but given Loki also seemed to know Skurge, without the same violent-hate response Thor had, he did actually think it more likely that the trickster might have been keeping an eye out for Skurge, too, lately. “I think he and Skurge aren’t exactly friends, but the big guy liked him way better than me, and I was offering, like, amnesty or something, even while he was trying to cut my face off.”

“No clues where they might have gone?” Cap asked.

“Not a bit. Looks like Thor’s cleared most of the tesseract-based weapons they put near the entrance in anticipation of a siege. I’m going in after Sparky McAngryFace.”

“We’ll be there in five to get your asses out of trouble,” Clint shot back.

“Looking forward to it. You sitting this one out, Bruce?”

“Waiting to see what you find, and if you’re more likely to need medical attention after this than any help from the other guy before it’s over,” the chemist responded.

“Fair enough. Looks like a fifty-fifty shot, so far,” Tony remarked, as he dove into the fray with a whooping cry.

In the end, they did need the other guy, because it turned out that about half a mile under the surface was where they were building their shiny, new, never-before-seen-above-ground Dreadnaughts,
which looked like the Anton Vanko Iron Man rip-offs as re-imagined by the same demented imagination that thought land-and-sea transports that looked like be-tentacled skulls in a sickly green aesthetic were a good idea. They were mean, green, angular, and the masks a bit skeletal somehow in style. They were also as big as Obie’s prototype rip-off had been, too, and a few of them had one or both hands taken up by big drilling-type machinery bit that looked very reliably German-engineered.

“WE NEED SOMEONE MORE ANGRY AND GREEN THAN THESE GUYS!” Tony shouted over the comms, sending images to their backup. Then he began a lot of ducking, rolling, and occasional dragging Thor out of a tricky position by means of the god’s surprisingly sturdy cape.

“Seriously, what’s your cape made of, anyway?”

“No one’s drapes,” Thor shot back, making Tony laugh as he set a uni-beam through two of the heavy metal monstrous parodies of his own sleek, elegant Iron Man perfection. Was he biased? Yes. Was he also angry that they were copying his tech so he didn’t care? Oh, hell yes.

Of course, the Hulk in a subterranean environment, even a pretty sturdy German-engineered one, turned out to be a tricky situation all is own, twenty minutes later.

“ Retreat, retreat!” Tony kept shouting. “No, really, Thor, dammit, come on!” He picked up Natasha and Clint along the way, while Thor managed to grab their star-spangled Captain America, in a mad flight toward the moonlit entryway they’d initially descended from. The Hulk followed them, sounding still enraged, but also a little distressed, almost falling behind. Depositing the assassin and the archer at the entrance, Tony dove back to help him out, despite the Thunder god reaching out to attempt to stop him.

“That’s why I don’t wear a cape!” he snapped over the comms. A short while later, he zoomed just past the Hulk and turned around. “C’mon, I’ve seen you jump before, what’s stopping you, big guy?” He powered up his thrusters, his palms on the green giant’s mid-back.

“Too far.”

“Trust me, okay? Would I be here if it was?”

“You do stupid things sometimes,” the Hulk responded bluntly.

“Yeah, well, I’m helping you with this one.” He gripped just around the big guy’s ribcage, right under the shoulder blades, calculating all the angles in his head. “Now! C’mon!”

The Hulk leapt and Tony engaged thrusters in his boots at full power, pushing the big green body ahead of him, and sending them both flying out of the place a scant fifteen seconds before total collapse.

They landed ten yards from the others, who had wisely scattered away from the entrance to either side, Tony flipping off the Hulk’s back and skidding a bit further before tumbling to a halt, laying sprawled out on his back, breathing hard.

“See? Totally knew what I was doing,” he panted.

The Hulk laughed at him.

Hours later, when they were all showered and most of them had decided to sleep, Tony was still too buzzed with adrenaline and curiosity, and Natasha was still re-adjusting to the time difference after a recent mission on the other side of the world, so they were both drinking coffee in the kitchen at
three in the morning in companionable quiet. Until Natasha got a mischievous look and smirked at him over the edge of her coffee mug.

“Im curious, Tony,” she said.

“About?”

“Well, you’re not bringing any flings around the tower, but you’re here more often than elsewhere most of the time, lately. No one is bringing themselves by, that we’ve seen, and I’d have noticed. You still sleep here, when you do sleep. And yet, those teeth- and suction-marks on your neck haven’t faded over the past few weeks, even the days I was away recently, so much as... migrated.” She sipped her coffee. “So who do I know with the ability to get into the tower without tripping any alarms, or using anything obvious like elevators or helicopters?”

“A lot of people, these days,” Tony muttered. “Seriously, if I weren’t a genius and practically a technomage, I’d start feeling almost inadequate with all the ridiculously super-powered upstarts in the local tri-state area alone.”

“And which one are you sleeping with recently?” she asked, light and playful.

“I’m insulted that your assumption isn’t even plural.” She made an amused sound, but her eyes remained a bit shrewdly assessing. “Teeth marks are so far consistently the same, just slightly relocated. They’re a bit wider than marks Pepper used to leave, and some of them are situated frequently enough near the nape of your neck at angles to suggest to me your lover enjoys topping, and you enjoy him doing it?”

“You’re creepy, I want you to know,” the inventor muttered.

“How long has he been around, Tony?”

“Oh, just a while.”

“Is he any good?”

Clearing his throat, Tony admitted, “Fuck yes, he’s good.”

“You think he’s manipulating you?”

“With sex? Have you met me?”

She laughed a little. “Fair enough.”

“The sex is a fringe benefit. Once the... war bit and alliance bit is over, I won’t be expecting a stab in the back any less because I happen to be a good lay.”

“Good.” She nodded thoughtfully. “I recall overhearing Dr. Foster-”

“Yes. And she’s got nothing to brag about compared to magic, because even when I was fucking fourteen I never recuperated so fast.”

The assassin laughed loud and long, gripping his shoulder for support as he beamed at her smugly. He patted her on the shoulder lightly until she regained her composure.

“Would you share him?” she asked, her tone sultry, but with a wary caution in the way her eyes read his expression.
“With you?” He let his teeth drag along his lower lip as he took her in from head to toe not for the first, and certainly not for the last, time. “I’d die happy.”

She snorted and swatted his hand away from her shoulder, even as she still leaned a bit against his. “You’re a lunatic.”

“I’m brilliant.”

“You’re a brilliant lunatic, but still a lunatic. Just be careful.”

“This isn’t a romance,” Tony offered. “I promise.”

She nodded thoughtfully, but there was a hint of doubt in her expression.

“It takes more than amazing sex to win me over,” he protested.

“I think you’re already in it for more than the sex,” she countered. “Be careful.”

Tony shook his head at her, dismissive and unbelieving. “It’s not like I trust him.”

“Take it from an expert, Tony,” Natasha said softly, “It can be the ones you know well enough to never trust, but enjoy nevertheless, who can get to you when you least expect it. Don’t get yourself killed by him, in the end.” She kissed his cheek, sisterly affectionate and casual, then finished her coffee and strode out, setting her mug in the sink as she went.

The mad inventor considered her warning, and all he’d learned about a certain Bucky Barnes over the past couple of years, and shook his head. It wasn’t like that. Really, it wasn’t.

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Loki reappeared three days later in Tony’s private lab, where the inventor was tweaking one of the more delicate components of a new disruption-field he planned to incorporate into most of his active-use armor.

“Thor says Skurge is an ally to some Asgardian exile?” Tony greeted.

“Yes, Amora. She is an old friend of mine, which is to say that having her owe me favors has always proven to be beneficial, and she knows me fairly well, of old,” Loki replied easily. “She is an enchantress, and has in the past held an unhealthy infatuation, to the point of near-obsession, with Thor.”

“Oh, so his reaction to Skurge was more to do with her than him? ‘Bad touch’ et cetera?” the mad mortal asked lightly, not looking up from his work again, though he was highly aware of the god stalking slowly toward him.

“Yes, quite. Skurge is powerful, but very much in her thrall. He is almost her pet more than her partner, but it suits the pair of them well enough, most of the time. She has changed, with time, though Thor has had little opportunity to notice, aside from the fact her attempts to possess him by trickery and mind control have ceased over the past half-century or so.”

“A favor. She and I have frequent trade in them.”

The inventor looked at him then, and raised an eyebrow. “Is she cute?”

Loki snorted. “She’s lovely enough to behold, but I have always found it difficult to be attracted to people desperate to lay with Thor.”

“Fair enough,” the inventor mused. He didn’t even flinch when the trickster vanished and reappeared close at his right. He did note, with appreciation, that the god was only wearing a black muscle shirt akin to his own, and ridiculously well-tailored black denim jeans.

“Whatever are you making this time?”

Tony grinned, aimed it at him, and fired.

Loki cringed, not with just his face, but his entire body, away from the prickling-electric-ozone sensation/smell that rolled over him like a wave.

“Wow, you were wearing illusions. You’re a bit beat to shit. Why hide it? Not like I haven’t seen you hurt before, at this point.”

The trickster shuddered and shook off the short-term effects of the low-powered blast, the illusions creeping back into place to cover scattered, but deep bruises along the left side of his body and his left arm. “That was deeply unpleasant, and please never attempt that again,” he intoned gravely.

“Not fun?”


“You still didn’t answer my question.”

Meeting his gaze, the god of lies hissed, “I was going to request that you have me over this table as hard as you might manage, and did not wish you to hold back, just knowing that I happened to be slightly injured.”

Tony licked his lips. “I can still do that.”

“First, explain that device in your hands.”

“It nullifies or disrupts magic at close range; that was the lowest setting, mostly good for short shocks that can mess with illusions and some thinner barriers, but can also deflect or even nullify some projectiles if they’re made up of magic or being moved by it.” As he set the device aside, Tony found the trickster suddenly in his face, leaning in close. “Like it?”

“Not at all,” Loki growled, “but your cleverness in designing it? That, I do appreciate.” For emphasis, he rocked his hips against the inventor’s. “Just as I do appreciate a challenge, Mr. Stark.”

Tony smiled, slow and sly. “That’s good. Because I am one.”

It was a long, long night from there.
"Rhodey tried to put his brain in order. He sent Tony a simple text: You’re royally screwed. Not just because the god in question is a prince, either. You should also tell Pepper."

The war Loki has been waiting for arrives on the horizon, and the preparations accelerate in earnest. The moon of Titan, the Kree, and others are made aware of the sound of war-drums, and encouraged to unite, if only for a while, or fall.

Thor embraces doubt. Tony Stark is acutely uncomfortable with the idea of time limits.

Somehow, over four months of sex, strategizing and snark later, it got to the point that going three weeks without finding Loki somewhere in the penthouse became a worrying thing. It dawned on Tony that he might accidentally be in a relationship when he realized that was what was really bothering him one particular night, and just why he’d been silently plotting how to make Loki carry a cellphone for the past hour.

For that past hour, a very attractive redhead at his birthday party had been first eyeing him from across the room, then flirting more directly by sitting with him at the bar. She was now asking if he wanted to go somewhere and Tony had politely declined, and then realized, as she walked away, that it was the third time he’d done this all night: turned down pretty women who wanted to have sex with him. He hadn’t even given it much thought, and really, this woman was stunning and why exactly was he turning her down? Why had he turned any of them down? How long had this been happening?

The results of further retrospective analysis revealed he wasn’t even quite sure when this started. He couldn’t remember. It had been a thing for that long. Months: at least three of them.

That was when Tony had a small crisis somewhere in his brain, and once able to slip free of the party twenty minutes later, to hide out on a small unoccupied balcony. From there, he called Rhodey.

“Tony, I’m at your party here, and you are too; why are you calling me?”

“How long have I been accidentally monogamous?” the inventor asked, sounding deadly serious.

“...What?”

“Look, I’m on the balcony. I have been turning women down politely all evening. I’m looking back over about a month or two, maybe three, and I’m disturbed by the pattern I am seeing here. How long has this been a thing?”

“I thought you’d just gotten picky, or something, or Pepper had come up with a threat that actually worked to keep you at a party until such time it was actually polite or appropriate to leave. You really haven’t slept with anyone?”

“One... person,” Tony admitted hesitantly.
“Have I met this person?”

“Not really, no. You know him, though.”

“Wow, when was the last time you actually dated a guy? Fifteen years ago?”

“Not the point.”

“Well, I mean, Pepper is still the record-holder, but you’d had relationships with a few women before that which actually lasted at least a couple weeks, maybe a month or so, but I can barely remember the last time you actually got hung up on a guy.”

“I can’t believe that’s your focus right now.”

“I’m trying to figure out what makes him a stand-out, here without asking directly. Please no details I can never un-know,” Rhodey said from the doorway to the balcony, which he then closed behind him and ended the call on his phone before dropping it back into his pocket.

Tony pocketed his own, too and ran a hand through his hair nervously. “Seriously, this is not a thing that should be happening.”

“Why not?”

“All of the reasons, Rhody. This is even me admitting this would be a bad decision, and I seem to have made it without noticing, and I am maybe a little freaked out,” Tony snapped out, rapid-fire.

“Slow down, man. Who is this guy?”

The inventor sighed. “Uh. So. Loki, god of lies and mischief.”

Rhodey shot him a slightly pained look. “How... why.... Tony, oh my god, only you would wind up in this situation.”

“It’s—complicated? I may have accidentally cornered him into swearing he’d be my ally against a particular threat coming up within about the next half-year now, and that was over two years ago after the battle over New York, and alliance with him was better than any other alternatives I could come up with, to the point I might have threatened to ally with the big threat guy against Asgard and him if he didn’t agree, but then he started showing up at my house recently, and we talk strategy and insult each other, and be brilliant a bit at each other, and sometimes he hides there when he’s gotten badly injured, and at some point early on after he started showing up we wound up having sex a lot, fairly often.”

Slowly, Rhodey stepped up to him, blinking a few times like he was staring into a small sun that was fueled entirely by poor life choices. “You’re an insane man.”

“Yes, but you love me and help me anyway,” Tony pled.

“Ugh.” The darker man ran a hand over his face. “It’s just—he shows up, like... regularly?”

“Irregularly. When he needs something, or he found something that might affect politics or our resources and combat options as a planet. And the time he told me the Ten Rings wasn’t actually dead.”

Rhodey’s eyes widened. “Everyone says you discovered that. Like, you did it yourself, like-”

“I know! Because it’s believable and telling them it’s intel from Loki would not win over anyone’s
trust, and Loki doesn’t want them knowing where he’s snooping around these days anyway.”

“So he... helps.”

“Usually with things related to anti-Thanos plans, or with relationships between mutual enemies and allies that could potentially fuck things up for us when we need to be able to rely on the people in question not to fuck up... he’s actually really good at this ally thing.”

“You like him,” Rhodey said flatly. It was not even a question.

“I... don’t... not like him?”

That earned him a ‘no really, cut the bullshit’ stare.

“If I didn’t like him, do you really think I’d be having these problems?” Tony sighed, full of exasperation, mostly aimed at himself. “He’s tall, dark, and gorgeous, a bit mentally unstable but still pretty much a genius to the point he can keep up with me and surprise me, and he’s really good in bed—like just fucking astonishingly good, and creative, and his tongue, just-”

“No details,” the soldier reminded.

“Fine, fine.”

“Do you actually want anyone else?”


Rhodey stepped closer, taking in his expression. “Do you regret turning anyone down tonight that you turned down?”

“There was one redhead that just—damn, she’s incredibly gorgeous, but I... I don’t actually want to retract that denial?”

“He must be really damn good.”

“Also MIA for almost four weeks, now,” Tony muttered. “I’d think... is there an expiration period for this accidental monogamy thing?”

“Or is it that the longer he’s gone, the more sure you are that he’ll reappear at the most awkward possible time?”

“Yyyyyah, that’s probably an added subconscious factor.”

Rhodey snorted, amused. “So you’re not in love with him, though?”

Tony opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out. He closed it, swallowed tightly, and tried again. “I don’t think it’s an option. This whole arrangement is temporary, Rhodey, and dependent on one particular threat being taken out by him and the Avengers both.”

“You think, after that, he won’t be dropping by anymore?”

“It would be more risk for him than gain? Even after he helps us, once Thanos is dead, it’ll be open season for Asgard to try and recapture him again, and he’ll probably have offended some of the Avengers’ enemies around here on earth too, knowing him, and his tendency to get a real kick out of tricking one enemy into destroying another of his enemies for him whenever possible. And I’m... fuck, I hate thinking about this, but I’m kind of mortal, Rhodey. I’m barely a blip on the radar, and
he’s been around for thousands of years, and if I were him, I’d make a real point of not getting attached to anyone mortal and fragile and temporary. I’ve seen that he considers that the wiser policy based on how dismissive he is of Thor’s thing with Dr. Foster, too. It’s not—he’s not as much of an optimist as Thor, for that.”

Folding his arms across his chest, Rhodey looked at his old friend’s expression for a long few seconds. “You’re already in deep shit, then, because you’re attached.”

Tony swore and strode away a few steps before turning on his heel and pacing back to face the soldier. “Really? I’m that bad right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit.” The inventor scrubbed a hand over his face. “I need a large drink.”

“You need to sit down.”

“I’m not—” Tony started, then realized his hand was shaking. “Oh. Okay, then.” He let Rhodey lead him over to the single table and two chairs on the balcony. He sat.

Rhodey moved to the other chair, and also sat down, watching his friend closely. “This is really freaking you out.”

“Yeah, a bit. I don’t even know how this... how I managed to miss this?”

“Have you considered trying to keep him?”

A shaky laugh. “You’re serious?” He looked sharply at his friend and his bitter humor dropped, transformed into utter disbelief. “You’re serious.”

“When have you ever refrained from taking something you want?”

“I’m not sure how much I want this. It’s still new. I still...” He gestured vaguely, unsure how to finish the sentence. “He’s still crazy and a bit evil and I don’t know if I trust him beyond—beyond his keeping his word because he has to, being what he is.”

Rhodey nodded. “I guess that’s fair.”

“I might want to,” Tony muttered, “but I really can’t. That’s—I can’t force that, I can’t get past it. I do really enjoy him, but once this whole thing is over, I’ll be waiting for a knife in the back. I strong-armed him into this alliance thing with clever threats, and I don’t know how much that means to his pride, and he can’t kill me yet, but I don’t know how that’ll change once this is all over. So no, I can’t try to... to hold onto something when the only reason I feel comfortable with what I already have of it is due to a promise with an expiration date.”

“That’s actually not bad decision-making. I’m proud of you.”

“Being a grown-up sucks,” Tony muttered.

They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes, staring out over the edge of the balcony. Tony faintly heard footsteps—clicking high-heels, the sound both authoritative and a bit sexy—approaching the door to the balcony before it slid open. “Mr. Stark?” called a low, smoky female voice with a familiar accent.

Tony turned to look and just stared for a long moment. “I retract my last statement,” he muttered to
Rhodey, then grinned, open and fierce. “Well, look at you.”

Rhodey was staring a bit too.

The woman in the doorway was tall, with high cheekbones and long black hair spilling around her mostly-bare shoulders. The dress she wore was dark green, fading to darker still such that the tip of the asymmetrical hem seemed to be black, with traces of fine gold embroidery. She was all dangerous curves and her green eyes danced with amusement and mischief.

“Rhodey, this is Loki,” Tony introduced casually, “Loki, this is my dear friend Colonel James Rhodes.”

Loki strode onto the balcony toward them, standing at their table with her body angled only a bit toward Tony as she proffered a hand to the inventor’s friend. “Charming to meet you, Colonel.”

“You too, I think,” Rhodey said, sounding deeply conflicted.

“I’m inclined to take Tony from you now,” the god said smoothly.

“You do that. Tony, don’t die.”

“Your confidence in me never fails to warm my shriveled little black heart,” Tony shot back, rising to his feet and taking in Loki’s chosen disguise from the new angle, and gaining even more appreciation for those immaculate-looking breasts in the process. “You look good.”

“Happy birthday,” she offered, and took his hand. “Now dance with me to make one last appearance for your guests before I abscond with you altogether.”

Head spinning a bit, Tony nodded and followed where she led.

Watching the door swing shut behind them, Rhodey tried to put his brain in order. He sent Tony a simple text: You’re royally screwed. Not just because the god in question is a prince, either. You should also tell Pepper.

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Tony was royally screwed.

He knew that, as soon as he noticed some of the looks they were getting as they danced, and felt a possessive urge to bring the trickster closer to him, and didn’t resist it in the least. Loki smirked up at him with different lips, but the same wicked curve, and wasn’t that a distracting thought.

“You dance surprisingly well for someone not exactly from this planet.”

“It’s a simple enough art.”

“I’m surprised you wanted to.”

“I prefer to show off before stealing the center of everyone’s attention. It adds savor to the act of theft.”

Tony shook his head, still smiling. “You’re enjoying that idea.”
“All eyes are on you here, and some of them upon me, and without registering the danger you’re
dancing with. Tell me that doesn’t have a certain appeal.”

“It does,” the inventor murmured.

“And you’re enjoying the view.”

“Your breasts are really, really nice.”

“Thinking about getting acquainted with them?”

Of course he was, but Tony had already run a quick comparison in his head: the lady in front of him,
pressed against him a little, versus the trickster’s elegant male form. “I might like to. I’d be interested
to see you come, like this.” His hand trailed down her spine, enjoying her dress’ open back. “But
then I think I’d like you to fuck me as yourself,” he mused airily.

Loki’s eyes widened only a little, pupils visibly dilating. She gave a purring, satisfied hum. “I like the
sound of this plan.”

The song ended, and Tony pulled them slowly off the dance floor. “Then abscond with me, Loki.”

The trickster laughed, low and thoughtful, and led him around a corner before vanishing them both
away from the party.

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The next day, Pepper dragged him out to lunch.

“Rhodey says you have a problem. Another one. Details?” she asked, as she examined the sushi
menu.

“You know about the alliance thing with Loki I arranged after the battle over New York and that
first invasion and all?”

She nodded. “I do remember, yeah. I also recall he arrived a bit early for ‘pre-game’ strategic
assessments. And a thorough appraisal of your everything.” She looked him up and down pointedly.

“Yeah. That. He, uh, really did just start showing up like that about four months ago. We’ve been
working out a strategic map of Earth, listing and mapping out the strengths and weaknesses of all our
available enemies and allies, and trying to keep the people-managing sides in line while also making
preparations technological and otherwise.” Tony shrugged. “Early, yeah, but he’s been waiting for
this vengeance thing over two years already. I think he’s getting a little impatient. Also paranoid.”

“I’m not seeing the problem quite yet.”

“Well you knew I’d slept with him, and I think you’re aware it was more than once, even,” Tony
added. “It’s, ah, continued since then. We talk, we strategize, and we have sex. Kind of a lot of
really, really great sex.”

“That sounds closer.”

“He’s usually around once, twice a month at the least, but sometimes he’s there for a few days at a
time, or one day a week for a bit. And uh, I might have accidentally started being monogamous after
the first month, but I didn’t really notice until last night. I might have freaked out at Rhodey about the
realization.”

A long silence followed.

“Only you, Tony,” Pepper sighed.

“Rhodey also said that, once I admitted it was Loki.”

She gave an amused hum at that.

“You’re taking the news better, actually.”

“You’re not actively freaking out just now, so I’m thinking you’ve come to terms with it a bit more,
or you have more to tell me, or both.”

“I might be—slightly infatuated, but also still don’t trust him not to possibly stab me in the back once
our deal’s time runs out?”

“Ah, that’d do it,” Pepper mused. “That, I think, you’re still quietly freaked out about?”

Tony nodded with a self-deprecating sigh.

“And you don’t think he’s infatuated with you at all?”

“I—honestly have no idea.”

“Not even a little?”

“If there are hints, I can’t work out if they’re actual hints, or if I’m—seeing something I don’t want to
think that I want to see, but that I’m not able to lie to myself quite sufficiently enough to pretend
otherwise.”

“At your party, the woman people saw you leave with—”

“That, uh, that was him.”

Pepper’s eyebrows raised.

“He’s a shape-shifter. It’s a thing.”

“Does he—usually...”

Tony shook his head. “That’s actually the first time I’ve done anything involving him not—not just
the way he is, and that didn’t last long before he changed back, which was... how I spent the rest of
the night occupied.” His helpless smirk indicated that it had indeed been a night well spent.

“Dr. Foster really wasn’t exaggerating?”

“And he has magic that puts me on par, recuperation-wise.”

Pepper gave a low whistle. “Wow.”

A waiter dropped by and they paused to order, then handed him their menus and watched him
wander away.
“If he hurts you too badly, I’ll kill him,” Pepper said.

Tony smiled faintly. “Thanks, Pep.”

“You think he’s going to?”

“I don’t know. I really, really don’t know.”

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Just over a month and a half later, Loki showed up in the middle of an Avengers meeting. He was blue, and wreathed in cold that soon filled the room. “With aid of the first of the Three of Nifleheim, Hel has detected Thanos’ fleet,” he said gravely, by way of greeting.

“Well shit,” Clint said succinctly.

“Agreed,” Thor added.

Tony could see the tension coiling in every muscle of the trickster’s body and stood up to stride over to him, ignoring the murmur of questioning from the other Avengers. He halted only once he stood in front of Loki, placing himself between the rest of the room’s occupants and the trickster. He gave the god of lies a thorough once-over and cocked his head with a tight, fighting smile. *I like it,* was strongly implied. “How much time do we have?”

“Just over six weeks, if they maintain their current velocity,” Loki responded. “They have been difficult to detect because they are portal-jumping large swathes of distance: no portals quite so far apart as I was from the tesseract when I returned to Earth, but a bit longer than I had anticipated they might be able to support.”

“How many, how big and how armed?”

“Ships on par, so far as size, with those you glimpsed at the heart of the Chitauri armada: thirteen of them. It is not easy to determine what weapons they carry with them, but I have little doubt that they would be wise enough to have smaller, more maneuverable vessels intended for release here, as well as infantry. He has brought most of his available forces and left very little behind.”

“Why are you blue?” asked Clint suddenly.

“I have just returned here from the frozen country of Nifleheim. The cold brings out my more icy Jotunn aspects,” Loki explained sharply, noticeably not even glancing in Thor’s direction. “Have you heard from the Kree on attempts to bring about a meeting with any of the Titans?” he then asked Tony.

“Mar-Vell couldn’t get any of his people to quite cooperate without them making too many demands of concessions from Earth, so he’s gone himself to talk to them about Thanos. We can reach out to him as soon as you like, to see if he’s had any luck.”

“I will take you there myself if need be,” Loki murmured. “You and I, surely, could make them see... reason.” His smile was wide and sly.

“We’ll keep that as plan B, or plan A if Mar-Vell has already got them to agree to at least meet with
us. That should be all we need.”

“You really think you can just talk them around?” Steve asked cautiously.

Tony turned partially to shoot the captain an offended look. “Have you met us? This is what we both do really, really well.”

“How long have you been working together on pre-game plans?” Natasha asked, lightly curious.

“Oh, a few months,” Tony conceded.

“Of course,” Bruce muttered.

“About six maybe?” the assassin suggested.

“If this is about the doom-bot head-” Tony started.

“Not quite, no.” Her smile was a bit sweet and a bit poisonous. “Moving on: ships?”

“Titan won’t like the idea of his sudden return, heavily armed and intent on conquest, to this star system,” Loki said. “I would not like to rely entirely upon them, particularly because once Thanos sees he cannot have all that he sought to conquer, he will do what he has always had a history of doing: take any and all means available to him to increase the body count and leave a wake of horror and destruction into which he can either vanish under, or use somehow to escape capture. He would aim right at the earth for that, and the Titans will not be able to keep track of all of his smaller vessels once they are out, let alone contain them.”

“So we need the skies made dangerous around here,” Tony suggested. “We can do that pretty well.”

“I have little doubt. Thanos will, however, not underestimate that. He will not count on staying too long in the air, just knowing that Thor and the Avengers protect this world, which also further implies that Asgard would lend further support.”

“Will he be expecting you?” Natasha inquired.

The trickster’s eyes fixed on her and he offered a slow, ferocious grin fit to make wolves cower. “He will not expect me to have any I might call allies, and he will not expect Asgard to have sent the likes of myself to your aid. Do recall that his death is for me to savor.”

“You are certain you can overpower him alone, Loki?” Thor asked, his voice hard and cold. “He is stronger than I.”

“So, Thor, am I,” the trickster mused. “Without my magic, you defeat me. With all my power, you required the aid of all the others gathered here to bring me down.”

“You had an army, then,” Bruce pointed out.

“And he had you,” Loki shot back.

Tony chuckled a little. “I did warn you.”

Bruce only offered a self-deprecating smirk and a concessionary nod.

“Sounds like we need to call up Mar-Vell,” Steve said.

The trickster gave a sharp nod. “Agreed.”
“Loki, dude, can you uh... warm up a bit? I’m not wearing sleeves,” Clint asked lightly. “You’re sort of freezing the room.”

Loki half-smirked and tilted his head back almost thoughtfully.

Tony watched the blue slowly fade back to Loki’s more usual pale, felt the air become a bit less like standing in Antarctica, though it didn’t return to room temperature. Seeing the blue drain away, and the red leave Loki’s eyes, and the faint ghost of the symmetrical designs along the trickster’s skin linger and then vanish, Tony might have flushed just slightly, especially when Loki smirked wickedly upon seeing the way the inventor’s tongue darted out to wet his lips. The trickster raised an eyebrow curiously, in silent inquiry.

“I like it, is all,” Tony muttered, a bit too quiet for the others to hear.

With an almost-imperceptible little nod, Loki dropped the subject returned his stare to the archer.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks. Still pretty chill, though.”

“JARVIS,” Tony called. “Reach out to Mar-Vell’s communicator. If he answers, project to holo-display in the middle of the table.” He tugged at the two nearest empty chairs, offering one to Loki, who nodded and took the offered seat. Tony settled next to him and soon, as he’d hoped it would, the holo-display came up, displaying Mar-Vell’s grim face and equally grim expression.

“Greetings... Avengers,” the Kree said, though his feed primarily showed Tony and Loki, with smaller views at the bottom of the rest of the people around the table watching him. “And this is... Loki?”

Tony nodded. “Yep. He just put us at six weeks, give or take, before Thanos gets here.” He realized that meant only about six more weeks of... whatever it was he and Loki were doing, but shoved that thought aside quickly. “How’s things?”

“They are... reluctant to take me at my word, and doubtful that earth has foreknowledge of something like the arrival of Thanos, when they have heard no similar things, nor can they detect his presence anywhere near this star system.”

“So they’re pushing back the whole meeting idea?” Tony asked lightly.

“They are... reluctant to become involved with the Earth.”

“We’re not looking to open up long-term relationships here,” the inventor said. “I don’t want their advanced tech making my job more difficult on this planet, and I’m not offering them any trade. This is their problem, a mess they banished and didn’t take care of properly since then despite his meriting execution by their own laws, according to Loki here, and all I want is for them to help prevent Earth getting actually destroyed by it,” the inventor said slowly, letting the phrasing sink in.

Mar-Vell nodded, as though about to tell him that he’d communicate as much to them, but then looked between Tony Stark and the god of mischief pointedly. “Can you transport him here, Asgardian?”

“I very well can. If they are hostile toward us, however, the Titans are indeed powerful enough to prevent me leaving, or do us both great harm,” Loki pointed out. “It would be best that they have some warning, if only a little. How well-informed are they, regarding my criminal status in Asgard?”

“They, uh, know of you around here but little, from what I have been able to tell. I have mentioned
your name off-handedly as a mage known to earth. They seem to know that you are no longer favored by Asgard, but I do not think they know to what extent. If they are aware that you are convicted of war-crimes, no one has blinked at the thought of your aiding anyone from earth regardless,” Mar-Vell explained.

The trickster gave a thoughtful hum. “If they will not take the word of Earth’s mightiest, perhaps they will bend their ears to gods inclined to show them what fools they are. Inform them that Thor the thunderer, Prince of Asgard, wishes to meet with them on this matter, accompanied by trusted emissaries of Earth, Asgard, and Nifleheim. Make sure they agree to let him bring at least two with him.”

Mar-Vell half-smiled. “I understand why no one wishes to get rid of you permanently, I think.”

“I’ve barely begun,” Loki assured.

“I will contact you all again, once I have word from their King. Are you familiar with A’Lars and Kronos, Loki?”

“I met A’Lars long ago, and studied under him for a time; however, Kronos’ consciousness had not yet come to reside there yet.”

“You studied under Mentor?” Thor asked.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Yes, Thor, I did. I traveled far more than you ever seem to recall,” he sighed, mildly exasperated.

The Kree gave a thoughtful nod to both Loki’s answer and the exchange with Thor. “Shall I tell Mentor you are one whom he might expect Thor to bring?”

The trickster’s eyes narrowed a little, thoughtful.

“If anyone would have heard from Odin or anyone else about you lately, it’d probably be their king,” Tony pointed out quietly.

Loki nodded. “Let me be a surprise, Mar-Vell.”

“As you see fit,” the Kree agreed, looking at Tony and the other Avengers as he said it, rather than the trickster. Seeing mostly approval or indifference, he inclined his head. “I will see you again soon.”

The feed cut out.

A long pause followed.

“I still hate you, but I’m kind of glad you’re not actively against us right now,” Clint admitted dryly.

“Thank you, Agent Barton.”

“Is there any way we can try to force him to land somewhere in particular, when he inevitably lands?” Steve asked. “If we know where the fight will be, and choose our own location, we’ll have a stronger advantage.”

“Maybe if we seemed to have something he wanted,” Tony mused.

“How would we make him aware of it without giving up the game, though?” Bruce mused, sounding thoughtful but wary.
“Difficult to arrange. Not impossible, but I wouldn’t envy anyone carrying out such a task,” Loki suggested. “There must be some easier means.”

“How many people do we know who can fly and probably deflect a space-ship about the side of a cruise ship somewhere around the stratosphere, and disable its engines sufficiently to render its propulsion useless, you think?” Tony mused.

“You, Thor, John and Sue Storm, Carol Danvers, possibly Jean Grey of the X-men if their jet can bring her within range and keep her there long enough to use it, though Magneto would be more efficient if we could persuade him to cooperate, which he has been known to do in case of global threats from outside,” Natasha began to list.

“I can contact him,” Loki concurred.

“Scarlet Witch maybe, particularly if she brings extra firepower, which you can likely help with, Stark,” Natasha continued.

“I could be persuaded. I could lend her a suit if it came down to it.”

“If we can get enough people spread far enough apart, and a monitoring system set up as a trip-alert, we can cover the globe,” Tony said. “Assign a certain area to a pair capable of taking down a ship, and any that hit that sector’s airspace should be taken down, aimed somewhere not very populated. We’d have to map it out based on the abilities and limits of each pair, but it could work. I think we have enough people, especially if we bring S.H.I.E.L.D. in on the plan and use them to cover some trickier places, like the Pacific Ocean.”

“There are island gods which can protect a sizeable portion of the island chains in the Pacific, given fore-warning,” Loki added. “I have already established contact with them.”

“Nice,” Tony complimented.

Loki offered a faint smirk. “A comprehensive list of contacts and a coverage map for them will need to be worked out, of course. JARVIS? Please collect statistics on all known heroes and persuadable villains who might stop a vessel in the manner Tony outlined, along with the geographic regions they are familiar and comfortable with.”

“Yes, Mr. Lie-Smith. I take it you would like S.H.I.E.L.D. classified data included?”

“Of course, thank you.”

“Months,” Steve sighed. “You didn’t think to mention all this to us, Tony?”

“See, that’s the disappointed face that is the reason I didn’t mention it,” the inventor accused, pointing a finger at Steve.

“It is indeed effective, it seems,” Loki observed.

“What exactly have you two been up to?” Clint asked.

“Mapping out the planet’s various strengths and weaknesses, stabilizing weak or potentially unstable relationships between probable allies, destabilizing weak points of potentially interfering or irritating enemies, discussing magic and science to the point I feel less like he’s breaking physics all the time, magic-proofing my armor, having sex, finding out about a dragon possessed by the Ten Rings that’s also actually an alien, and generally being brilliant,” Tony shot off, words falling together so quickly they almost blurred enough for the others not to catch quite all of.
Almost. But not quite.

“Uh... I think I heard part of that wrong,” Steve said slowly.

“You didn’t,” Natasha said. “I suspected.”

“How?” Clint asked her. Then looked at Tony and the trickster, “Also, while I do not want the how, there, especially not details, but uh... I just... what?”

“Tony hasn’t been sleeping around for months now,” the spy offered simply. “About five months, at the least, possibly a bit longer. I only noticed five months ago.”

Tony very deliberately didn’t glance at the Trickster. He also ignored the sensation of the skin on the back of his neck and his ears feeling warm, trying not to wonder if they visibly pinked at all. “I’ve been busy.”

“Apparently.” She sounded amused.

“Loki,” Thor said, low and warning, full of threat and suspicion.

“I did nothing without his enthusiastic consent, Thor,” Loki shot back.

Steve shut his eyes and grimaced at ‘enthusiastic’ and muttered softly, “Things I did not ever need to know.”

Ignoring him, and indeed talking over him a bit, Loki continued, “Also, while my intentions are impure, they are not actually treacherous. They could not be, given the promises I have made, if you might care to recall.”

The thunder god held his adoptive brother’s stare for a long few moments. The trickster stared right back, unflinching, and a bit bitterly amused. “You were wise, Tony, not to inform me of his presence in your home.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured. Lay off, big guy, I can handle myself, and this isn’t about anyone else here save us two consenting adults,” He gestured between himself and Loki. “And yeah, I’m not stopping while he’s still willing, and especially not when I think I’ll be needing all the stress relief I can get in the coming weeks anyhow. Capisce?”

Thor looked at the inventor a bit sharply, warily, but nodded. “My apologies.”

“Good. Let’s move on-”

“Wait, are you two actually dating?” Clint cut in.

Tony rolled his eyes, with an exasperated exhalation escaping his lips.

“I am a god, Barton,” Loki intoned dryly. “Do I look like I date?”

“We argue, we strategize, we theorize and analyze, and frequently we also fuck; that’s just how we roll,” Tony concurred, with a casual shrug.

“I am somehow not actually all that surprised,” Bruce muttered.

“See, Clint? This is why Bruce is my favorite instead of you,” Tony chided.

“You’re an asshole, Stark,” Barton shot back. “And really, just, fucking insane.”
“My insanity is working toward your planet’s benefit at present, so I would think you a bit less squeamish about it,” Loki riposted.

The archer shot the trickster a look even as he gave a half-laugh despite himself. “Alright, that was a fair shot.”

Loki inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgement.

“Anyway—” Tony started.

“Sir, Captain Mar-Vell is calling,” JARVIS interrupted.

“That was what, twenty-five minutes? We must’ve caught him while he was at the palace,” Tony mused. ‘Fuckin’ handy. Bring him on.”

The display came back up. “It seems that you are remembered fondly, Loki,” Mar-Vell started off. “No sooner did I mention Thor than did he ask if you might also arrive. I advised him that I would have to ask, but Thor and up to three companions are now welcome, and expected, here.”

Loki smiled a bit, sincerely pleased. “He is well?”

“As far as I can tell, yes.”

“It will be good to see him again, then.”

Thor rose to his feet. “You plan to bring Anthony, brother?”

“He is the one I’m the ally of, so yes,” Loki shot back, cool and unperturbed. He looked over the rest of the Avengers. “Do any of you wish to go along?”

“Steve should,” Natasha said. “He’s good at this sort of thing.”

“She means he’s more likable than me,” Tony stage-whispered.

“Well, it’s true,” Clint added.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” the inventor admitted, standing up when Loki did. He barely even blinked when a snap of the god’s fingers summoned one of his better suits, from the tailor Loki also happened to be fond of, along with a fresh shirt and red-and-gold tie.

“I, uh, think I’m fine going casual, right?” Steve said quickly. He wore black slacks and a pale red button-down shirt, with his old brown leather jacket.

“It suits your personality, in any case, and they hardly know what constitutes formal fashions on this planet regardless,” Loki admitted.

“Then why did you—”

“I like the look of him in it,” the trickster interrupted, then gestured to he and Thor to move closer to him. As they approached, he fixed his stare on Mar-Vell. “I’m going to get a fix on your location, and you may be slightly uncomfortable for a moment. Please state your name.”

“Mar-Vell,” he said clearly.

“Now say mine,” Loki requested.
“Loki,” it came out slightly strange and he coughed. “That... was uncomfortable.”

“Yes, but now I can teleport to where you are.”

“See you soon, then?” Mar-Vell asked.

Loki, Thor, Steve and Tony vanished from the screen.

They then reappeared just to the Kree’s left, in the mostly-empty guest chamber.

“Quite,” Loki confirmed.

Steve shook his head a bit to clear it. “That... was a ride.”

“Isn’t it kinda fun?” Tony asked.

Steve shot him a look that suggested he was deeply questioning both the inventor’s sanity, and his concept of what the word ‘fun’ actually meant.

“They seem to have arrived safely,” Mar-Vell said into his communicator. Natasha and Bruce now occupied most of the screen, with Clint peering over their shoulders.

“Good luck, boys. Fuck up and I’ll murder you in your sleep,” Natasha promised.

“Thanks, Nat,” Tony called.

The feed closed, and Mar-Vell turned to face them, stepping closer. “You do indeed look well.” He nodded to Thor and Steve, then paused on Tony. “I was not aware you could change clothes so quickly, Stark.”

“Magic,” the inventor deadpanned. Then he jerked his thumb at Loki. “His.”

Mar-Vell extended a hand toward the god. “Nice to meet you in person.”

“You too, Mar-Vell. I have heard much of you.” He shook the Kree’s hand politely.

“More flattering that what I’ve heard about you, I hope?”

“Well, perhaps we can mutually hope to share differing opinions of what constitutes flattery,” Loki offered, his tone droll.

The Kree laughed a little. “To the throne room, then.”

“Oh, before I forget,” Loki added, “Anthony, Captain Rogers, you may wish to know that the king here is Thanos’ father. He was banished in no small part because he tried to take over this moon-colony and in the process killed many, including his own mother.”

“You didn’t think to mention this earlier?” Tony inquired.

“It had honestly slipped my mind. They could not be more different men.”

“This much is true,” Thor agreed. “And you do remember your teachers fondly enough to forget some of their low points.”

“I consider it respectful not to dwell on them,” the trickster insisted.

Thor half-smiled in a bitter, hesitant and amused sort of way, like he wasn’t sure how to respond to
quite such an old and familiar argument, and Loki’s equally familiar candid response.

“Now that we’re all appraised,” Mar-Vell said. “Shall we?”

The trickster nodded and gestured for him to lead the way.

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Tony took in the style of the columns and pillars and wide balconies along the halls they passed, and quietly concluded that if, on earth, 50’s films *Metropolis*-style futurism had sex with victorian neo-gothic, the results wouldn’t be too vastly different from the decor he was seeing right now.

What Titans they did see around wore clothes with a little more cloth than metal, but otherwise a little more reminiscent of Asgard than of earth in overall style, making them seem like retro-futuristic Edwardian actors off to perform a version of Shakespeare with an unearthy moonscape back-drop, to Tony’s earth-pop-culture-saturated eyes. The doors to the main throne room were, as expected, tall and ostentatious. “What is it with places ruled by absolute monarchs and really tall ominous doors?” he muttered.

Steve shushed him.

Loki responded, “They appropriately humble the easily impressed.”

The captain looked like he wanted to try to shush Loki, but couldn’t while the god was staring at him with such intent, smiling challenge, as though daring him to.

Mar-Vell caught sight of it and visibly struggled not to laugh. “Come along.” He led them into the chamber, as the king stood from his throne and strode out to meet them. He was tall, with sleek white hair and kind dark eyes. His smile made Tony think of Burt Reynolds a bit, despite the lack of mustache framing it. “Ah, Loki, you have seen fit to accompany your brother.”

Loki’s smile was warm as he stepped forward and clasped the king’s forearm, while the king clasped his. “I am here for more reason than that, dear Mentor; although it is good to see you well.” He turned then, and gestured as he introduced, “You know Thor, already, but these men accompanying us are his brothers in arms when he is in Midgard, and fine warriors both. Anthony Stark, and Steve Rogers, meet A’Lars, ruler of Titan. A’Lars, Anthony is an ally of mine in these recent matters concerning your son.”

A’Lars mirth went out like a candle in the wind. “There is truth, then, to talk of his return to this system?”

“I, A’Lars, am the very source of it. I fell through the void created recently in the wake of Asgard’s over-loaded bi-frost shattering, and I fell very far, through many places no sentient and sane creature should have to experience, and I landed near his colonies. They caught me, and I was treated as their experiment until they learned all they could of my biology, and only then asked my name. Thanos is allied with a brilliant yet mad fool who can hardly remember his own name, I think, so long has he stared into the wrong places out there, so that he only calls himself the Other, and they are not a duo I would wish on anyone living, save their own selves.”

“How did you return, without him able to follow?”
“A trinket of Odin’s, a variety of cosmic cube residing on earth, caught Thanos’ attention. It burnt up most of my magic and some more power than even that to do it, but I knew the tesseract well, and it knew me, and I used it to bring myself to it,” Loki explained quietly. “I had persuaded Thanos that I would give it to him, in exchange for the earth. Then I arranged the invasion as inconveniently as possible, for the army that he sent, and these warriors of earth were among those who destroyed them all, along with Thor.” He gestured again toward them.

“We are safer, away from the earth. The Kree trade with us on an understanding that neither of us interfere with the earth any further,” A’Lars said firmly. “And that understanding also keeps direct action from the Skrulls at bay, knowing they cannot take both Titan and their more usual foes.”

“I am aware,” Loki assured. “We do not ask you to stand and fight with Earth as though it is yours to protect; we ask this because the threat approaching this system is yours. Thanos is coming with a large fleet, and he will destroy your peace and become threat to Kree and Titan forces both if he takes them to the earth. You need not so much as touch the little planet’s stratosphere; we merely need that fleet fended off and destroyed.”

“Would that not reveal our presence to more on earth?” A’Lars asked.

“Not necessarily, but even so...” The trickster smiled sweetly. “If you do not provide this aid, I will reveal you all myself, firstly by giving the mortals of S.H.I.E.L.D. all of the information about your colony in my possession, and also a number of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s enemies who are fond of expending vast resources to seize ill-gotten wealth from near and far.”

The monarch hesitated, thoroughly taken aback. “Why?”

Tony thought Steve and Mar-Vell looked pretty shocked at the threat, too, but Thor didn’t. Thor looked angry.

“Because Thanos has been your responsibility, Titan A’Lars,” The thunder god rumbled, before his adoptive brother could say it.

“He sent Loki after our planet to steal a cosmic cube, and getting a trickster god on our side afterward was a bonus when the invasion stopped and I got him to agree to an alliance, but with kind of fleet he’s bringing, it might not be bonus enough without more help,” Tony added. “And Asgard doesn’t even have this much firepower to aim at a fleet of ships, but you do, especially if you can further help us convince the Kree that they will be under threat, too.”

“We do not need you to reveal yourself to the rest of our people if you wish to remain apart,” Steve assured. “We don’t want this fleet any nearer to the earth than can be avoided, even. We just cannot handle this threat on our own, and it is a threat with origins here on Titan.”

“Yggdrasil hangs in the balance, here. You are no longer of a world from our tree, but would you see it wither at the hand of Thanos?” Loki asked softly, meeting the monarch’s stare when it turned on him again, and holding it steadily. “You have been a great teacher, to me, and I remember you and your world with fondness. It will not please me to see you harmed, but you cannot expect to let this happen, and have the likes of Loki Lie-smith look upon you with anything less than resentful contempt. I have chosen where to lay my loyalties, and if I cannot count on you, they will not be extended to you again, Mentor, A’Lars of Titan and son of Kronos.”

“This is the fallen prince of Asgard, then,” said a voice from the air: booming but not offensively loud, so much as seeming to echo within the very skulls of any and all who heard it.

“I am,” the trickster responded. “You are Kronos?”
“Indeed I am, little god.”

Loki stepped back from A’Lars a little and bowed his head with his arm across his chest. He looked up into the air, though the others could see nothing there. The trickster’s eyes glowed a bit green, showing it was an effort even for him to see what there was to see. “I am honored to meet you.”

“You have let my son believe he speaks to the same prince he recalls.”

The trickster folded his hands behind his back, chin raised high. “And so he does. I am Loki of Asgard, and I am purely myself.”

“Are you? Even after falling into such a void as you did?”

Loki’s eyes fell shut a moment, as though against a few particular memories, then opened again. “Only a little stranger than death. You would know all about that.”

“I am not what I was.”

“I am what I have always been, but did not always know that I was, and I am no longer tolerant of any who would bid me doubt or shame what I am made of, and what makes me great,” Loki responded, with a little heat, and an edge of almost-melancholy bitter triumph. “I have fallen. I have committed grave criminal acts in a state of furious, righteous anger but toward an unjust cause, and there is much blood on my hands, for which I can never hope to be redeemed or forgiven, nor is it in my nature to desire such things. I do admit that many such actions were mistakes, and foolish ones at that, and that I have learned much from them. I am a monster, yes, but my journeys to discover this have not lost me my self; they have only further revealed it.”

“Wise words, for one so young.”

Tony snorted quietly, and Steve elbowed him. Mar-Vell shook his head at them.

“What think you of Thanos’ return, Kronos?” Loki asked.

“Even should we let him take the earth, he would not rest, knowing we were so near,” Kronos stated. “To attack early, and at the moment of his arrival when he may still believe us ignorant of his presence, and we would lose fewer of our own in the end, and maintain more stable peace with our allies.”

Again, the trickster bowed his head. “I thank you for your sensible insights.”

“Do well by my people, trickster god of Asgard,” Kronos warned, before his presence seemingly faded, and Loki’s eyes lost their glow, confirming it.

“Sensible because they agree with your goals?” A’Lars asked.

“Sensible because they are an accurate assessment. You have not detected Thanos’ approach, but if you had, instead of hearing it from me, he would have made the same judgement, do you not think? The only difference is that what I tell you does not quite match what you wish to believe, and his method of travel is of a sort that can avoid your eye, unless you know the right tricks.”

“Could you possibly share these ‘tricks’ then, trickster?” A’Lars asked.

“In exchange for your solemn vow to aid in Thanos’ destruction, I would be happy to do so for your people.”
“You have my vow that the forces of Titan and our allies will take out the largest ships of his fleet, but you know that you cannot hold us accountable for smaller fighting vessels, and escape pods, which may scatter like seeds in the wind from the battle. And you know that I still cannot kill my son.”

Loki clapped him on the shoulder firmly. “That’s quite alright, and suits my needs quite well,” he concurred. “We have an accord, my friend.”

“Friend,” A’Lars repeated. “What strange friends you must have.”

“Oh yes,” the trickster agreed.

“So very, very glad he’s on your side,” Steve muttered quietly. “I could barely follow most of that, and does this place have an AI like JARVIS?”

“That’s the voice of a dead Titan. He hangs out,” Tony whispered back.

The soldier looked a little disconcerted by that. Mar-Vell just seemed amused by the inventor’s phrasing.

“Welcome to Titan, princes Thor and Loki of Asgard, and you Avengers Steve Rogers and Anthony Stark, heroes of earth,” A’Lars announced solemnly. “Our friends and allies, however strange, are indeed welcome here.” He stepped toward the mortals, who stood to Thor’s right and Mar-Vell’s left, and looked at them curiously. Loki remained a step behind him, watching with some amusement. “You two are brave, to travel here with strange gods, to ask favors of a people who have ignored your kin for incalculable generations. What matter of men are you?”

Tony started to answer, but was halted by Thor’s hand over his mouth.

Steve took that as his cue to go first. “I’m Captain Steve Rogers, sir. I’ve been a soldier for a long time, and I’ve protected my planet against a lot of things, but if it’s fit to scare the likes of Loki, I think we need all the help we can get.”

“Does he scare?” Mentor asked seriously.

“Well... his fear tends to look a lot like malice and anger, and so does his anger, but I do think he knows that this isn’t a threat to face alone, just as we do.”

A’Lars nodded to him thoughtfully. “Quite. My son has killed many of my people, and is far too powerful and intelligent for his own good, or for ours.” He turned his gaze to the other human, whose mouth was now free, though scowling a little as he shot Thor a stony glare. “And you, Anthony Stark?”

“It’s Tony, if you like. I don’t have a rank or title, really, and I’m no soldier,” Tony offered casually, meeting and holding the monarch’s calm stare with a shrewd one of his own. “I’m a scientist, an inventor, and an engineer, and sometimes I wear a lot of armor and protect my planet by slightly more brute force means. I used to manufacture weapons and sell them. Now myself and my inventions are weapons only for me and mine, to protect those I care about, and destroy my weapons where they’ve been put into the wrong hands and used to commit horrors in far-off places around the world. If Loki hadn’t agreed to be my ally, it would be me and Thor telling you what he did, just now, only Thor wouldn’t like what happened before I brought you guys in.”

Thor shot him a dark look, recalling that outlined threat from a long-ago interrogation of Loki. Tony offered a slightly apologetic smile.
“I see,” A’Lars mused. “You are a bold creature, Tony Stark.”

“I get that a lot.”

“With good reason,” Loki added, from over the monarch’s shoulder.

Tony’s grin widened a bit further.

“You chose your allegiances well, I think, Loki, choosing these men.”

“I chose only one. The others are his,” the trickster corrected lightly.

“Oh?”

“He was incarcerated at the time,” Tony offered. “I might’ve been threatening him a lot and he might have chosen a single ally like me, instead of the Avengers as a whole, as the lesser of two evils.”

“Or greater,” Steve mused.

“I resent that,” Tony said sharply. “I’m Chaotic Good, he’s Chaotic Neutral. We get along, is all.”

“I apologize for him,” the captain sighed, pointing at Tony.

A’Lars looked at the trickster for a long moment. “Suddenly our friendship seems less strange, in comparison.”

“I just work with these people. Except Thor. Thor is my friend,” Steve muttered.

“Thank you, Steve,” the Thunderer responded.

“I make do,” Loki said, ignoring both blonds entirely.

“Hey!” Tony protested.

“Now, lead me to your observation platforms,” Loki requested, rubbing his hands together and grinning. “I have tricks to install.”

“I want in,” Tony insisted.

A’Lars’ brow furrowed. “You wish to watch him take apart and modify our machinery?”

The inventor’s eyes all but gleamed. “Watch a trickster god pull apart advanced technology and install even more advanced technology? Why yes, yes that sounds awesome, thank you.”

After blinking a few times in surprise, A’Lars smiled faintly and nodded. “Mar-Vell, if you might show Thor and Captain Rogers to the guest wing, they may have their choice of the unoccupied rooms,” he said. “Please let our staff know if you require anything to occupy your time.”

“I shouldn’t take too long,” Loki assured. “Perhaps two or three hours.”

Steve and Thor glanced at each other, then nodded, resigned to playing cards and talking strategy with Mar-Vell for a while. Then all three men bowed slightly as the king inclined his head toward them, before sweeping away with Loki and Tony Stark in tow.
Loki had soon shed much of his armor save for his green under-shirt, which apparently lacked sleeves, and the leather vest which usually showed just under his chest-piece. He did all of this with a snap of his fingers, to allow a bit more freedom of movement. He had taken a long look around the large observatory’s main telescope and other scanning equipment, and had opened a bit of shell at the base of the telescope, from which most of their non-light-based sensors also extended themselves, and had his long hands carefully pushing aside bits of complex nanofilament wiring, self-contained repair pods full of small self-regulating machines that repaired minor damages even as he worked delicately as he could through the device’s structure. It was clear his armor would have gotten in the way, and caught on everything, especially as he leaned most of his upper body through the rectangular opening, reaching further down and around larger components.

Tony was watching from over his shoulder, using all of his willpower to prevent himself getting an erection while three Titan engineers and their king were in the room. “I want you to know,” he said very quietly, so the sound wouldn’t carry, “that this might just be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

Loki stilled for just a moment, then huffed a laugh and shot him a quick grin, as he slid his arm down a bit of metal conduit, his long fingers following it down to something. “Aha. There it is,” he muttered, turning back to his work, distracted. “Perfect.” He grabbed whatever it was and slowly pulled it up, reaching down with his other hand as well to prevent it catching on anything. He paused when it reached the end of some sort of tether, and hummed. A flicker of green from his fingers lengthened the line, allowing him to pull it further out, until he could stand up straight again. The box in his hands was glowing softly, as though alive, and composed primarily of some sort of crystalline structure run through with something a little more metallic.

“Along with the modifications made to their algorithms for more basic scans, there was a new detection protocol I designed which requires a different sort of particle-detection altogether, which should allow them to detect the sort of shadowy particles generated by the portals Thanos travels through. Thus, this processing unit needs some upgrading, if it wants to handle, and execute, those new protocols for their sensors.” He reached into his vest, pulling out a similar device from seemingly nowhere, given the vest had no pockets. Loki parted the primary connector leading the little box back to the machine, and linked the two devices together.

Tony recognized the second box, which was darker and not quite glowing, but instead reflecting light in unpredictable shades of amber and violet by turns whenever it moved in the trickster’s hands, as something Loki had actually thrown together in the lab a few months ago, muttering about theories from Nifleheim making no sense. “Fixed that up then?”

“Yes, I required aid from my great-great-grandmother. She’s a dauntingly knowledgeable creature, at times, and frustrating in her lessons.”

“You got schooled in Nifleheim by your great-great-grandma?” Tony sounded amused.

“The method of portal-jumping travel Thanos is using leaves minimal time spent exposed outside of the portals, but the portals themselves left traces. I couldn’t work out how to detect them so very far away. She has been keeping track of cosmic bodies and their subtlest of subtleties since before Odin was born, so yes, she has much to teach me, but she does not make it easy.”

“That sounds really cool, actually.”

“She is the first of the three, a Jotunn mage who brought herself and two other women to the world of icy winter and darkness, where they became the first Jotunns to develop elemental powers of an
icy nature, millennia ago,” Loki murmured. “She is, in fact, the coolest, you might say.”

Tony gave a sputtering laugh. Then, more quietly, so their observers wouldn’t quite hear, he asked, “Oh, by the way: where did you go before delivering Selvig to my tower? Before the invasion?”

“I was wondering when you might ask that.”

“I’m still waiting for an answer.”

“I visited an old friend, exiled from Asgard some time ago. Her name is Amora, and I requested that she deliver something for me.”

“Deliver what?”

“She did not know its true nature. I had disguised it as a different, more mundane sort of weapon. The power-source I mentioned, the one of ice. She has long owed me a great favor, and I did request she deliver it to my daughter.”

“Why?”

“I no longer needed it, and did not wish Asgard to have it again. The city in Niflheim that my... kin dwell, thought I knew not they were my kin, is where that artifact was created.”

“Huh. And then later on, after you escaped prison, you found out more?”

“They were grateful, and curious.”

Tony nodded, thoughtful. “Thank you for that. It’s been driving me crazy.”

Loki gave a distracted, half-amused hum, his fingertips glowing as he dragged them along the two devices in his hands, locking them together as the one he had contributed began to flicker with an inner light blue-and-gold like a propane flame. Then the trickster uttered a small sound of discovery, of victory, and something in his hands clicked quietly into place at last.

Something in the whole telescope and the observation chamber around them thrummed with something, in time with the new device Loki had connected glowing almost blindingly for a moment before easing to a less retina-stabbing brightness. “Excellent, it’s been accepted,” the god announced. He leaned back into the main compartment he’d been digging in and slowly lowered the new and old components both to their previous position. He then rearranged the rest as it had been before his alteration, shortening the artificially lengthened cord again, before he retreated and shut the compartment door behind him. “Now, let me show you how it works, shall I?”

“If you would please,” A’Lars concurred.

Loki snapped his fingers and their screens all powered on. “Basics, here, let us begin with this...”

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Mar-Vell was being introduced to poker by Thor and Steve by the time Tony found them again. “Did you all miss me?”

“No,” they said in eerie chorus.
“Aw,” Tony deflated, just before Loki pushed the door open further behind him and prodded him until he stepped through it. “Hey, hey, fine!”

Loki smirked a little at him and stepped into the room. “Our business here is done, I believe, if you would like to rejoin the others back in New York.” He nodded at Mar-Vell. “I could transport you as well, if you like.”

“I arrived by my own means, and I had best keep track of them, rather than leave them here,” Mar-Vell assured. “But I do thank you.” He pocketed the deck of cards before Steve could reclaim it. “Should I also remind my people of the importance of supporting our Titan allies, and the threat that Thanos’ presence might be to them?”

Loki bowed his head slightly. “It would be much appreciated.”

“Good to see you again,” Tony offered, with a nod. “Come around the tower sometime you’re in New York. Bruce says he’s got a new Thai place you need to try.”

The Kree smiled. “Thank you. I look forward to it.”

“Thank you for your help,” Steve said, squeezing his shoulder.

“The earth is my home, too, these days. I wish to protect it as much as you do,” Mar-Vell replied. He gave Thor a nod, and received one in turn. Then the Avengers stepped close to the trickster again and soon vanished with him.

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They reappeared in the main living-room of the tower, reachable from all of their apartment-like suites. Clint, formerly half-dozing on the couch, gave a shout and leapt up, ducking instinctively behind the couch. From the kitchen, Natasha and Bruce peered out to see what had alarmed him, each with a fresh cup of tea in hand.

“Oh, you’re back,” Natasha said, sounding amused.

Clint swore, rising to his feet. “Seriously, there has got to be some way to warn a guy before randomly materializing near his face!”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tony asked.

“Me not dying of a coronary!” the archer snapped.

“Mmm. That’s the ‘fun’ part?” Loki queried, tone dubious.

“Hey, fuck you, buddy,” Clint retorted.

“What news?” Bruce asked, settling in a nearby chair. Following his lead, Thor stepped away to collapse with surprising grace on the one beside him.

“Victory and shiny things!” Tony declared. “Seriously, they agreed to target his armada, it’s good. Phase One looks like it’ll pan out.”

“Good news,” Natasha agreed. “Now what?”
“We have a matter to discuss privately,” Loki said smoothly, before the inventor could answer.

“Privately?” Steve asked, a little suspicious.

Smiling shamelessly, the trickster wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist and tugged him closer. “Yes.”

“Oh. Right. That, yes very important,” the inventor agreed swiftly, leaning back against Loki’s chest casually, though his eyelids fluttered a little when he felt teeth at his neck, it was worth struggling to keep them open for the briefly horrified expression on Steve’s face. “See you all at dinner!” he said cheerfully.

Then he and Loki vanished.

Steve rubbed his eyes with a groan. “I did not need to see that.”

“I dunno, they’re interesting together,” Natasha mused.

Clint shot her a betrayed look, his scowl deepening. It only alleviated a little when she reached out and patted his cheek.

“Thor, uh... what do you think of this... thing?” Steve asked lightly.

“I do not believe my brother intends any harm, at present. Tony is a match for his wits, and a foil for his temper, and I believe he may understand Loki better than I do at this point in time.” His brow furrowed. “I... believe I may have been very mistaken about my brother, of late. I have much to rethink, after today.”

“Is it about his, uh, speech with Kronos?” the super-soldier asked.

Thor nodded. “Indeed.” He stroked thoughtfully at the edge of his beard.

Steve stepped closer for a moment, his hands folded behind his back at parade rest, out of habit. “Did you think he was really lost?”

“I... no longer am certain what to think,” the thunder god murmured.

Natasha cut in, “Whatever it is, the way Loki has been around you lately has been less grating, and he’s been less easily provoked, than I’ve ever seen before between the two of you. Something has changed, if only a little. I’m not sure Tony did it intentionally, or if it’s just getting frequent sex that’s improved Loki’s mood or something, but you might ask Tony, since they’ve apparently been working together on this for months.” She sipped her tea. “Also because I think you’re right: that he understands what’s going on in Loki’s head better than any of the rest of us right now.”

“It’s my own mind I am doubting now.”

“Maybe you need to,” Steve said. “Being solidly sure of your convictions about Loki got you this far, and look how some of that turned out.”

Thor frowned. “You may have a point,” he admitted, a bit grudgingly. He glanced ceiling-ward and shook his head, taking on a more bitterly amused expression as he imagined just how irate his brother might get, if Thor attempted to interrupt the pair upstairs anytime soon. “Not now, however.”

Murmurs of fervent agreement rose from all corners.
Tony returned downstairs to the main living-room about an hour before dinner, looking freshly showered, but also freshly bruised along one side of his neck from lips and teeth. It didn’t appear to bother him.

After barely more than a glance at him Clint threw an empty soda can at him, hitting him squarely on the crown of his head.

“Argh!” Tony caught the can and frowned at the archer. “Who pissed in your cheerios, scowly?”

“I’m annoyed with you.”

“Because I’m getting laid more and better than you?”

“Because you’re happily screwing a guy who put me under mind control.”

“Oh, right.”

Shutting his eyes, Clint sighed. “You didn’t forget.”

“No, but I didn’t exactly factor it into my usual ‘Do I want to have sex with this person?’ formulas,” Tony said. “And yeah, he fucked you over, but you’re whole and he’s now apparently key to earth’s survival and incidentally not allowed to kill or maim me, and have you seen his face, his legs, his ass, and... pretty much his everything?”

“I’m straight, you know,” Clint said dryly.

“You’re mostly straight, conceded, but you have eyes, and Loki is a very pretty man. God. Both. Being?”

“You’re really just in it for the sex? I mean, yeah you’re shameless, I get it, but this is an arch-nemesis here and you two, uh, have some neuroses in common.”

“You think we’re secretly in love, or something? Two incredibly brilliant, crushingly cynical and realist geniuses, one of whom is older than christianity, the other of whom possesses a track record of one successful long-term relationship that resulted in no property damage, lawsuits, paparazzi scandals, or threats upon my life? Oh yes, we’re all about feelings and opening up to dangerous people who can rip open our emotional armor almost without trying when they’re feeling bored and a little malicious, and we’re really just desperately hoping that we’ve thus found true love!”

Clint squinted a bit, but nodded. “Okay, so maybe you have a point.”

“I’m glad we had this chat.”

“Anthony Stark,” rumbled a low voice over Tony’s shoulder, making the inventor jump slightly.

“Hey, Thor. How goes things?” Tony turned to face him and managed to not appear at all disconcerted by the thunder god’s close proximity. The guy really was a wall of muscle and strength and solemn blond brooding and Tony was always strongly reminded of that on occasions like this, when he turned around and found himself facing Thor’s collarbone, right at his eye level.

“I would speak with you. Where is my brother?”
He had to run an errand, keep a few Kree dignitaries on their toes with tales of Thanos, and how Thanos has allied with Skrulls more than once in the past. The usual.”

Thor relaxed slightly. “I would discuss matters relating to him.”

Tony nodded. “I figured, after today’s interesting speech. I asked him to give me material and damn, did he deliver. Let’s hit the kitchen, I need coffee for this.”

Seeing an intimidating Norse god tucked into the kitchen’s breakfast nook never ceased to amuse Tony, so he ushered Thor there and poured them both coffee.

“JARVIS, let’s have Do Not Disturb protocol ‘Deep Meaningful Conversations’ edition active, please.” Tony said toward the ceiling.

“Protocols engaged, sir.”

The inventor gestured for Thor to start. “So. About Loki. Talk to me.”

“You mentioned his speech today... How did you know it would affect me?”

“One of the first times he showed up, I decided to straighten out how I wasn’t going to deal with both of you driving me crazy hurling emotions at each other. He explained a few things, and I explained a few things, and he and I have an understanding. The rest is on you, now,” Tony offered succinctly.

“On... me?”

“He mentioned that you believed that there wasn’t hope left that your brother was still in there somewhere,” Tony said slowly.

Thor hesitated only briefly. “I did. We needed his aid, against Malekith the Accursed. I had not seen him since his trial, and he asked me what it was that made me think I could trust him. I advised him that I did not trust him any longer, and that when I had fought him before, it was with the glimmer of hope that the brother I had known was still there, underneath the rest. I had, by that point, lost that hope.”

“Still not found it?”

“No. Something stranger: I doubt myself instead.”

“Good,” Tony said, with approval, and sipped his coffee.

“Is it?”

“The thing about Loki is that he’s not big on deep convictions because he’s in a perpetual state of upending his own expectations and those of others, no matter what else is going on. That’s just what happens when he’s around. Fire is hot, water is wet, Loki is misleading at best and outright false at worst. You know this.”

“I—do, I have known. It has always been so, but I thought that I knew more to him than that.”

“Like what? Was he quieter? More prone to playing along out of boredom? More willing to respect the rules of your society, Asgardian law, and Odin?”

“All of those, I suppose, yes. He was more reserved, and yet more light-hearted in his playfulness, I thought. He has always possessed a ruthless edge, and darker humor, but he would never have tried
“Even Jotunns?”

“My brother did not loathe them, as most did. He saved his distaste for their politics, and all that lies lost under miles of ice in Jotunheim, which a single clan disregarded and overpowered. He resented people who loathed Jotunns as they had been before that, or who disliked their physical characteristics and characterized them as monsters and nothing more: thoughtless and cruel without reason. He knew Laufey’s history, however, and saw nothing but a monster there: base and cruel and small, in the eyes of other realms, for having destroyed so much and created so little from it.”

“And you?”

Thor shook his head. “I considered them my equals, and as such could not understand their fear and hatred of me. I only saw a chance to fight in great battles, and in many battles I imagined them my opponents. They are strong, fierce, and clever. Steve once told me that I spoke of them as antique lion-hunters of earth spoke of a search for noble and challenging quarry. I found that apt. There is love in such a hunt, and respect for one’s enemy, albeit strange. I do not feel the same way now about them. Not after—not after my banishment and all that I learned. They are as any other peoples of the nine realms to me: people, different from those I know, with ways I do not fully understand, because I do not live as they do, with the challenges that they do.”

Tony set aside his coffee and rubbed his hands together. “That’s progress, admittedly.” He tilted his head back, trying to think of where to even start. “Do you know why you are wrong about Loki?”

“If I did, I do not think we would be having this conversation.”

“We might if you thought you knew why you were wrong, but still didn’t know what to do about it.”

“True...”

“Well, you know from today’s speech here, that from Loki’s perspective, he’s become more of what he always has been, under all the masks and tricks and façades he wore habitually before he fell.”

“That is precisely what I find most incomprehensible,” Thor muttered.

“You have to realize just how much he faked and how much you didn’t really notice or think about, because you were under the mistaken impression that his life was as carefree and easy as yours and that to him as well as you, everything was fine.”

“You are as much a prince of your world as I am of mine, Tony Stark, and we have discussed privilege before.”

“Yeah, I know. You just still haven’t gotten the point that Loki still didn’t have it as easy as you did.”

“He was still a prince. How different can it have been, truly? He was respected more than I, for his opinions. His cleverness was well known, as was the power and skill of his mage-craft. I have always considered him my equal.”

“Yeah, but you and he aren’t alone in your world, and just because you thought he was totally awesome and to be respected for it, doesn’t mean other people felt the same way. They saw qualities about him which they believed made him... less respectable, as an Aesir. You didn’t, because you saw him as equal, and it’s not easy to get into the frame of mind of people with prejudices you don’t understand. Look, buddy, I only know this because I’ve made this exact same mistake, but I had
friends who could never afford to be that blind because they naturally lived less easy lives just by virtue being who and what they were born to be, and I wanted to understand, so they wouldn’t keep thinking of me as a sheltered ignorant dick.”

“You mentioned, yes. Particularly your friend, the Colonel…”

“Yeah. Yeah, he didn’t let me get away with being ignorant about this shit for long, and I owe him so much for that, and putting up with educating my ass when he didn’t have to,” Tony sighed. “The thing is... Just since then, I’ve seen how twisted up people get, who have lived far shorter lives than you, when they’re told that what is natural to them is wrong and horrible and sinful, and they try to hide or try to change to fit into something more like that mythic ‘normal’ ideal. It’s all pain and loathing, unless they really love the aspects of themselves that come so naturally to them, despite the trouble they go through just because they possess those qualities. With Loki, I think he really did love all of those things about himself that made people think him odd, or strange, or wrong in the head somehow. I think he gave up being very polite about it a long time ago. I get the impression that, before your falling out, he’d decided ‘the rest of society be damned’ so long as he had your approval, and was following Odin’s footsteps in learning magic and trickery the way that he did. For a while, I bet that was good enough for him to build up confidence, and a sense of himself as the cunning and skillfully manipulative one, the strange but brilliant and vital one: the trickster. He loves those parts of himself, as I know you have to know.”

The inventor leaned forward, hand rubbing at his brow as he sighed for a moment. “But he’s not blind, Thor. Far from it, and you of all people know that. You always talk about how you used to marvel at how perceptive he was, how much he could read from situations that you would casually overlook because they didn’t stand out to you as clues to something greater, but they did to him. Don’t you see it yet? There’s only so long someone as perceptive as Loki is can be met with distrustful looks and wariness and being dismissed out of hand, or casual insults, before he starts to see patterns when it comes to which of his qualities most brought about those reactions—qualities about himself which, again, he loved and cherished, because those he cared about liked them, and they made him feel closer to your parents, and they made him Loki, which is a kind of important corner-stone of identity and context to mages, right? You explained it to me, and so did Doc Strange. It’s a big deal.”

Thor’s brow was heavily furrowed. “Which qualities are these?”

“Seriously?”

“I... I think that I need to hear it. I need to be reminded.”

Tony snorted. “Oh, come on; think about it. Think about everything people ever said about Jotunns that he thought was stupid, or irrational, or petty and thoughtless, of people to say or believe, Thor,” Tony said slowly. “You just explained to me that part, and it makes sense to me because of the patterns he must have seen, even then, before he had a clue that he wasn’t Aesir. Think about what it might be like to be surrounded by constant suggestions, in words and deeds and looks your way, that suggested you were lesser, or wrong, or otherwise inadequate and easily disliked, just for being good at certain things, and of a certain temperament, and maybe a bit uncommonly hedonistic about indulging in your impulses. Do you know how many of those little things turned out to be stuff he might have known he had in common with Jotunn mages of pre-iced-Jotunnheim history?” He smacked the table.

Thor winced. “How much of our history has he told you?”

“Enough. A fair bit. It’s been a sort of work in progress, and there are more important things I’ve got to focus on, but Loki is my ally and I need to know things that might trigger instability in him, and
“This was the mother-load.”

The thunder god took a shaky breath. “I had not realized—I had thought, after he tried to destroy Jotunnheim, that he hated what he was.”

“No, Thor,” the inventor sighed. “He hated what he always had, and with a whole new focus on Laufey’s people, since they were the ones who destroyed the others of their kind he might have been proud to be a son of. Instead, just like the cultures and history Laufey didn’t care about the true value of, Loki was abandoned to the elements, just as an infant. I think he was a bit pissed about it.”

“I hadn’t even thought...” Thor rubbed his hands over his face. “I had known that he was fond of the less elemental Jotunns, refugees of the ice in Jotunnheim, whenever he met them. I should have realized that they liked him better than most... most people back home seemed to. They never so instinctively distrusted him, until he had created that reputation for himself as a liar and trickster.”

Tony hummed, thoughtful. “I’m surprised you didn’t, I mean... just knowing what I do, which isn’t a lot, I can imagine him, reading history books over the years, reading of all the lost cultures from that world that he might have been easily understood by and not have had to hide behind so many veils of mock-courtesy, careful omission, and other tactics? Can you imagine what it meant to him, to find out they were his kin more than you ever were, by blood?”

The thunder god was staring at him with wide eyes now. “He—I cannot—”

“Thor, there is a reason he doesn’t have any respect left for Odin or most of the people of Asgard,” Tony said slowly. “It’s because he’s realized how much none of you had a clue what or who he really was, what he was capable of and his full potential, because he was tame for your sakes before then, out of respect and love and a fair amount of self-restraint that was directly related to strong awareness of every little thing about his posture, expression, and words, that might inspire contempt: like a wolf raised in a pack of domesticated animals. You all knew him for centuries, and yet here you are, looking shocked by all of this I’ve just explained to you, like it’s fucking new,” he sighed, shaking his head slowly.

Tony continued, “He found out about his true heritage and it upended everything he knew about himself within the context of Asgard. He could never win, never be favored, and had lost all respect for Odin for failing to even lie to him successfully enough to be able to keep it up, or to know when it was time to drop the farce when it would have helped more than hurt, which there had to be opportunities for over the years, and more than just a few. Lacking respect for you all, he does not care to act tame and calm and polite to you any longer. Until you earn that respect back, he’s still going to loathe you, and even then, he won’t go back to being more like you remember him being.”

“How might I do that?” Thor asked, a bit shakily. “How do I earn his respect, now that I begin to understand?”

“That’s where it’s up to you. He asked me if I thought it would be enough, for you to understand the full scope of how wrong you’ve been and start to see how many of your actions have harmed and offended and exasperated him over time, and you know, I kind of figured he wouldn’t think so, and he agreed. If you can look at him, and see that you’ve both been horrible, and try to understand and relearn him the way he’s still only half-willing to relearn you now that you’ve changed after your banishment in ways he still can barely fathom, that’s a start. It won’t happen quick, but if you’re patient, and not a complete dick, you have a chance to have a brother again who doesn’t want to stab you in the face almost every single time you talk.”

Thor laughed a little. “That does seem to be all that he wants to do.”
“Nah, sometimes he wants to kick you in the throat.”

“He is frightfully good at that,” the god muttered, rubbing his windpipe and recalling many sparring matches over the centuries. “Tony, I want you to know that your insight into my mind and my brother’s is slightly disturbing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Loki... is he also disturbed by it?”

“A little, but mostly he seems to find it attractive. And he does the same thing to me, which I also find both disconcerting and really hot, so it balances out.” He mimed balance-scales with his hands absently, and then shrugged.

Thor’s brow furrowed. “You are on good terms with him, I did note.”

“Is he not usually, with people he’s fucking?”

The thunder god considered. “After his relationships ended? No. While he was involved with men and women who intrigued him, he was quite playful and usually got along with them well, not quite to the point that it was awkward to be around them.”

“Hm.”

“Do you trust him?”

“At the moment?”

“In general.”

“There... isn't really an ‘in general’ applicable here. This is Loki. I trust him as long as Thanos lives, but after that I really have no clue where he will stand, in his own mind and what he might want to do next with his life.” Tony arched an eyebrow. “You, uh, still intent on dragging him back to Asgard?”

“I... need to think on how much I value Aesir law, compared to how much I might trust Loki not to wreak general havoc throughout Midgard and the rest of the realms once he is free of his promises to behave as your ally.”

“Fair, but let me know, okay?”

“Would you aid me, if I chose to capture him?”

Tony considered. “No. But for my own safety, let me know. Promise?”

Thor nodded slightly, his expression momentarily cool and distant again, a bit calculative. “I will.”

“Thanks.”

“I presume you would also tell Loki?”

“Yeah. I would.”

“You believe it would be better he have a chance to escape another time?”

“He’s been escaped, Thor. And yeah, he’s caused a little chaos, and pestered Clint a few times with
pranks he hasn’t traced back to Loki yet, and annoyed Dr. Doom which is always dangerous and I’m still waiting for fallout from that, and got ambushed by a dragon the one time, but the world isn’t under his sway. In fact, they’re still under mine, and he knows how this planet works now. He could become a politician in the right place at the right time, and hand my ass to me in the ‘control of earth from the shadows while hiding in the spotlight’ game within a decade. He doesn’t want to, though. He’s focused on revenge so much I can’t fathom what he thinks he’s gonna do once it’s all over, but I think he might actually consider a vacation with as much savor as he’d consider taking over a small nation-state for kicks or finding a way to take over Asgard the next time Odin needs a power-nap. So really, being polite enough, after he’s helped me out as well as he has, to give him a sporting head-start and maybe not even chasing him down with intent to incarcerate at all, might lead to less of a body-count in future. That’s just my opinion.”

“Do you truly believe that he never intended to take over your world and rule it?”

“Thor, that scepter he had, when he came here through the tesseract, was all the magic he had left to wield. The rest was used up, ripped up, by his coming here, and you were the one who confirmed that for us. That scepter was bonded to his mind. He was being monitored for loyalty to his ‘purpose’ there on earth; he admitted that in the interview after,” Tony sighed. “He was performing, that whole time.”

“Have you only his word on that?” Thor asked.

“I’ve got my own observations that make me think it’s more likely than the idea that he thought he might actually want to rule the earth. He’s glorying in freedom of movement, lately, and the ability to travel vast distances whenever he wants, from what I’ve seen. He’s all over the place, every day, and he’s not letting anyone pin him down to responsibilities he doesn’t feel like dealing with. Even the me-as-ally thing, I’m pretty sure, is something he’s accepted as both a source of stress-relief, convenient ‘look, no really trust me’ backup for his plans’ needs like we provided today, and a useful lynch-pin supporting his overall plans to brutally murder Thanos. He’s not a nice guy, but he’s also not the would-be dictator he pretended to be for us, either.”

“He seemed so certain, when I spoke with him after her return,” Thor murmured. “So certain that he was a king, and that he had been so betrayed...”

Tony snorted. “Look, just personal opinion here, but: he’s not that fond of responsibility and accountability and having to deal with pleasing people enough to support him politically, and with him being such a good liar and manipulator, who knows how to make people do what he wants whether they’re aware of it or not, sometimes making them think it was their own ideas in the first place—Loki understands exactly why dictatorship doesn’t work because he knows people at their worst, because like understands like. You get it?”

“That does—sound more like my brother,” the thunder god admitted. “He has always possessed such a way with words, and with people. Sif always resented him for it; she thought him underhanded for it, but I was always slightly in awe. He would talk to someone for just a while, and they would do exactly what he needed them to do, happily, whereas all I knew to do was bluster, or tell the truth, or threaten people with a hammer, and I could never operate as smoothly as he.”

“Well, he is underhanded,” Tony said.

“You seem to find it appealing, however.”

“I’m also underhanded. I appreciate seeing another master at work, because I can see all the strings he’s selectively pulling and admire the skill and finesse he puts into it as he goes.”
Thor smirked faintly. “I wish we had more men like you in Asgard, Tony. It would do us some good, to have that.”

“Goldilocks, I am one of a kind, don’t even try to suggest imitators would ever suffice,” Tony shot back, almost reflexively.

“More like Loki might have sufficed, but I cannot imagine an imitation of him, either. He is apart, but he is no lesser for it; in fact, I would say he is already greater than I may ever be, and only wish he would see that his potential need not always feed off of chaos and bloodied means to his ends.”

“He’s doing what you can’t, by the means you’re afraid to use,” Tony said slowly. “Really, from what you’re saying, that’s sort of what he’s always done.”

“Does it not bother you?”

“I’m the wrong guy to ask, given how much blood is on my hands. I don’t really think I can be redeemed, nor do I want or deserve forgiveness, really, for all I’ve done. I’m trying to improve, and if things get in my way, then I kick their asses. That’s me.”

Thor smiled faintly. “I can relate to the latter, but I do not understand the former, the... All I have wanted, since discovering at length my own most unforgivable shortcomings and failures, is something like forgiveness, or redemption.”

“You still have things you hold sacred that you haven’t had to give up, is all,” Tony sighed, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “Or that you haven’t just failed at altogether even when you tried. All sorts of things you haven’t broken. Feel free to call that a terrible privilege, because it’s going to make understanding people like Loki a bit harder for you, but not impossible to overcome.”

“Perhaps so.” The god finished his coffee. “Thank you, Tony, for telling me these things this evening.”

Tony waved him off. “C’mon, let’s get out of here before Steve starts cooking.”

Waking up to a god of mischief crawling into one’s bed should not be such a strangely comfortable sensation.

“You smell like smoke,” Tony muttered.

“With good reason.”

“Oh, I had a sit-down with Thor.”

Loki stilled. “Oh?”

“He’s going to decide, and tell me, whether or not he ultimately plans to take you back to Asgard when Thanos is dead and you’re free to flee once your protections are up,” the inventor said. “I got his word on it.”

The trickster curled against his back, making a thoughtful noise against his hair. “I thank you,” he whispered.
Tony settled comfortably back against Loki’s front with a wordless murmur.

“When I swore to be your ally, you never made quite the same promises to me. You’re hardly bound
to do these things.”

“You’re not bound to be right here, either, but I like you, and you don’t actually hate me and we
both enjoy morning sex, so here we are.”

Loki’s breath was a huff of warm, quiet amusement against his hair. “I suppose you’re quite right.”
He settled in, then, and slowly fell asleep alongside the mad inventor, who in turn relaxed into sleep
against him.

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The anticipated morning sex the next day was hastier than either participant would have liked, given
urgent incoming messages to the tower from Titan and Mar-Vell both. As a result, the Avengers
were around their round meeting table listening to a slightly more snappish Loki argue with the likes
of everyone. Tony was sure it wasn’t just the sex interruption, but did notice that Loki became a little
less hostile in his responses when their shoulders were touching, even just lightly, and wasn’t sure
quite what to make of that. Eventually, he decided to ignore it, rather than construct any theories
without further evidence.

Loki was mostly arguing advanced wave-form mathematics that usually applied on a quantum scale,
to large-scale cosmic event scans, with Titan’s foremost astrophysicists, and one or two Kree fleet
navigators/strategists similarly proficient in the lingo being used. Tony cut in whenever he caught
discrepancies between parties, and occasionally interjected corrections of the Kree, who clearly
hadn’t been keeping up with Erik Selvig’s work on portal-based phenomena both smaller-scale than
the tesseract he’d been far too close to, and also potentially larger, such as what the tesseract should
have been capable of if Loki hadn’t hindered it deliberately.

Bruce and Thor were the only others bothering to make much overall contribution: Thor with his
strategic knowledge regarding fleets akin to Thanos’, Bruce either further elaborating criticism or
input posed by Tony, or adding critique of his own to some of their allies’ positions.

Steve was mostly intent on trying to keep them focused on establishing an arrival time for Thanos’
fleet, and hopefully an arrival location, and with Thor’s silent aid, began to get a feel for when Loki’s
irritation inclined him to insult more than critique, and how to defuse the tension with calm and
practical comments, before the trickster could apply too many personal insults.

Their allies, for their part, seemed to get used to the god of lies resorting to acerbic insinuations when
he grew irritated with them, or too frustrated by their inability to pick up on the concepts he laid out
for them quickly enough. They seemed, overall, used to dealing with temperamental genius critiques,
being their own world’s equivalents for the most part, which Tony found rather amusing. The Kree
who now took up most of the screen from Mar-Vell’s communicator’s feed, in particular, almost
outperformed Loki in condescension several times, which put the trickster a bit at ease, comfortable
as he was using logic and reason instead of sheer snark to derail that particular sort, since he’d long
ago learned such people found that criticism far more irritating and difficult to combat.

Natasha and Clint began compiling a list of words they suspected the main intellectual parties to be
making up on the fly as they went, on their side of the table. They were amused when Bruce made
the occasional addition to it, usually based on something Loki or Thor added which involved magic doing something he found inexplicable.

While long, tedious, ridiculously erudite and over-thought, the meeting of minds did indeed produce results. The devices and alterations Loki had installed on Titan had gotten solid, measurable results that had tracked Thanos’ progress for over twenty-four hours, allowing for more precise modeling of his flight-path—not quite a straight line, almost more akin to a very tight cork-screw, still aimed at the earth—and allowing them to make predictions for where he would have to halt and cease portal-jumping, in order to safely make it into the Sol star-system without inconveniently landing in the asteroid belt, which ships the size of Thanos’ carrier-fleet would not be able to dodge all asteroids in given their lack of deft mobility, or crashing into the wrong outer planet.

They knew which direction he would be coming from, now, and the distance between “hops”, which was more consistent than Loki had first anticipated; although the trickster’s estimated time for their arrival was not far from the final results they worked out: five weeks, six days, and ten hours before the Mad Titan’s fleet should arrive abruptly, between the orbit-paths of Uranus and Saturn. Saturn, and thus its moon Titan, would be too far away to intercept him, but Titan’s fleet, with Kree accompaniment, could easily arrange an ambush by keeping Jupiter between themselves and Thanos’ ships. Titan should still be in position to observe and track the movements and position of Thanos’ fleet to further that goal.

Loki would be part of the ambush, teleporting soldiers onto one of the larger flagships (the one, he assured, that Thanos would be on) with intent to either commandeer or sabotage. He planned to engage the Titan personally, and keep him too distracted to command his fleet as efficiently as he might otherwise.

“You should bring backup, just in case,” Thor cut in.

“All who venture with me on that ship will know that they risk being caught in it, for if it cannot be taken over, as I suspect we well find that it cannot, we will have no recourse but to set about its wholesale destruction,” Loki said flatly. “To bring you along would be to ensure that I would have to drag you out by your cape later, wasting my time thoroughly.”

“Based on the systems you’ve shown me his computers and ships all run on,” Tony cut in, “If you brought me along, I could hack into the main flagship’s systems. I think I’ve already worked out how to apply auto-pilot and auto-aggression protocols into the systems of the fighter-ships he’ll be carrying. I can make his own fleet their target, and get my happy ass out of there in a stolen fighter-ship before you even finish proving to Thanos that he will have to flee or die.”

Loki considered, looking uncertain. “You are sure that you can extract yourself from the ship in time?”

“If I can’t finish the hackery in time, I’ll just bolt, maybe leave a few remote tracers so JARVIS can see if he can complete what I started while I’m running,” the inventor assured. “It’s not the first time I’ll have done that sort of thing. You should’ve seen the Khang the Conqueror incident.”

There were nods of recollection and assurance from the other Avengers around the table, Thor included, though he looked between Tony and his adoptive brother a bit warily, with a variety of concern in his expression the inventor couldn’t quite quantify.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much how that went down,” Clint muttered.

“I suppose I will have to trust in your capabilities, then,” Loki said, his tone oddly cool given how sharp it had been with Thor moments before.
Tony leaned a bit against the trickster’s shoulder a bit. “You should. I’m brilliant.”

The trickster offered a slightly strained half-smile before he returned his attention to their allies. “With a number of Thanos’ own ships turning on their fellows, we can count on a more chaotic field of battle.”

“Stark, can you make your automated aggression systems differentiate between friend and foe?” the Kree insisted.

“I can add in clauses to either ignore or even protect Kree and Titan ships; you all do have a tendency to have your ownership emblazoned on them pretty clearly.”

“I will also further add recognition of the same beacons that the Asgardian fleet protecting Midgard’s skies will be aware of, so they do not overly trouble those ships which will contain allies less obviously,” Loki added.

“Good idea,” Tony mused. He elbowed the trickster’s arm lightly. “Mark him special. Just so I know. Just for me to keep track of,” he added in a whisper the others wouldn’t hear.

Loki nodded, with a hint of a smirk. “I will also make certain Kree and Titan forces have similar visibility.”

“What is our policy for deserters?” one of the Titans inquired.

“Should escape pods, or even fighter-ships, flee away from this system, out into other reaches of space instead of toward Earth or Titan, their good sense should be rewarded, do you not think?” Loki suggested. “Let them fly. They will find only Kree or Skrull bases as the most civilized landing-points for quite a long ways. If they are found by Kree, and are not already high on their list of wanted criminals the likes of Gamora, they should have the right to what possessions and supplies they and their ships hold; if they are otherwise better known to the Kree, no forces of Midgard or Asgard would see reason they should not be arrested and treated as the Kree may see fit.”

“And if they escape to Skrull bases where we have no alliances or contacts? What then?” the other Titan inquired.

“The Skrulls will treat them as refugees or smugglers, and they will be forced to rebuild a life for themselves accordingly. If they resist being brought into the Skrull ranks, I do not envy the time they will have of it,” the trickster mused.

Nods of acceptance from Kree and Titans all. “We concede to those terms,” the Kree said, and both Titans murmured similar assent.

“Good,” Loki said, some of the tension in his shoulders relaxing by a minute fraction. “Very good.”

The next hour was spent on further diplomatic discussions, and refining only a few more strategic points, before communications came to a clear and amiable close.

Loki exhaled heavily, settling into his chair at last and letting his head roll back. The god made a not-remotely-disagreeable noise in his throat as Tony, still standing, curled a hand into Loki’s hair at the base of his neck and scratched soothingly.

“Well, that was fun,” Tony mused.

“I say we order an enormous lunch from the Indian place two blocks away in about half an hour,” Bruce said. “Thor, Steve, and I can go pick it up a while after, and bring it back. In the mean time, I
need a while away from this room and all of you people. No offense.”

“None taken,” Tony, Natasha, and Clint muttered in droll unison. The others merely shook their heads with unoffended half-smiles, save Loki, who ignored all of them in favor of remaining slumped back in his chosen chair like a dead thing, except that, generally speaking, dead things hardly ever seethed with irritation and expectant tension the way the trickster did, his fingers on the arms of his chair occasionally twitching like the tail of an irritated feline.

Tony waited for the others to clear out, which they obligingly did after JARVIS and Bruce finished placing the aforementioned enormous take-out order, before looking down intently at Loki’s face. “I think I want to have you on this table.”

The trickster’s eyes snapped open, looking cool and distant seemingly out of long habit, but the way his tongue darted across his lower lip belied that a little. “Would you, now?”

“JARVIS? Lock the doors. Privacy mode.”

“Engaged, sir.”

“Good.” Tony turned Loki’s chair toward him, and leaned in close. “You’re amazing to watch in action, you know.” He began unbuttoning Loki’s green silk shirt, immensely glad that the trickster hadn’t decided to don his armor for the meeting. “Just fucking brilliant and stunning.”

The god curled a hand around the back of his neck and tugged him still a little closer, until their lips barely touched. “You’re not unimpressive yourself. If you get killed in this war, I’d be deeply disappointed, Tony Stark.”

“Same to you, Loki,” the inventor murmured, a bit more solemn than he’d aimed to sound. “You’d better come out alive.”

Something hot and hungry finally cracked through Loki’s expression and he surged up to seize Tony’s mouth, hard and furious. The inventor welcomed it, met and matched every parry, every nip and undulation and maddening scrape of teeth. The kiss lasted longer than Tony expected he’d have patience for, until it seemed almost languid, so deep and rich and heady was it, as the inventor settled one of his knees on the chair between Loki’s thighs and pressed in, tugging the god’s hips forward hard as he could. Loki, being heavier than he looked, had more to do with obligingly facilitating the movement than the force of the inventor’s hands, but he still gave a sharp gasp and a low groan when the inventor used the new position to push against the trickster’s erection and grind deliciously.

Tony’s lips and teeth trailed down Loki’s neck, biting hard as he pushed Loki’s unbuttoned shirt further out of the way with one hand, and tugged open Loki’s belt and the front of his trousers with the other. “Table. Ditch the shirt,” he panted.

The god pulled Tony’s t-shirt over his head sharply before the inventor could pull away, but did slowly rise to his feet when Tony slid off of him and the chair both. He started to turn his back toward the inventor, but Tony grabbed his hips hard, keeping the trickster facing him, then pushed back, until Loki was perched on the edge of the table, their faces lingering close. Smirking a bit and biting at the corner of Tony’s jaw, Loki slid free of his shirt and tossed it carelessly aside, arching a little at the feel of the inventor’s hands sliding down his ribcage and stomach to begin pulling his trousers down further. Obligingly, Loki kicked off his shoes and let the inventor strip him bare, not even caring where his clothing was dropped.

Tony relished the small hiss of surprise from the trickster when he dropped to one knee between Loki’s thighs, and offered a smirk up at those bright green eyes just before he sucked the head of the
god’s cock into his mouth. Then he settled his hands on Loki’s lower back and glared up at him in open challenge.

Loki’s expression grew dark and greedy with pure lust then, as he buried the fingers of one hand in the mad mortal’s hair and tugged him down sharply, fucking himself with the inventor’s gorgeous mouth and moaning helplessly, hips arching up for more, as Tony simply let him, adding the occasional hum or swirl of tongue just to make it better, pulling desperate and broken sounds from Loki along the way. The trickster struggled to hold out with all of his focus, not aware of one of the inventor’s clever hands leaving him until it returned, slick and insistent, pressing two fingers into him without warning. So clever, that was your plan, the god thought vaguely, as though through a haze as he emitted a sharp cry, which turned into a harsh hiss of pleasure as the inventor unerringly found his prostate and began to press hard, precise circles of friction against it with his fingertips. Unable to take it for long, Loki came hard down the inventor’s throat within a few minutes of such sweet torture.

Tony swallowed tight and hot, and added a third finger, sucking hard and not letting the god get even a moment’s respite. He was rewarded by soft, almost-pained and breathy noises from the trickster, who jerked and bucked helplessly with the movements of the inventor’s fingers opening him up, and shuddering as Tony’s mouth continued to work him. It wasn’t long before Loki was hard again, but still making noises indicative of too-much-too-much like he was still too sensitive to enjoy it properly, and he almost screamed when Tony’s mouth released him and the inventor rose to his feet, hips pinning the trickster in place and dragging one of those long, pale legs up until Loki’s knee bent over his shoulder.

“So pliant like this,” Tony rasped, quickly replacing his fingers with his cock and wrapping his still-lube-slick hand around the trickster’s erection, making the god arch and hiss, his expression clearly putting him on the knife edge between wanting to stop due to discomfort, and wanting only more until he came again.

“Fffuck, Tony,” he gasped, high and breathless, as the inventor began fucking him in earnest and that hand around him kept stroking, tight and slick, almost as good as his mouth had felt, but it also burned. Too much too soon. “Don’t stop don’t you dare stop.”

Tony swore reverently and picked up the pace, his hand squeezing a little tighter as he felt Loki spasm around him. The inventor had to bite his lip hard enough it bled, to keep himself from following the god over the edge. So tight, hot and perfect, and he could feel every flutter and twitch of muscles as Loki’s second orgasm rolled over him, and then could feel the resistance again, even more acute this time, Loki still more sensitive and raw from over-stimulation. “Again,” the inventor demanded.

The trickster shuddered hard, taking deep gulping breaths as he tried to come up with a response, any response, but no one had played his body this well in centuries, let alone been able to figure out this trick and push his limits so skillfully, like Tony could read every nuance of his moans and expression and knew just when to push, holding back nothing. Weak as he felt, he wrapped his other leg around Tony’s waist and arched his back a bit, enough to change the angle. “Harder.”

The inventor made a breathless and utterly inarticulate sound, letting go of anything like restraint, and pounding into the god with pure desperation, his fingers stroking Loki’s cock more disjointedly out-of-rhythm, and the differing stimuli drew a sound from Loki like a scream, or a roar, but lacking enough breath for quite either so it was all harsh and cracked. Tony bit down hard, where the trickster’s neck and shoulder met, and put all he had into it as he felt Loki already shuddering through another climax, riding him through it until Tony’s own vision went white with the force of his orgasm, and they both collapsed on the table in a sweaty heap soon after.
They lay there for a few minutes, catching their breaths, before Tony had the strength to properly pull out and Loki lazily worked the usual clean-up spell. They lingered further, close and hot, breathing each other in.

“That’s some of the best sex we’ve had,” Tony mused, breaking the quiet.

Loki hummed in low, satisfied agreement. “I’ve had few lovers capable of wearing me out in a single round.”

“Well. It’s been a long da-” He was cut off by the trickster kissing him hard.

“You, are impressively skilled,” the god insisted.

“And you’re possibly the best I’ve had, which is unfair even for a god, you know,” Tony countered, his expression fairly sincere despite the playfulness of his tone. “Me being me, and all.”

Loki smirked, wide and satisfied. “I’d like to express my appreciation, then.” His fingers trailed up Tony’s hip, the touch hot and prickling with magic that made the mortal groan at the familiarity, and the sudden relaxation and renewed vigor in his muscles.

Then the god vanished them both, and their far-flung clothing, from the room.

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If Tony had maybe started to notice Loki leaving a couple more vivid marks in high-visibility places than before, he certainly had no plans to mentioned it. Nor had he thought about it. He certainly wasn’t turned on by catching sight of his own reflection and thinking about Loki leaving deliberate reminders. He also, definitely, wasn’t turned on by the rest of the Avengers being amused (Natasha, Bruce), indifferent after a single pointed look (Thor) or slightly horrified/disconcerted/displeased (Clint, Steve) by the marks when they noticed them. Not. At. All.

Tony Stark became aware yet again that he was utterly, and totally, royally screwed, after dinner that evening, several hours after the diplomatic intellectual and logistics arguments with Earth’s current allies. There was an air of momentary respite, after a long day of struggles large and small, and the Avengers and the trickster alike seemed to feel it, almost relaxed around each other for the first time. Loki leaned against the back of Tony’s chair, talking to Natasha about daggers, and absently the god’s fingers outlined the marks he’d left on the mad inventor’s neck, and Tony realized that he’d relaxed into it thinking, Yours in the back of his head, like this was actual intimacy and not just— not just allies who fuck. The inventor didn’t freeze or stiffen at the realization, but did close his eyes and count to ten silently.

“You okay, Tony?” Natasha asked, a little teasing.


The assassin almost choked on her sip of tea and Loki laughed, high and open and sincere. Tony wanted to hear a lot more of that laugh.

Less than six weeks.

Loki gets to have a showdown with Asgard where they aren't allowed to lock him up, shut him up, or even restrain him much. Tony enjoys the show, and is very glad no one mentions that he had to threaten Asgard to get Loki to agree to alliance in the first place.

Three days later, Asgard came a’calling.

Tony met them on the ground floor, at the elevator, because JARVIS was brilliant enough to inform him before anyone else of their arrival, and it was still his goddamn tower, after all. The door didn’t open quite wide enough to let them in, though the inventor’s face was clearly visible. He did not look happy.

“Sorry, we’ve already got one,” he drawled, seeming bored as he took in the sight of Sif and the warriors three in full armor, standing on his proverbial doormat.

Fandral and Volstagg exchanged mildly baffled looks. Hogun raised an eyebrow in sardonic query. Sif shook off his attempt at misdirection and said sharply, “I doubt it, Anthony Stark. We’re here for the sons of Odin.”

“I’ve got one of those upstairs,” Tony mused, “and a charming Jotunn houseguest who is my ally by contract, which you guys have no right to meddle with. He’s keeping his word, as he’s sworn to do, and you can fuck off until we’ve killed Thanos. Get out of my building.”

Sif took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We are here, on behalf of Odin, to call his sons and the Avengers to discuss the imminent threat of Thanos the Mad Titan.”

The inventor considered. “You’re Sif, then?”

“I am.”

“You mess with my world, my plans, or even just the people living under my roof, and you’ll be the first of four who will wind up deeply regretting having crossed this particular mortal, are we clear?” Tony asked in cold, clear tones.

“We mean you and yours no harm, Anthony Stark,” Fandral said.

“Allies included?” Tony asked, in dulcet tones light as air.

“We don’t intend him harm with this visit,” Hogun said. “We would love to punch him in the face a few times personally, but we will refrain while attending our duties.”

“Good answer. Honest. I like it. Come in,” Tony said, standing aside and leading them in with a sweeping hand gesture, the doors sliding open fully. “And frankly, I want to punch him too, sometimes.”

“Why don’t you?” Volstagg asked, as he passed.
“Because he’s smart enough not to inspire that urge when I’m armored, so far, and I’d break my hand otherwise.”

The heavy-set Aesir nodded. “Fair enough.”

“JARVIS, take us to the main Avengers floor, and tell our two resident godlings who we have here,” Tony said to the air.

“Right away, sir,” the AI replied. Sif and the warriors three appeared curious, but not actually baffled.

“Who is this JARVIS?” Fandral asked. “His voice is almost familiar.”

“I don’t see how. His voice is based on my late father’s butler, who did a bit more to raise me than my dad did, often enough. He’s a computer-based intelligent system I built a while ago, who has since developed a complete personality mostly independent of my original designs, though clearly influenced by them, as he’s learned over time to make his own judgements and decisions,” Tony explained.

“He is a magical construct, then,” Hogun mused.

“Er... no magic involved. Just technology.”

The Aesir shot him odd looks.

“Midgardian technology that doesn’t break physics, anyway,” the inventor sighed.

“Loki’s daughter, Hel, lives with a construct in and around her home, similar to your JARVIS, I think. He developed from a companion Loki made for her when she was a small child, much simpler, but he grew with observation of her and others, and with time, into his own being,” Sif mused. “Your work is more akin to magic than you may realize, Mr. Stark.”

“I remember him from when Hel was younger!” Fandral said suddenly. “He used to take a corporeal form right over my shoulder whenever I was in Loki’s home!”

Sif and Volstagg sniggered at him, while Hogun smirked.

“Hel loved to see you startled, and Fenrir loved to startle you,” Sif teased.

“Uh... Fenrir?” Tony asked.

“That is the construct’s name, yes,” Volstagg confirmed.

The inventor half-smirked a bit. “Wolf-shaped, usually?”

“Yes. Some on Asgard found his self-possessed intellect to be rather disturbing, and claimed he ought not be allowed to grow,” Hogun murmured. “You are thinking of earth’s own stories. They were... not meant very literally. There was fear of the creature possibly becoming too vastly intelligent to control, with the ability to create more like itself, and be a threat to Aesir and indeed most other peoples. It was an unfounded fear, for Loki had the... questionably moral foresight to give the creature potential to develop a soul, which Fenrir did, rather than remaining less complex but more morally flexible. Also, powers being bound to his own soul, Fenrir is limited as any magical being, not able to pull more magic from any source without first having the capacity for it within, which limits all mages, too. Only one so mad as Loki has ever attempted such a thing in Asgard, and many did still consider the creature somehow monstrous, but I remember only the large shadow of a
wolf trailing after the smaller one of Hel, when she was a girl. They were as much like siblings as Thor and Loki, in our eyes. They remain nearly inseparable.”

“Fenrir, the wolf who would swallow the sun, was an Asgardian story about a technomage-equivalent of the singularity, interpreted by vikings in terms they understood,” Tony muttered. “That’s kind of hilarious... What about the snake?”

“Jormungandr is the barrier between sea and sky, wrapping around all of Asgard, and is rather older than Loki, or even Odin,” Sif explained. “Though Loki did get into trouble with it when he was younger, and less in control of his powers. He was only, what, a century old in human terms?”

“A bit older than that, surely,” Volstagg muttered.

“A century and a half?”

The red-bearded warrior nodded. “Closer, I think, yes.”

“He had been trying to understand how it worked, I believe,” Hogun explained.

“And scare the piss out of Thor, perhaps,” Sif muttered.

“Well, he might have succeeded there, though I didn’t think to check,” Volstagg boomed. “We both of us screamed, young and foolish as we were. It only brought the leviathan’s attention to focus upon us!”

“He did eventually fix it again, before Odin could arrive,” Hogun recalled. “Though the effort cost him, I recall. He rather panicked, when the sea began to thrash so high...”

“I do recall,” Sif sighed. “He was different, then.”

Tony smirked a little, unsure how to handle the image of a younger, more unsure Loki without ever-present control of his body and his powers. It was too—endearing? Adorable? Things not-Loki. Things he shouldn’t even consider associating with Loki, or letting himself dwell on until he thought he’d grin stupidly for no damn reason.

*Ding*

*Oh thank JARVIS,* Tony thought, glad to be jarred out of his thoughts by leading a quartet of gods through the foyer and into the main living-room with its artfully cluttered assortment of constantly-being-rearranged seating. Loki had found the only wing-backed armchair in the tower, which was a luxurious almost-antique with brass studs and rich brown-red leather—formerly a resident of the shared library upstairs near the labs, Tony noted, frowning a bit at how it clashed slightly with the more modern-styled furniture around it—and lounged in it. The chair faced one of the larger couches, and was flanked by two smaller ones, and Tony’s preferred executive-looking modern armchair had been placed to the far right where he would be able to command the attention equally of both sections of the room, and override Loki if he needed to.

Sometimes, Tony found it really obvious that he was dealing with royalty. Only a prince or a fastidious diplomat would come up with arrangements like this.

Natasha, Clint, and Bruce were on one of the couches, and Steve on the other. As the gods filed in behind Tony, and Thor stepped from around a corner into view, the seated Avengers began to rise to their feet one by one. Natasha and Bruce lingered the longest, until the spy couldn’t keep her curiosity reigned any further, and the biochemist was feeling too exposed being the only one seated thereafter.
Sif and the warriors three beamed at Thor, who only offered a cool smile and a nod to each of them, before gesturing for them to sit. They remained formal and restrained as a result, though Sif looked a bit concerned by the relatively aloof welcome from the usually enthusiastic thunder god.

Loki observed the room as Thor made introductions between his Aesir band of cohorts, and his Midgardian tribe of exceptional misfits brought together by their badassery. He glanced sidelong at Tony, who raised an eyebrow at him calmly. The trickster gave a barely-perceptible shrug and tilted his head back as the Avengers settled back on their couches, and Thor sat between Steve and Tony, along with them. The trickster god’s gaze fixed on Sif, who stared back, calm but wary.

“You come here with a purpose in mind,” Loki said, as the others were still settling.

“We do,” Sif concurred. “Your contract with Midgard, and Thor being an Avenger, as well as Asgard’s continued interest in protecting this world along with the rest of Yggdrasil, does make the Thanos threat one pertinent to us.”

“I am allied with a Midgardian. Not the whole of his planet,” Loki corrected lightly. “And I have things in hand tidily, for the moment, unless Odin is inclined to send in valkyries and their like to take down fighter-vessels escaping the battle against Thanos’ fleet. Pick them off, drop them somewhere remote away from the general populace, let human forces on the ground sort out any survivors.” His eyes narrowed. “It is necessary that they leave survivors, if it’s requested of them.”

“Why should we?” Sif asked. “Why not obliterate them before they might even fall?”

“You’ll be tracking him,” Tony said, directing his words toward Loki. “You’ll know which ship he’s escaping in. It’s not like you to gamble that sort of thing close to the final steps in your plans.”

“Hence why I specified ‘if it is requested’. I do know Asgard’s valkyries are fond of rushing in and reigning fire down upon all they see who are set against them, but they will need to be brought into the chain of command and communications in place for this war, as will any of Asgard who care to participate in protecting Midgard. There are already plans in place to have the upper atmosphere under close monitor, and capable super-humans and other powerful beings are being assigned to them. Many of these are not normally heroes by temperament, and might not take kindly to their kills being struck down unexpectedly by alien vikings, or other unexpected encroachments. This is to be organized, for the sake of Asgard’s fighters, as well as Midgard’s.” Loki spread his arms out slightly, hands palm-up with fingers splayed. “Unless Odin is willing to offer enough forces that we need not court many at all from our previous list of volunteers, and instead use exclusively Aesir forces, disciplined and organized, which would be enough to persuade us to change our previous plans.”

“Does he really have that many?” Natasha asked.

“If he sends mages? Of course,” the trickster mused. “They would even be able to help us all stay in communication, since I will be rather focused on Thanos myself.”

Sif and the warriors three looked surprised by that.

“You would target the Mad Titan?” Volstagg asked.

Loki’s smile widened, cold and fearsome, no mirth or humor in his expression. “I accepted this alliance only because it is my deepest desire to make Thanos and the Other suffer for what they have done to me, with what carelessness they treated me, and how they dared believe they could possess me, and command me about like their dog;” he said in glacial tones, his words careful and unhurried, but heavy with hate, and the promise of blood and agony.
“Were you not his dog?” Sif asked lightly.

The trickster was on his feet and standing much closer to her within a moment.

Tony gripped the arms of his chair for a moment to prevent himself rising, shooting a look at Thor, who looked equally like he might leap up at any moment, but their eyes met for a second and then flicked back to Loki. They did not stand.

The god of lies took in Sif’s look of disdain, mild satisfaction to have provoked him, but also dawning horror at the thought of what he might do. “You are a fool, little shield maiden. You see me as a jealous and petty thing, akin to yourself perhaps and how you have often felt toward me since certain times in our youth, when I discovered your affections for me were shadows compared to your infatuation with Thor,” Loki said, calm and cold, watching her face closely. “I do hope one day you might overcome your hurt pride, and accept that I do not care who you love, or who loves you. I do not even hate you, dear Sif, for that would require me to feel anything toward you but indifference. Your hate for me is a pathetic and self-serving thing, and letting it blind you to just how justified my anger, my hate, for Odin and for much of Asgard, is: that should be below you. To suggest that such as I would willingly submit control of myself to Thanos and his sort, is even more absurd and pathetic of you to suggest. Either go home, or learn quickly to become a diplomat as your duty to your people and your All-Father demands of you. Either fail, or mature and see me with eyes less biased by your own fickle heart.”

The shield maiden was on her feet by the time he finished, stepping closer to him to glare into his eyes until his last words fell. She took a deep breath, her expression sharpening with acute observation, dislike, and a hint of resignation, as she shook her head at him. “You were always dangerous with your words.”

“Return to your seat to lick your wounds, unless you are not feeling honorable enough to complete the duties assigned to you, Sif,” Loki responded, low and cold.

“You are not so jealous as you once were. I can see that clearly enough. You have lost that much more love in you, even of such a twisted and hurtful sort. I still doubt your sincerity, your loyalties, and your own ‘honor’, Lie-smith,” she countered. “What evidence have you, to change my mind?”

“This is hardly a court, and his conviction has been dealt already; it’s not anyone’s fault but Asgard’s that he couldn’t be held onto long enough to complete his sentence for it,” Tony interrupted. “If you want evidence that he’s more set on vengeance against Thanos, than anything else, consider that Thor is still alive under the same roof with him.”

The inventor enjoyed the stunned silence for a few long moments, smiling cool and unconcerned. “Look, I’m just saying that there’s plenty of ways to argue that any member of the Avengers is unstable, or a detriment to the cause, because we’re all hot-headed and a few of us are amoral, and most of us are not good people, except Steve and sometimes Thor or Clint. Also, Thor has no trust in Loki, who has made himself a crucial factor in all of our plans to defend against Thanos. He’s my ally alone, and while I like Thor, his loss wouldn’t prevent us winning this war, and insofar as the terms of his agreement with me, such as he phrased them, Loki’s deal wouldn’t be broken by Thor’s death.” The inventor leaned back in his chair, smirking a little. “And this late in the game, the Avengers and I wouldn’t have much choice but to go ahead with things as planned and maybe try to work with you all back in Asgard to make it easier for you to catch him once Thanos is dead. There’s too much at stake for us to do anything else, before that, against him.”

Sif’s brow was furrowed as she looked Tony over again with new eyes. The warriors three, too, looked disconcerted.
Loki appeared mildly thoughtful, and a bit sharply wary, like he hadn’t himself quite thought of that plan, but was uneasy about his own lack of desire to carry it out even now, thus making him resent Tony for bringing it up at all. The inventor saw something in the shield maiden’s expression flash with realization, or recognition, seeing that look on the trickster’s face, and wondered. It vanished into a calmer mask again, before Loki turned his gaze back to her.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m actually on your side,” Thor said dryly.

“I am, big guy. Just looking out for you, really.” He patted the blond god’s ridiculously muscular bicep almost-condescendingly.

“Disturbing as that insight is,” Steve cut in, “he has a point.”

Sif fixed her stare on Loki again, and considered. “You brought an army to earth for the Mad Titan,” she said slowly, but it was questioning now.

“I was bound to a weapon he placed in my hands, which watched me, and inflicted agony at any signs of disloyalty to the orders I had been given,” Loki said. “If I had not opened the portal, it would have progressed from agony to injury, and from injury to death.”

“And you would kill him for doing to you what you’ve done to many?” she asked.

“The details of what was done to me after my fall through the void, after his soldiers collected my injured self, but long before any one of them even thought to ask for my name, or my purposes and intent, I do not need to share with you,” the trickster said, his eyes narrowing. “I am a monster, but even I lack the combination of mad vision, and callous lack of interest in the minds and souls of others, to inflict upon any sentient creature what happened to me at the hands of the Other, with Thanos’ content approval. I dishonor my enemies, because I know what I believe they deserve. There is no reason to treat strangers to worse than even that, for the sake of stealing secrets of their blood and sinew and species, which might be gotten freely from a willing subject, when that subject is as sturdy as a Jotunn.”

Sif took a step back, then, her expression carefully masked. “Then you deserve your vengeance,” she said simply, and inclined her head.

The trickster exhaled heavily. “No further accusations or doubts you wish to hurl at me before returning to diplomacy in its proper form?”

“No further accusations or doubts you wish to hurl at me before returning to diplomacy in its proper form?”

“Not in regards to this matter. I am convinced, for now, that you are focused on a goal I am not inclined to prevent you reaching,” she replied. “That is all that I needed, for I know you not at all, any longer. Once, you might have told me, before even telling Thor, but you do make it clear why that stopped a long time ago. I did not deserve it any longer, and though I have missed the boy I knew, I think I have missed much, to not realize just how much of him is still under the surface of you.” She shook her head a little. “Otherwise you might not still wear the exact same look on your face when someone points out how you should act if you truly hated your brother.”

Loki’s expression turned darker, and more genuinely angered. “You’re as much a fool as he, Sif.”

“Oh how you often wished I were.” She half-smiled for a moment, but then returned to her position on the couch and took on an aloof and professional mien, crossing her legs at the ankles.

Loki nodded to her gravely, and stepped back to fall with an unfair degree of careless grace back into his own seat, for all the world like a cat, if only for his unquestionable air of having done only what he meant to do. Tony could see an edge of lingering resentment and unease in him, particularly
where the fingers of his left hand drummed not-quite-silently against the leather of the chair, and where the lines at one corner of his mouth displayed a hint of scowl that resisted being masked in its entirety.

“Odin could provide more than enough protection to earth’s skies, if he saw fit,” Thor reminded them. “I would strongly recommend it, unless you think he may be less than willing?” He aimed the casual inquiry at the warriors three.

“It is more action than we have taken for the sake of earth since war with the frost giants,” Fandral pointed out.

“But no less caused by our own failures,” Hogun added lightly, his expression more solemnly contrite than accusing, as he met Loki’s stare across the room. The other warriors seemed not to notice he did so, Volstagg making some vague comment about fellowship and honorable camaraderie between Asgard and Midgard.

The trickster considered for a moment, then gave another barely-there nod, just for the stoic Aesir who had been fair to him in past and over the centuries had often been the only other calm head present in times of crises, reeling in his own two companions while Loki tried to anchor Thor’s impulsiveness, both trickster and Hogun knowing that Sif would follow if the other three more hot-headed warriors were not busy throwing themselves into more danger.

Hogun inclined his head for a moment, as though in relief or silent thanks.

Tony added him to the ‘sensible ones’ list of not-enemies/maybe-allies in his head, and cut in, “We really do need to emphasize communication, here. Loki probably won’t be the only one trying to go right for Thanos, won’t be the only one either hijacking a fighting vessel, or teleporting between them possibly up until they hit the stratosphere. Thanos will have different forces than the Chitauri alone this time.”

“He will have a few mages of his own, though young. Enough to be more than a little nuisance to the Titans and any Kree fleet that may or may not aid them,” Loki confirmed. “The Titans, too, will have infantry and smaller fighter-vessels, and those who managed to board any ships of Thanos’ fleet may well steal smaller ships to escape it when the time comes to destroy them entirely. There will be difficulties telling friend from foe, if Asgard’s forces are not kept informed and able to hear or otherwise detect those who aren’t their enemies.”

“We have a comm system, but given how fast things will be moving, we’ll need something more like a visual interface too,” Tony said. “Too many people talking at once on the same channel, and all the listeners go deaf to what’s actually being said.”

“Beacons not visible to Thanos’ forces, I can create. The rest of Asgard’s mages can create a sensory link of sorts, for all of the forces provided by Odin. If I give them the necessary spell-work to make the link sensitive to such beacons, any ships bearing forces other than Thanos’ may be detected and spared. The link would provide visual input, so that the beacon would appear as a recognizable symbol, and the warriors will know not to strike.”

Tony shot the trickster a look, already catching on to what he would then plan to do. You’ll mark Thanos with a beacon: guarantee he’ll make it to earth. He didn’t mention it, merely waited.

Loki glanced over at him, read his expression, and winked with a hint of a smirk, though his right hand moved in a small, gentling motion. Later. More later.

“That would also allow enemies carrying incapacitated allies through our warrior’s ranks,” Sif
pointed out. “They will eventually notice, especially if many of them flee toward earth once the total destruction of larger fleet ships begins.”

“Most, if they are wise, will flee the system,” the trickster said. “Even the smaller escape pods have the capacity and supplies to carry them to the nearest neutral moon or planet with a Kree or Skrull outpost and smugglers willing to take them back to a proper civilization in exchange for half the supplies in their pod.”

“You sound very sure of that,” Natasha mused.

“I took inventory of his entire base while being ‘allowed’ to recover my health and my magics awhile,” Loki offered. “I was not considered a threat.”

“That’s the most disturbing thing you’ve said about them so far, actually,” Clint said, sounding deeply disturbed. “They didn’t think that you were a threat.”

“They knew all about my powers, and a little of my reputation, and presumed that they had come close to breaking me. I let them lie to themselves, and bided my time.”

Thor looked stricken for a long moment, as though he had suddenly realized just how bad it must have been, for anyone, even ones who did not know Loki to believe the powerful green-eyed trickster before them—proud and controlled—to be anything like broken. Like a predatory bird caught in a trap, Thor knew Loki’s nature would have made him more likely to struggle and fight himself to the point of self-injury or death, before being unwillingly broken and forced to anyone else’s will. But then he recalled, long ago, Loki ceasing to struggle when caught up by too many strong hands, and surrounded by a crowd eager to see his pain, as a dwarf he had tricked too severely approached him with a long needle and dark thread. The trickster’s expression had darkened, but did not show fear, did not give the crowd much reaction to crow over, as he was held immobile and his clever lips sown shut. Loki’s eyes had watered, and looked glassy when the stitches were done, and whoops of joy and insults and spite went up around him, but the trickster’s gaze had burned with something calculating and too patient. He had not winced, had made no sounds of pain, had given them little or no satisfaction in such regards, even back then.

Now, sitting and watching his adoptive brother vaguely refer to horrors committed against him, it occurred to Thor that he should have known long ago, before the stitches and certainly before this moment, just how obvious it was that Loki had long since grown used to hiding pain and any of his reactions to cruel treatment—how obvious it was that he’d had much practice at concealing what he felt or refusing to be provoked for the pleasure of others who would laugh at him for what he could not control and refused to regret. The thunder god shut his eyes tight for a brief moment and swallowed thickly his own sudden shame.

He was drawn out of it by a hand on his shoulder, squeezing hard for a mortal and shaking him slightly. “Hey,” Tony whispered. “You okay?”

Thor’s eyes snapped open. He realized quickly, that only the inventor and Sif had visibly noticed his sudden reaction and were looking at him in concern; although he knew Loki must have, for all that his brother did not spare him a glance. The trickster always seemed to know when Thor was hurt or in trouble. Always.

The thunderer shook his head dismissively, as though it were nothing, but held Tony’s gaze for just a moment, silently asking a thousand questions he could not begin to find the words for, but which he had to hope the mad inventor would understand.

It seemed he did, for Tony offered a crooked, bitter half-smile and let him go, but elbowed him in the
bicep in an oddly comforting way. “Hey, progress,” he muttered, for only Thor to hear.

The god grimaced, but said nothing to that. It was progress. And it was only a little. And it was already exhausting.

“You should come to Asgard, and preset your request to Odin yourself,” Fandral was saying, by this point. Somehow, they had gotten past the outline-the-plan phase to get-it-actually-done time.

“You say that like it is a suggestion, but I believe you were instructed to request we do so,” Loki responded, sharp and droll.

“We were,” Sif said. “I’m now convinced that you might be capable of actually making him listen, if you bring along your rather insightful ally, as well as Thor.”

“No,” the trickster said sharply.

Sif was not the only one who seemed surprised.

Tony felt a little offended, until he interpreted the hint of fear behind the trickster’s too-abrupt, almost graceless denial. “You really think he’d try to kill me?”

A hush fell over the room that was cold as the wind Loki had brought with him from Nifleheim mere days before. It lingered for a few seconds, until even the warriors three and Sif all looked solemn on par with Hogun’s earlier contrite.

“It would nullify our agreement,” Loki said slowly. “And he would be free to again incarcerate me.”

“Should he attempt that, I will remove his other eye myself,” Thor said.

The trickster shot him an almost startled and incredulous look, bordering on outright defensive, his whole body tensed as though he were about to spring up and attack or flee—either option seemed equally probable. “What did you say?” he snapped, and every staccato syllable was knife-sharp with disbelief.

“He would be within Asgard’s laws to do so, but Anthony is quite right: you are currently a vital part of all plans to prevent Thanos from taking Midgard, and from there Doubtlessly rebuilding until he could come for Asgard and yourself, if not any of the other nine realms first. He could corrupt them like rot, until Yggdrasil began to wither. If the All-Father saw fit to allow that, just for the sake of caging you once more for a brief while, Loki, then I would remove his remaining good eye, and take his kingship from him, for he would no longer deserve it.”

Loki swallowed tightly, his eyes very wide as he processed the thunderer’s words. It took him several seconds to relax into a more reserved pose again, but his expression remained hard and wary.

“You really mean that,” he said, in a voice devoid of inflection.

“I do.”

“He will threaten. He may attempt,” the trickster warned, tone still flat and oddly distant.

“I will step in the way, and I will not let him be unaware of what else I might do to stop him, nor why I would stop him.”

Loki folded his arms across his chest, turning thoughtful. “Well, then.” He turned his gaze on the mad mortal inventor, who in turn found it to be unnervingly unreadable. “Do you wish to go with me to Asgard, dear Tony?”
Slow and sly, Tony Stark began to grin. “Yeah. Yeah, I would.”

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Thor shouted, “Heimdall, open the Bi-frost!”

“You know, I’ll have been to more worlds just this week than-” Tony began, then was cut off by the goddamned amazing. He might have let out a whooping cry at one point amidst all the color and the whoosh. There was a lot of whoosh. All of the whoosh.

When it stopped, Tony was breathing a bit hard and dazed. He stepped back and to the left to stand a bit behind Loki slightly while he took a few seconds to think about the most unattractive things possible in an effort to banish his technology-boner. “I want one,” he said a bit breathlessly.

Loki laughed, loud and surprisingly sincere.

“No really, I need this in my life,” the inventor said, with feeling.

“You would really try wouldn’t you?” the trickster inquired, turning his head to look at the mortal now stepping out from behind him with hands in his deep in his pockets as he adjusted himself in his jeans as unobtrusively as he could manage, which still wasn’t exactly subtle, but better than outright reaching down the front to grab, so it counted as almost courteous, Tony figured.

“Fuck that!” he responded, immediately. “I’ll succeed.” His grin was all greedy sharpness and determination.

Something in Loki’s expression flickered with heat and questioning for a moment, and his lips parted as though to reply, but he was interrupted.

“Did I miss something?” Sif asked, a bit teasing.

“Usually,” Loki shot back.

“I didn’t think you had that sort of partnership,” she mused.

The trickster and Tony both made exasperated sounds.

“It is hardly your business, Sif,” Thor chided.

“So he’s allowed to bring up my past infatuation with you, but I can’t question his conduct with his mortal ally?” she inquired.

“We’re fucking. And we’re allies. And we get on like a house on fire intellectually. There, you’re updated,” Tony said, droll and almost bored-sounding. “We don’t do embarrassment, because that would require having shame. I’m Tony Stark, and ‘shame’ is something that only happens to other people.”

The warriors three laughed a bit, and Sif nodded thoughtfully. “It was worth a try. I suppose it’s been a long while since I could make any of Loki’s lovers blush, rather than the other way around.”

“My tastes have steadily improved to ‘exclusively people suitably intelligent and challenging to be capable of disconcerting people like Sif’ yes,” Loki acknowledged, dripping sarcasm.
“Sigyn was always very good at that,” Volstagg recalled.

“Oh, I wish she’d have me even now,” Fandral murmured with melodramatic longing. “How you let her go, Loki, I can scarcely imagine.”

No pressure, Tony thought, then nearly had a minor panic-attack before his be-cool-no-really-be-cool instincts crushed the emotional rebellion and he pushed such a horrifying thought as comparing himself to Loki’s ex-wife out of his mind entirely. It was an effort not to shudder, realizing that was what he’d effectively just done.

“It was a mutual parting of ways,” the trickster said smoothly, his expression a perfect mask, though a bit of irritation laced his tone. “She desired a more peaceful life than I have ever had the patience for, as time went on, and it was better for both her happiness and my own that we part company. And Fandral, she would still break you within a single night,” he added, with a wicked grin.

“I doubt I would mind,” the goateed god responded.

“Tell her that, and you might stand a chance of getting a night, then,” Loki mused.

If Fandral looked both terrified and thrilled at the prospect, no one commented further on it. Tony thought it explained an awful lot about the sort of woman capable of making someone as far-wandering and easily bored as Loki feel inclined to promise something as long-term as marriage. He filed that thought away under ‘interesting’ because now he wanted to meet Sigyn at some point (preferably with Steve on hand because his reactions tended to be priceless) just because he had a feeling she’d be impressive and a little frightening.

“Come along, boys, we do have business to attend to,” Sif chided.

“You would do well to avoid carelessness, Loki,” chided a deeper, more resonant voice, that filled the chamber.

Tony traced it to a large, armored figure with hands braced on a large broadsword, standing with his back to them; the inventor had mistaken him, at first, for a statue. Heimdall, then, of the far-seeing and creepy glowing gold eyes, which now fixed on them as Asgard’s watcher and bridge-guardian turned to look at them more directly.

“If I appear careless to your keen eye, then I am an even better performer than I thought,” the trickster responded, smiling tightly and humorlessly at the watcher-god as he followed the others out.

Tony nodded thoughtfully at Heimdall, who nodded back, regarding him with an almost serene gaze that while calm and guileless, still felt like it pierced something—possibly everything, and made the inventor feel a bit uneasy. Then he stepped out of the main chamber of the Bi-frost and onto the rainbow bridge—flickering iridescence under his feet and humming with energy—and Tony’s thoughts ground to a halt, then changed gears and zoomed in half a dozen entirely different directions as he took in the sight of the city of Asgard. He suddenly wished he’d opted for wearing some of his armor instead of one of his finest suits. “Oh,” he said. “Right. Advanced civilization.”

“I do keep telling you,” Loki muttered.

“Yes you do,” the inventor teased lightly. “Long walk?” He nodded toward where Sif and the warriors three were getting on horses for the journey back into the city.

“I do not believe they anticipate us following on foot,” Thor responded, and shot his adoptive brother a pointed look.
Already gathering energy in one hand, Loki smiled coolly and vanished the three of them. They reappeared outside a palatial building shining gold and bronze—though made of neither metal, but instead alloys curious to Tony’s eye—in the sun. They had arrived at the foot of a long, broad marble staircase, leading up to the palace’s main entryway. As they settled into place, freshly appeared with the scenery still a little blurred, the air flickered a little, clearly with a faint protective barrier, at the foot of the stairway.

“I take it teleporting into the palace itself is a trickier endeavor?” Tony asked.

“It did not used to be,” the trickster murmured.

Not before he was considered an enemy of Asgard, then, the inventor surmised, but kept the thought to himself. Adjusting his red-gold tie, Tony took in the massive front doors and snorted.

“You are not cowed by awe?” Loki inquired lightly.

“I’m too awesome myself,” the inventor responded. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.” He grinned, cheeky and casually arrogant.

“You have your occasional impressive moments.”

“By ‘occasional’ you mean ‘constant’ of course.”

Loki snorted, and shook his head, but didn’t actually deny it, which Tony was more than willing to count as a win. By the time they reached the top of the stairs at an unhurried walking pace, Sif and the warriors three were in sight, running quite fast all the way, taking three steps at a time until they caught up with them at the doorway.

“You don’t usually take the stairs,” Sif observed, not even winded by the run.

“They usually liked me better,” Loki responded blithely, as Thor pushed open the doors to the main entry hall.

Tony noted the gleaming metal elegance of the architecture, the high arching ceiling with support structures that reminded him of being a kid in a museum a long time ago, stepping under an overturned reconstruction of an old viking long-boat. There were honest-to-gods torches along the walls, though sunlight fell between many of the pillars alongside the hall, indicating either massive windows beyond them, or simply an open-air plan. Given how fairly temperate the place was, just cool enough that Tony’s suit felt a little thin, but he could imagine people walking around in immaculate Asgardian formal-wear wouldn’t sweat much unless they were exerting themselves, Tony was betting on open-air. He smirked when a stir of wind from a northerly direction, not from behind them, confirmed the theory as he strode through the hall.

“Torches. Seriously, with flames, torches?” he muttered.

“I never said our sense of style lacked a hint of archaic melodrama,” Loki countered in deadpan tones, though a smirk tugged at his lips.

“Usually you pick your lies better than that, yeah.”

Thor chuckled a bit at that, too, and it didn’t make the trickster’s smile more hesitant this time, though something ahead of them did make him look more gravely solemn a few moments later: another pair of ominous doors, these ones more ornate, heavier on gold alone, lacking the addition of bronze or silver mixed in. Fandral and Volstagg pushed them open, held them for the others, who strode through and started immediately down still more stairs. Tony refrained from comment on overzealous
use of stairways when he took in the theatrical quality of the room itself, round and open, all lines
leading to the broad throne where the All-Father awaited them, up a slightly lower series of stairs. It
was the sort of place where ceremonies and events would be held, and people would stand on the
floor, the main stage, while Odin and his kin, or others of rank, might stand on the steps leading up
to, or flanking, the throne, as fit their rank and how much they had to do with any particular
proceedings. The stairs at the entry were meant to immerse those who entered into the world of
courtly performance, and the air seemed different at the base of them than it had at the entryway:
thicker with expectation and the weight of an audience’s eyes, though only guards and a small throng
of courtly presences coming and going at the far edges of the hall watched, at first. Then recognition
of Thor and Loki happened, and the guards on either side of the main straight path toward the throne
stood a little less at ease, and a small crowd began to gather at their backs, close enough to the throne
to watch and listen, but not close enough, by some culturally arbitrary measure to impose themselves
on events, Tony had to guess.

The brothers, the shield maiden and the warriors three took this in stride, though they walked with
more deliberation, all carelessness and mirth suddenly turned to solemnity. Tony only let a little bit of
similar seriousness afflict him, his eyes still wandering and taking in the court curiously, and warily,
feeling a little on-edge as though expecting a sudden knife, but Loki at his left, Sif and Hogun just
slightly behind them with Volstagg and Fandral at their own backs, and Thor ahead of them, made
for an impressive guard force. He did not feel intimidated, so much as he felt calm and sharp in ways
that only adrenaline and potential threat of imminent death could provide him. It made him half-
smile: aloof and professional and business-like, as they came to a halt before Odin’s throne.

The old gallows-god stood there, no helmet in place, but holding his scepter, and with Frigga at his
right. His expression could have made storm clouds cower, but his wife’s wore calm and stubborn
determination when she shot him a sidelong glance, which he met, and turned more stoic in the face
of.

Frigga strode down the steps away from him, to stand first before Thor, and lightly touch his face as
she murmured a greeting, before she slipped past him to stand before Loki and his mortal ally. She
looked Tony over shrewdly and nodded to him, then met the trickster’s gaze and said smoothly,
“You and your ally are welcome here, Loki, and I have the All-Father’s word that neither of you will
be harmed or threatened, out of respect for your arrangement, and what you both seek to achieve
with it.”

The green-eyed god smiled very faintly looking both relieved and surprised, and there was more
sincerity in it than in most of his many smiles, as he inclined his head in respect. “I am glad that he
may still listen to reason, and that you remain, as ever, a near-constant provider of it.” He raised an
eyebrow. “Nearly.”

“I have apologized, where his pride still prevents him. I should have seen before, how much of his
desire to keep that secret from you was pride, rather than desire to keep you, and to keep you ours, as
my own motivations selfishly were;” Frigga said softly. “Do you still not yet forgive me?”

Loki reached out and took both of her hands in his own. “You, mother, I cannot deny anything for
long, if you ask it of me. I have forgiven you some time ago.” He did not stop her when she removed
her hands and pulled him into an embrace, which Loki returned with something like reverence as
well as affection, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Tony had to look away, feeling too much like an
intruder, upon seeing the trickster far too open, heart exposed. He instead observed Odin, who
stoically watched all of them in return, making an impressively intimidating picture where he stood,
with his ravens perched on either side of his remarkably-not-poo-streaked throne. Either the ravens
were secretly non-corporeal, or they were somehow trained so well it bordered on ridiculous. He felt
safe to look back at Loki when Frigga had pulled away to murmur some last thing he couldn’t quite
hear, and then strode back to stand at the foot of the throne, as Odin descended toward them at last.

Tony fixed his attention on the wily gallows-god again: not so tall as his sons now, with a thick white beard, and ostentatious gold eye patch. He wore armor like it came more than naturally to him, and while aged, he still clearly possessed great strength and grace. His expression as he regarded Thor was neutral, but slipped into open suspicion when his gaze landed on Loki.

“You are here in peace?” he inquired sharply.

“I am here on the brink of war, but I swear to you on my life, that I am no enemy of Asgard while this war is imminent and Thanos and his Other still live,” Loki responded, cold and blatantly unimpressed. “Should you make any attempts to thwart us, however, I will not stand alone against you, as you may already know.” He glanced toward Frigga, then, more pointedly, at Thor, who nodded solemnly at the sentiment.

Odin looked at Thor a little more warily, sensing the trickster’s implications. He raised a brow at his eldest son, who stared back, calm and serious, unflinching. *Yes, I would. Yes, I stand with them against even you.*

“So it would seem,” the All-Father mused. “You are aware, of course, that Asgard has interest in protection of Midgard.”

“Your warriors did inform me that you might be inclined to extend that protection again,” Loki agreed. “We are here to negotiate the terms.”

“Terms?”

“You will not interfere with the plans we have in place,” Thor said. “We have already arranged for Titan, and the Kree, to act against Thanos’ fleet soon after their arrival in Midgard’s star-system.”

“Thanos will have with him thirteen primary vessels: enough to bring a few hundred fighter-ships, and a fair amount of heavily armed infantry prepared to defend their ships or take over a world if they are permitted to land,” Loki added. “More than Asgard could hope to fend off alone.”

The old gallows-god nodded grimly at that, his eye narrowed. “You are certain of this?”

“I have confirmed evidence of their number, and the rate of their advance, both with Hel and first of the three in Niflheim who devised the means to detect them in spite of vast distance and their means of travel, and again with Titan, using my own applications of the same concepts to their machines,” the trickster said.

“The first of the three?” Odin asked lightly. “I was unaware that they were ranked.”

Loki smirked faintly. “Well, you have hardly sought them out.”

“I was also unaware that they might ever welcome such an endeavor.”

“You never asked, even after Hel revealed them to be more than mere myth.”

The All-Father shook his head with a slightly self-deprecating half-smile. “You sought them out, then?”

“I was invited, after escaping your custody.”

That caused murmurs to rise from the crowd behind them.
“They sheltered you?”

“I concealed myself, and ventured there. They did not hide me; that part was mine. They were aware that I had means to reach them, and therefore passed on to my daughter word that I would be welcome in their city; although it took even her a long while to track me down, this time. I was quite busy.”

“Do you know their names? The three?”

“I do now, but I will not tell them. They know too well the power of old names, Odin All-Father. Their city, their people, do not share names with outsiders, and I have given my word to respect their ways.”

“You are of them, then?”

“They are my kin, by blood,” Loki countered. “Furthermore, I returned the Casket of Ancient Winters to the three who made it, and they were both grateful and intrigued. I am welcome within the nameless city.”

Now the susurration of the crowd became louder, and there were a few outcries that sounded like accusations of treachery against all of Asgard. Hearing them, the younger trickster’s smile only widened, until he was almost beaming with pride.

“So it was not lost, when you fell.”

“No. Merely disguised, and hidden up my sleeve. Thanos did not know of it, nor could he quite discern its purpose or potential, disguised as it was. I was able, once stronger after my fall, to steal it back before I was sent to earth.”

“You hid it there?”

“I sent it to my daughter, in the hands of one who owed me a debt, and knows me well enough to tread carefully on any errand I sound oddly sentimental about.”

“You add new crimes against this place, even when you might have gotten away with them,” Odin mused. “Why?”

“I hardly consider that particular act a crime at all. The casket was not yours to keep, and was of no real use to you save as a trophy from a distant war to show off to future generations. It belongs more rightfully in the city it was made, and you should know that, and admit you were wrong to not return it yourself once you knew the city to be a reality,” Loki offered, low and calm, all mirth suddenly dropped in favor of grave solemnity. “The city is the last living remaining bastion of Jotunn culture as it was before the catastrophic freezing of Jotunnheim. They are peaceful, as well, and have been for millennia, disturbing no one. Did it never occur to you that they might even know of survivors below the ice? Lost kin, preserved by old magics even now, waiting for their world to thaw?”

“I had thought perhaps there might be such survivors in Jotunnheim, but the terms of the peace you broke with them previously forbid me any interference, direct or otherwise, with their world and any people thereof, below the surface, or above it.”

“You would not need to, had you made contact and established good will with Nifleheim’s Jotunns. The three, in their culture, which Laufey and his father were both rebellious against, but respectful and fearful of, for it created them, are above kings. The nameless city’s queen defers to their judgement, and openly seeks their advice in most important matters. The laws of Jotunnheim became those of the city, for Laufey knew no others. Even I may walk safely through that world, betrayer
and killer though they now truly know me as, if I declare myself there on the authority of the three.”

“Then I have been fool indeed, but why have they not reached out themselves, to aid their remaining kin?”

“They are powerful, but the powers they draw from no longer permitted them travel over such distances, without carrying winter with them,” Loki explained. “Now that they have the casket, they might travel again, yes, but bringing more winter to Jotunnheim will not help that world to thaw, and their arrival with the casket here would be perceived by most as possibly signifying an act of war, which they are inclined to avoid any risk of setting.”

“What *would* aid Jotunnheim?” Odin asked thoughtfully.

The trickster smiled again. “We may discuss that another time, I think. For now, more pressing matters are those concerning Thanos the Mad Titan.”

“You have plans.”

“Let’s not get too far off-topic,” Loki deflected smoothly. “Have you enough good warriors, and enough respectable mages in my absence, to protect the skies of Midgard from any aggressors who escape the destruction of the fleet carrier-ships, All-Father?”

“Only that?”

The god of mischief spread both hands to either side, palms up, like a set of scales. “That is all we require at present. Details and coordination, of course, will need to be arranged, so that there are no accidental clashes between forces fighting the same enemy.”

“Yet you claim only one ally?” Odin wondered aloud.

“Officially, yes.”

“And how did a mortal man come to merit such an honor in your eyes?”

Thor again reflexively covered the human inventor’s mouth before he could speak. The All-Father’s lips twitched with a hint of amusement at the gesture, but he kept his primary focus fixed on Loki.

“Quite simple. He managed to do what even you have rarely ever succeeded at doing since I left adolescence behind,” the younger trickster explained. “He changed the game, as I could not have anticipated, acting as none of his allies would believe he might dare, and made me change my mind and my plans, to suit his version of the game. In doing that, he did what no truly golden and painfully honorable prince the likes of Thor could have done; he did not presume to appeal to morality or ideals I do not share and which I consider to be beside the point; he made no attempt to play by any rules save the ones that mattered to me; he understood my rules first, and was able to play by them and come out ahead; that, Odin All-Father, is a man the likes of which I am content to ally myself with. It’s so refreshing, to borrow a colloquialism of Midgard, to simply not have to deal with ‘all the usual morality-play bullshit’.”

Tony pushed Thor’s hand away from his mouth lightly, and the thunderer let him, seemingly distracted by the immense effort it was for him not to laugh. The inventor was smirking a bit despite himself, and definitely not feeling a hungry, possessive bit of pride at Loki’s words. They were just words; just another game to the lie-smith. Surely. If they happened to make the region behind his sternum feel all-too-pleasantly furnace-like, that was his own problem.

The gallows-god appeared deep in thought for a long moment, his stare boring into Loki’s. He took a
deep breath and exhaled, smiling a bit faintly, almost tiredly. “I should have seen these facets of you far earlier, I think.”

“Indeed you should have,” agreed the younger trickster coldly. “We might have been nearly equals, once.”

The crowd muttered louder, almost as distressed as they were confused by that.

“Perhaps one day we might once more have such an opportunity.”

“If you can puzzle me out, perhaps—as you owe me that at the very least—but know now (for I see you are actually listening, for once) that until you understand me as I deserve, and re-earn my respect as you owe me for what you made of my life when it could have all been avoided and the both of us the better and less bitter for it, you are only a part of my game, a mechanism which controls and affects many parts of one more piece of machinery in my grand scheme, but no longer my leader nor my ally nor an architect I can accept guidance from when it comes to what I might make of myself and my place in the universe, and you should not presume to rule me.”

“Rule you or no, you have been my son, Loki, and your crimes have been great.”

“They were, but it is not your place to determine how I might repay the debt incurred by them. I have much more entertaining plans in mind.”

“Punishment should not be intended to entertain the one being punished,” Odin said angrily.

“Punishment is useless against the likes of me, and I think you know that. The act of repentance for the sake of the dead is symbolic comfort to the living, and I owe the living so little, especially in Asgard, where the havoc I have wrought caused no more distress than what troubling thoughts your people had as they bore witness, and they suffered no losses themselves.”

Loki took a half-step closer, looming over Odin as he continued, his voice calm and cold, unwavering and precise: “I will not grovel before those who expect my penance here to have any effect upon those who have suffered at my hands, especially when you have since offered no aid, took only measures against my freedom, rather than making positive efforts to further peace or make amends with Jotunnheim, when the madness that drove me was pathetically focused on impressing you, because I was your loyal fool as you taught me to be, and through the other lessons, All-Father, that you neglected to teach me,” Loki’s polished demeanor cracked into a snarl on the last few words and he paused, taking a short, quick breath, his composure unshattering back into smooth wholeness with only a little visible effort, though anger lingered in his expression, now.

After that brief moment, he spoke again, smooth and matter-of-fact: “The only recourse left to you is to imprison me forever so that I might never take action again, which is hardly feasible because I am not keepable, I am no more fond of cages than they are of me, and eventually you will need something only I am capable of achieving. I am vital to this world as you are to Yggdrasil, and you well know it, or you would have orders out for my death, not my capture. I know you of old, Odin of Asgard, and have watched you sentence to death a few creatures less dangerous than I and not quite with so much destruction to their names, who were equally out of your control, to be hunted down and murdered swiftly. You cannot do this with me, for I am Loki of Asgard, trickster and lie-smith, sky-walker, father of Hel, and ally of Jotunnns you have not even dared speak to. I am not yours to rule any longer, for you cannot rule me even if you try, and I will only make you miserable if you persist in your blustering attempts to do so in some vain hope of once more having me under your control without conceding my true worth.” He gave a bitter laugh, and stepped back, his hands held out wide, as though offering and shrugging in the same gesture. “You can either play the game, or continue to lose. Those are your options,” Loki taunted, now wearing a cruel parody of a smile.
“And you have already lost much to me.”

“I will hardly lose more without you, Loki. You overestimate your importance gravely,” the king intoned, his hand gripping the cold metal scepter he carried as though to lash out at Loki with it.

“Peace, Odin. He is not wrong, as you would know if you let your anger cool and gave it thought,” Frigga said, her voice calm and steely: the sort of voice that, while elegant and lovely, could still command soldiers on a battle-field. She approached her husband and king, who shot a fierce look her way, which she met and held for a long moment, clearly unimpressed and disapproving. “You and I raised a clever, resourceful, and impressive mage, capable of tricking and manipulating even the likes of you and I both.” She touched Odin’s jaw lightly with long, delicate fingers. Her expression was solemn, and shrewd. “You would do well to learn what there is to learn from a new force of nature you yourself do not fully understand. That is what you are for, Odin, or are knowledge and wisdom no longer your domains? What are you, my love, if you abandon them, but just another god of executions and warfare?”

The gallows god covered her hand with his own, his expression becoming very carefully blank and calculated. “What would you do, if allowed free without being hunted by Asgardian justice, Loki?”

“I would come and go, as I please, just as I have been doing since my recent escape from your house. I am reliant on resources only Asgard can provide me, of course, but I am no longer bound here. This place no longer feels to me like home, and lingering here for long has little appeal to me. For now, I am at war, and it is a war I have spent years anticipating. Once I have what I wish of it, things may differ, but not by much. This place has not the hold on me that it once did, though I might be persuaded to favor it again, given time and incentives. And if you can one day appear again respectable in my eyes.”

“Where now do you dwell?” Frigga inquired.

“Many places. I have one or two apartments in Midgard, I spent some months in the great libraries in Niflheim’s nameless city, the shelves of which I hope will become almost as familiar to me as these halls. I have a few scattered places to hide throughout Alfheim and Dvergarheim, a few places below Kree and Skrull outposts only a little outside the nine realms, where my neighbors have never seen my true face and never shall. I am wherever there are whispers of matters that I am curious about.”

“You have plans, for after this war,” Thor observed.

Loki’s expression became a careful blank. “Perhaps so. They are not pertinent to any promises I am held to, and I will not discuss them with Aesir royalty, because they have lost the right to be included in them, aware of them ahead of time, or otherwise feel in any way entitled to input their own opinions on them, as though expecting that I might change anything for their sake.”

Tony felt something like a cold, dull ache in his chest, but said nothing. His expression remained stoic until the thunder god was clumsy enough to utter the wince-inducing phrase, “And if your ally were to inquire?”

“Jeez, you have all the subtlety of a supernova, don’t you?” the inventor groaned.

The trickster glanced at the inventor for a brief moment; if he had any opinion, seeing only exasperation with Thor’s lack of tact, rather than anything with more guile on the inventor’s face, it changed his expression not at all. “He knows better than to trust my answers, given they are outside the terms of our agreement, do you not think?” he responded, voice devoid of inflection, his gaze on the All-Father, rather than Thor.
Thor’s brow furrowed further, and he might have frowned a little. Tony, for his part, felt almost relieved, because he did know better than that, or he would have asked before now. He couldn’t trust Loki outside the terms of what the trickster had promised him, especially because there were things that he knew he wanted to hear even the slightest hints of, and he knew it would show, and then—then he’d be even more compromised than he already was. That just wasn’t an option. He already felt too exposed, now that Loki knew all of his strengths and weaknesses, and exactly where to hit him where it would hurt worst. If he offended the trickster’s pride with this unhealthy infatuation, or by how much he had been trying to be rid of it and failed maybe, he’d be cracked open even further, and Loki would have incentive to focus particularly on him, instead of the Avengers as a whole, because Tony would be their weakest point. And Loki knew exactly how many needed the likes of Tony Stark: the Avengers, S.H.I.E.L.D., and the earth itself.

Tony was jarred from those thoughts by Odin saying gravely, “I should hope he is, if he is to survive you in the wake of your war.”

Loki flinched visibly, for reasons Tony could hardly fathom, and shot the old gallows-god a wrathful glare. “That applies more to you, than to he, and you are the one asking so intently after my future, All-Father. We have other matters to discuss, more urgent and about which I am inclined to be much more direct. We should return to those and cease indulging your pride, I think.”

The king’s eyes narrowed in the first sign of an insult truly striking deep somewhere, and twisting it up with anger. “Very well, then. What are your terms?”

The trickster proceeded to outline plans and spellwork for the placement of Aesir forces to best intercept incoming ships, conditions for where to aim them once the ships were crippled and sent tumbling down to earth, communication channels with the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D., as well as emergency protocols to reach out to Kree and Titan forces. “You should not need reach them, of course, as the two battle-fronts will be quite far apart, and the beacon-system should allow you to spot those of Titan’s ships carrying forces other than Thanos’, which you can let slip and inform S.H.I.E.L.D. of, so that they may track them and take care of their landing and recovery; if no communications of a friendly nature come from a ship with a beacon, they will be assumed to be holding hostages and will have the likes of Carol Danvers, Mar-Vell, Monica Rambeau, or others sent after them by S.H.I.E.L.D. order.”

“You trust this mortal institution?” Frigga inquired lightly.

Loki snorted. “Not personally, but they have the most organized and global network of support for such things available on earth, and did successfully arrange a group of local powers capable of capturing me in New York and destroying more of the Chitauri’s forces than I fully anticipated. As an aside any unfriendly, crashed ships, should be communicated also to the Avengers, not S.H.I.E.L.D. alone. The Avengers will arrange for suitably strong allies of theirs in any given region to make their way to the crash site to make sure that any survivors are incapacitated quickly.”

“How many do you believe would truly follow Thanos to the earth, despite how clear his defeat will by then be?” Odin inquired.

“Perhaps a dozen or two.” The younger trickster shrugged. “I do not consider his most loyal underlings to be also his most competent, and between the destruction of his fleet, and the tricky navigation required to escape it, and the surrounding armadas, there will not be many capable of such a feat, but there will be enough to provide a nuisance and some minor global panic down on earth if the matter is not very well-contained.”

“Thanos will aim for the earth, for it is his way, to escape inevitable loss and then seek to create an atrocity shortly after,” the All-Father pointed out.
“His death is mine to deal,” Loki said flatly. “His, and his Other, who will be my first target, and the first hint he will get that things are about to go very poorly for him.”

“You plan to make an example of him?” Thor asked lightly.

“I plan to render him into a paste and paint the whole of Thanos’ flagship’s bridge with a fine spray of it,” Loki responded. “I am considering whether flecks of bone in the overall mix would do, or if I should save his skull to place somewhere for more clear dramatic effect.”

The chilled silence that followed was a nervous one. Even the watching crowd seemed afraid to whisper, and like they might startle at the sound of a pin dropping.

“That is after I make a few key points to him, of course,” the god of mischief mused, his tone light and airy. “I have my reasons, and he has done still worse to me than I will inflict on him. I do, however, believe that I will be better off after a bit of violent catharsis, and it would be unwise for anyone to suggest that I refrain.”

“I cannot say that I approve of the idea, quite, but then, I am equally that certain you could convince me that it is more than deserved if you felt so inclined, but also that you will not tell me such things, for I have no right to know,” Odin said, his tone edged with a hint of something akin to regret.

“Perhaps you retain some wisdom and perceptiveness, if only a little,” Loki conceded, his tone bitter and biting.

The All-Father extended his hand. “I will sent my warriors and mages, to protect the skies of earth, when the Mad Titan’s arrival is due, and my mages will work with you in the days before that date, to weave all necessary magic for communication and organization of their strategic positions.”

Reluctant to touch the older trickster as he was, Loki reached out and accepted the handshake stiffly. “I am glad we have come to an accord, if only on this.”

“I as well,” Odin said, releasing him, and offering his hand as well to Tony. “We will protect your world, as we value your people and their potential, as well as respect for your own capabilities.”

The inventor shook hands with the gallows-god, and nodded sharply. “I look forward to seeing you all in action.”

The All-Father offered a wicked and rather ferocious grin at that. “The warriors of Asgard are a sight to behold, but it will be our honor to fight in the same war as your Avengers. You have done nothing but impress.” He glanced sidelong at his adopted son briefly. “You in particular, it would seem.” Then he released Tony’s hand and stepped back, giving them a dismissive nod. “Go in peace, and prepare well for the war. I wish you only honor and victory in these battles to come.”

“I will aim for victory, and leave honor to my ally,” Loki returned, but bowed his head a little, as Tony bowed his. “Fare you well.” Not waiting for any escorts, Loki vanished himself, his ally, and his adoptive brother out of the throne room with an effort. They reappeared on the rainbow bridge, though the trickster looked very pale and swayed a little.

Tony caught his shoulder, squeezing hard to help steady him. “You okay?”

“Your powers to evade wards and restrictions remain impressive,” Heimdall rumbled, from where he stood watching them.

Loki grinned, manic and a little fierce. “I do enjoy reminding you all that it is a waste of time and energy to bother trying.” He patted Tony’s hand briefly, and the mortal let him go. Straightening a bit
and dusting himself off as though banishing the presumptuous efforts of anyone to restrict him coming and going however he damn well pleased, Loki regained his composure. “Well, then? Shall you send us back to the tower from whence we were summoned, or no?”

Heimdall shook his head at them, but the bi-frost whirled to life around them regardless, the rumble of powerful machinery filling the air. Tony made a low noise of deep appreciation, scarcely audible over the din, just before he experienced the epic whoosh of the bi-frost’s transport once again. It was still pretty awesome.

Landing back on earth, Tony stared skyward for a long few moments. “It’s... later than it should be.”

“There is a sometimes-unpredictable time differential between here and Asgard,” Loki said quietly. “It is not so drastic now that travel between is again more common, but if too long is spent with no anchoring force here with connection back to Asgard, such as Mjolnir and Thor, the differential can grow more vast.”

“That... doesn’t make too much sense.”

“I could explain in full, but it would take a few hours,” Loki offered.

Thor appeared a bit surprised, though the trickster was looking at Tony and didn’t seem to notice.

Tony nodded, and waved a hand, bidding them follow him back inside. “We’ve got a bit of downtime, and I do want to know. It would explain how you all are technically millennia old, by earth time, but seem... less so?”

“Correct. There isn’t a very... reliable means to convert our ages.”

“Maybe I can figure it out,” Tony mocked. “C’mon. To the lab, then, I’ll want this modeled out and JARVIS need more practice scanning your illusion-magics.”

“You already detect and disrupt them more easily than I like,” the trickster muttered almost petulantly, but with a hint, too, of appreciation.

“Yeah, but I don’t know how they work or quite how you control them, yet. There’s always more I want to know; you should’ve noticed that, already.”

“I have, yes.”

Once back inside the tower, Thor watched them head off toward the lab, looking contemplative and still for long enough Clint abandoned his place on a nearby chair and came over to poke at him. The thunder god blinked at him.

“Things in Asgard bad?”

“No, not quite. Disconcerting, but not ill-fated.”

“Why the long face, then? You look worried about something.”

“I merely no longer trust that I know my brother as well as I once did, so I cannot tell what I am seeing at times, when he looks at Tony Stark.”

Clint blinked at that. “Uh... woah. Like, you think he’s, uh, actually interested?”

“I think he finds Tony’s intellect very appealing, and refreshingly novel,” Thor conceded. “I cannot tell more than that. He seems at once more fond than I would expect, but also quite carefully distant
at other times. I know that he... he considered me a fool, for letting matters with Jane cause me
heartbreak, as I will suffer in time given Odin’s... given Asgard did not welcome her. I cannot
believe he would grow attached to anyone mortal in a such ways as I have.”

“But you think he might have accidentally found someone who really interests him?” another voice
suggested.

The archer and Thor turned to find Natasha lurking in a nearby doorway.

“Jeez, Nat, give some warning,” Clint sighed.

“Never.” She offered a wink.

“What are your thoughts on this matter, Natasha?” the thunderer inquired.

Humming softly, she considered. “I think Tony is afraid of betrayal at the hands of someone he trusts
more than he’d ever admit, and that he’s thus securely terrified of the idea of trusting Loki beyond
this war business. I don’t think that’s enough to stop him wanting more, but he’s stubborn, and
would do anything to protect the people he does trust, so he won’t act on that, even if it’s the case.
Loki is harder to read, but I think he likes Tony more than he’s actually comfortable admitting even
to himself. He’s showing minor signs of increasing possessiveness and touching him more often.
He’s less tense when Tony is in a room than not, and during the shouting-match with the Kree and
Titan, he was more capable of restraint when there was even the slightest physical contact, at hand or
shoulder, between the two of them.”

Clint made a noise. “You’re still really creepy when you make these assessments of people like
you’re dissecting their motives with surgical tools.”

“I consider it an art,” she shot back, not even a little offended.

“I had observed some of those signs, on Loki’s part,” Thor murmured.

“How is he, more usually, when he’s genuinely interested?” Natasha asked.

The thundered offered a weak, chagrined half-smile. “As someone who currently understands my
brother better than I do recently told me, ‘There... isn’t really an “in general” applicable here. This is
Loki.’” He shook his head. “My brother’s loves, over time, have all varied based on who they were,
and what about them caught his attention. Few, if any, aside from possibly Sigyn and Angroða,
were able to keep up with his mind quite as well as Anthony, and that was before he... before now.
He has changed, and his priorities and demeanor overall have drastically changed. He is not as
nearly—tame as he was, before he knew of his true nature, which colored his behavior and his
relationship with Sigyn. He was less restrained and more passionate with Angroða, until eventually
her affair with he and Sigyn—” He did not notice the eyes of the two former S.H.I.E.L.D. agents
widen a bit. “-grew strained; although all three of them still seemed quite in love, albeit a bit
tempestuous on occasion. The strain became less of an issue when Hel was born, though when she
was only a few years old, Angroða left Asgard in the wake of a falling out that left Loki and Sigyn
with her daughter, and herself inclined to never lay eyes on any of them again.”

“Wow. That’s a bit epic,” Clint muttered.

“She was a force of nature all her own, was Angroða,” Thor mused. “Loki had initially been hostile
toward her presumption that, upon seeing him and his wife and desiring them, she thought that she
could have them both as long as she pleased. Eventually she persuaded them both that this was
actually, indeed the case, and by that point they were both inclined to keep her. She was an...
interesting woman.”

“And, ah, Jotunn, right?” Natasha asked lightly.

The thunderer nodded. “Primarily, yes, though also part fae, and a mage whose kin were refugees of the frost that took over most of Jotunnheim. She had no elemental inclination for fire or ice, but was immensely powerful as a sorceress, and shape-shifter.”

“I can see how that being the primary example of people previously able to keep up with Loki mentally might make it tricky to compare to... whatever it is going on with Tony,” the assassin mused.

“I think they’re both lunatics in such complimentary ways it should be illegal,” Clint intoned. “And that they’re both going to fuck some shit up when the war is over, and we just get to wait and see if they both come out alive or not.”

Natasha and Thor shared a mutual grimace of reluctant agreement as they nodded in response to that.

“Probably,” she said.

“Indeed,” concurred the thunderer.
Life lessons to take to heart:

1) Let Tony have his coffee before you discuss anything moral and/or personal with him

2) Amora is creepier than Loki by a significant factor and it's best not to inquire after her sex life

3) Trust issues are hard

Four weeks and six days left until showtime...

“Tony, I want you to assure me you’re not compromised.”

Honestly, the inventor had expected this conversation to occur with Barton first, rather than the co-captain of the Avengers team. Well, in reality Natasha and Bruce were his counter-balance, but out on missions and in training, Steve was practically team coach and usually giving the orders. The triumvirate planned the missions, handed them to Steve, and the end result along with Tony’s penchant for improvising mid-plan-failure, made them seem more like a duo than they actually quite were.

Still. All the newspapers considered them co-captains. Media: what can one do?

“Coach, yes, coach, I’m perfectly level-headed and fit to follow orders,” Tony deadpanned, continuing to pour his cup of coffee, not even looking up. It was the first cup of coffee of his morning, and it was a very vital thing. Steve should respect that.

“I’m serious,” the super-soldier said, a bit more quietly. “I know I’m a bit out of touch, but I’ve gotten adjusted to the idea of the people under this roof being decidedly casual about their relationships. Open, even, in Natasha and Clint’s... cases? Case?”

“Cases,” the inventor offered.

“I’m not even as surprised as I feel I should be by this whole thing with...” He gestured vaguely. “-with Loki, and with you. I just want to make sure it’s not more than you’ve let on.”

“Look, he’s my ally for the duration of this war. He can’t kill me, or injure me much even, unless it’s a major part of his plan. He hasn’t tried to manipulate me into feeling more for him than appreciation of a really good fuck, and I’ve had the courtesy to do the same.” He grinned at Steve’s obvious discomfort, at that.

“Courtesy,” the captain muttered, uneasy. “That’s... courtesy.”
A nod from the inventor. “We appreciate each other physically and intellectually, but the trust here is temporary, because the truce is temporary. I like him, yeah, and we understand each other a bit more keenly than is actually comfortable to think about long-term, for him as much as for me, but he’s been known to get rid of people who ‘know too much’ with sharp instruments on a few occasions we’ve seen, and just because he can’t now doesn’t mean it might not appeal to him later. Same as, if he’s dicking about with earth and putting people in danger and I see a weak point in his plans because of how well I know him now, I’d be willing and capable of taking the whole machine down.”

“I still don’t see how this is a healthy idea, or a good idea, or-”

“I like unhealthy things, Steve, you might have noticed,” Tony interrupted, his tone blithe. “I like danger. I like being reckless in ways that show off how brilliant am but also tend to nearly get me killed. I like adrenaline, I like the feeling of surrender to the moment when making a bad decision brilliantly and diving right in. These are things I love dearly, and that love is what makes me Tony Stark, Sunshine. You can tell me how bad these things are, and if I’ve endangered other people while I’m at it, yeah you might get me to feel guilty about it then, but you know what it does most of the rest of the time? It’s like a non-smoking sign, viewed by someone who smokes; it just makes me crave the metaphorical cigarette because now you’ve got me thinking about it, and missing it, and wanting to tick you off a little.”

At Steve’s slowly darkening, yet uneasy expression, the inventor waved a hand in an all-encompassing gesture, meant to illustrate all of human nature in a nutshell. “Seriously, there are studies, it’s a human thing: the warning, the chastisement, does more to kick-start greater craving than it does to dissuade the habit, unless you offer more behind it than ‘this is bad’: like guilt, or your disapproval and authority, which I can shrug off easy enough if I know it’s only me in the line of fire, as you might’ve noticed. So, Stevie, is it really any wonder that being fucked exquisitely by a god of chaos and former arch-nemesis might appeal to the likes of me?” His grin was all teeth and didn’t quite reach his eyes.

This is why it’s a bad idea to talk to Tony on any morning before he’s gotten through his first cup and a half of coffee at the very, very least. One of many reasons, anyway. His keep-the-bleakness-back protocols were still barely warmed up and had a tendency to fail altogether after a certain point.

“Finish your coffee,” the captain sighed, but his expression was drawn and far too world-weary. “And stop hating yourself as much, please.”

“You don’t get to advise me on that until you’ve seen more of what I keep in here,” Tony sighed, tapping one temple with a finger as his other hand brought the mug to his lips. He drained it, and refilled it slowly.

Steve waited patiently until the inventor had gotten a bit over half of that one down, a bit more slowly, with apparent savor.

“I didn’t say much that wasn’t true, though,” the inventor said sharply, the very second that the caffeine began doing its job properly.

The captain rubbed his hands over his face a couple of times. “I don’t understand why you think like you do, sometimes.”

“It’s better you don’t. You keep us going, remind us someone has hope. There’s plenty of times I’d have given up if not for your stubbornly hopeful ass.”

“I’d like to keep my ass out of this discussion.”
“It’s nice, but I’m not into blond guys. Or, uh... straight ones.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Steve said, but seemed comfortable enough shrugging that off. “My concern is... he understands you better than I do. I think he understands you better than most of the other Avengers, too.”

Tony shot him a surprised look. “Yeah. He does.”

“That concerns me. I know how I’ve felt, finding people who understand things about me that no one else does, and it’s caused me plenty of trouble, and none of them were evil gods,” Steve sighed.

The inventor considered for a long moment. “It’s not that I don’t want that, but there’s—a different quality to it. I see through a lot of people, especially liars, because I know their games better than they do. People are easy to get, for me, when I really look, but most of them are boring, or so easy to read that I barely even have to pay attention. It’s not often people are good enough at the game that I have to really focus on them whenever they’re around, if I want to get a real read on them. It’s the same for Loki, and yeah, we see through each other because of the similarities we have and tells we recognize in each other, but it’s not comforting. It’s the opposite of comforting.”

“Except when he’s on your side,” the super-soldier said lightly.

Tony made a small sound like a scoff and finished his coffee. “It’s not going to become a habit, Steve.”

“For you and him both?”

The inventor was momentarily stunned by that. “Sorry, what?”

“You’re keeping him grounded, whether you notice it or not.”

“We’re allies. I’d do the same for anyone else under my roof.”

“Yeah, but we can rely on people other than you for that. I don’t think Loki can say the same.”

Tony considered. “He’s—smarter than that.”

“He’s a god, but if Thor is anything to go by, that doesn’t mean he’s not more human than he might seem, when it comes down to some things,” the soldier said.

“He knows this game as well as I do. Hell, he knows it better than I do.”

“Which is why I think he might be more used to bending and breaking any rules he might see fit, Tony. It’s in his nature.”

“He doesn’t break rules that might hurt and endanger himself like that, because he’s as selfish and vain as I am, at the least,” the inventor shot back.

“You’re not doing this for those reasons. You’re doing it to protect people you care about, and you know it,” Steve reminded. “That’s why we trust you. That’s why you’re an Avenger, Tony. It’s why Iron Man is still a hero.”

Tony sighed, running one hand over his face, tugging a bit at his own skin with his fingers. “I’m a hero because I’m shiny. Not because I’m golden.”

Steve frowned. “Don’t change the subject.”
“Don’t add a pep talk into the main subject line then, coach.”

The super-soldier rolled his eyes. “Tony, he doesn’t have anyone else to protect. That’s what I’m saying here. He has nothing to lose but himself.”

“His sense of self has weathered worse than a torrid affair with me, but that’s part of why I’m confident he wouldn’t risk his pride that way. His pride is all that held him together, I think, when he fell. I thought about it a long while, after talking to Strange about mages and shit, and that’s really all he must’ve had. Hell, it’s all I had when—” He cut off, shaking his head free of the images of caves and fire and a voice, comforting and hurtful in retrospect for being missed and for having failed its owner: then this is a very important day for you... The inventor inhaled sharply and deliberately reminded himself exactly where he was. “He’s berated Thor a thousand ways for making the mistake of getting too attached to any mortal, but especially Jane. He’d see this as falling into the same sort of sentimental trap, Steve.”

“I don’t think it’s really sentiment.”

“Bullshit, that’s the dangerous part.”

“For him? Not if he’s like you. Sentiment comes after the initial sort of focused, intense fascination, right?”

Tony stared at him sharply, then. “Stop that.”

“Being observant? Not on your life.”

“Steve,” the inventor said slowly, “I’m not compromised, but I really don’t need your help if this is how you’re planning to present it.”

“Why?”

Tony paused, examined the super-soldier’s expression coldly, shrewdly. “Not bad, for a beginner.”

“Tony,” Steve warned.

“No, really, did Natasha give you lessons?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What is it you think I’ve just tried to manipulate you into?”

Tony stared for another long few moments, then exhaled raggedly. “You seriously think he might be compromised? Seriously?” He sounded tired again, and put his coffee cup back on the counter.

“It’s—you haven’t seen how he—”

“Stop, Steve. Just stop.” Tony took a deep breath, then another one. Just because the tall blond hadn’t intentionally provided a perfect lead-up for a confession that finding out Loki might be interested in more than the game within contractual parameters in certain ways might lead the mad mortal inventor himself to reconsider whether he might want that to happen. He had already come to terms with the fact that he did, but that it wasn’t in the cards. He didn’t need to be reminded and have to face up to just how much stronger that want might be than when he last let himself really look at it. No, it was really best to keep it out of sight until this was over, until he could have some clue, any goddamn clue, what the trickster would do once this epic revenge was over and done with. There was nothing he could do about it until then, anyway.

“I thought you’d be surprised, maybe, but not actually—are you offended?”
“Drop it, Steve. You don’t want to know this, I don’t want to know this, and I really don’t need to be distracted from the games at hand.”

“Games. Really, Tony?”

“Yes, Steve,” the inventor said, offensively light and mocking. “It’s a crooked game, but I’m a crooked man, and it’s the only game in town. You’re a straight-shooter and shouldn’t expect us to make sense, here.” He remained tense, and focused, staring the older man down for several long seconds, only to almost let out a sigh of relief of his own that the obfuscation had worked, when the super-soldier exhaled a long breath and shook his head.

“Okay. If you’re sure-”

“This isn’t a game for men who play by honorable rules, Steve. Just trust me. Trust that I know what I’m doing enough to hold my own against a god of lies.”

Steve half-smiled at that. “You’d be the most qualified man I know. And I do trust you, Tony.”

The inventor smiled wanly at that. It still stung, almost, how brilliant and good and bright the old soldier could be, at times. Honor and goodness so acute it seemed like it would either rot his teeth like sugar, or make them suddenly whiter and more gleaming out of sheer fraternal pride. It was ridiculous, and old-fashioned, and strangely comforting. “Thanks.”

Steve squeezed his shoulder and strode from the room.

Tony waited a few moments. “Whoever is lurking just out of sight on the other side of the fridge, you can come out, now.”

Natasha appeared, and perched nearby on the counter, her hands gripping the edge as she tucked her ankles together, lightly folded.

The inventor swore as soon as he caught sight of her, and didn’t stop until she was still.

“You know what I’ve worked out, then,” she said simply.

“Yeah. I do. Don’t worry about it. It’s not a thing,” Tony assured, waving a hand vaguely and looking at the coffee-maker like he was seriously considering another cup.

“Tony,” Natasha said, her voice almost soft, almost apologetic.

The inventor whirled on her. “No!”

“You don’t even-”


Natasha’s eyebrows raised, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t think he knows, if it helps.”

“Did it occur to you, Tasha, that since he has more trouble manipulating me, and because I’m playing the game as well and as close to honorably as I’m capable of where his boundaries and mine are concerned, that the next best target would be you?” Tony snapped. “Because more than anyone else in this house, save Loki right now if it’s war-related since he’s a resource and has been able to play even you in the past on multiple occasions, I trust your read on people almost as much as my
own. Sometimes more, like when I might be a little compromised.”

The assassin clearly considered. “And you are.”

“Yeah. I am. But so are you, if you’re thinking anything like I think you’re thinking.”

“What would he gain, Tony?”

“I manipulated him into agreeing to be our ally. In his position, I might be inclined to then make my ally regret thinking they could out-maneuver me. I wouldn’t put anything past him, long-term.”

“Beyond the war, you mean.”

“Yeah. Beyond that.”

“And if he shows up, the day after Thanos is dead, in your penthouse, what would you say to him?” Natasha asked.

“I’d ask him to leave,” Tony said slowly. “I’d let him know, as a friendly warning, that he’d be allowed to leave if he chose to do so in the next ninety seconds, before alarms would go off, and a magic-dampening field stronger than any he’s seen me wield yet, would be activated.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m selfish, and vain, and I won’t be betrayed again by someone who knows me almost better than I know myself,” the inventor murmured. “He could do it. And I don’t think I can get past that. Not having seen him do it to Thor over and over, knowing how close they used to be, and knowing I’d mean even less to him, being what I am. I’m needed too much to let him come close to destroying me like that.”

“Who you are tends to overcome what you are, in the eyes of many, Tony,” Natasha reminded lightly. “The Kree respect you. The Skrulls know not to fuck with you. The Ten Rings have been crippled by you. All of Titan, populated by near-immortal beings supposedly the highest forms of human genetic potential, knows you are a force to be reckoned with in this universe.”

“You’re saying I’m an exception?”

“I’m saying you’re Tony Stark. No more, no less.”

The inventor chuckled a little. “All the more reason for him to distrust me as much as I distrust him, Tasha.”

“If, and this is purely hypothetical, and a long-shot, admittedly,” the assassin mused, “if you warned him away, like you described, but he had been there because he wants you, and wants more of you, what do you think he might do?”

“Run. He’d run. He knows me better than to not,” Tony murmured. “Beyond that... get bitter. Get angry. Come back to make me regret it, but—never let me know I’d ever actually hurt him. I think.”

“You want to risk that?”

“Given my chances, really?” The inventor almost laughed.

“Tony... you aren’t the only liar here,” Natasha said softly. “And I can read you a bit, too. And I can read him better, the longer I observe. I don’t share some turns of thought with him that you do, so it’s not as instant, but I can read him fairly well.”
With a sigh, the mad inventor held out a hand and waved his fingers in a beckoning gesture. “Fine. Disturb my equilibrium further. Go on.”

“You said that you’re not making a habit out of relying on him. That’s good. And that’s true, too. I can tell that.”

His shoulders slumped just a little in relief. “Thanks.”

She smiled thinly. “I don’t think he’s relying on you in a relationship sense, but there’s something to Loki... Thor does it too, but to a lesser extent, like he’s not as used to dealing with people as people long-term, who change and alter and grow distant and go away or fade, or die of old age,” Natasha said slowly. “I know the look. I used to look at you with it. I’ve known others as long-lived, or more so, than myself, and seen it in them. We have to regard people a little differently... like they’re not permanent, like we’re expecting them to fade. We fixate more on people who last, or people we need to last, and they become ours. We protect them, we look out for them and try our damnedest to preserve them. Loki doesn’t have that... protective quality to the way he looks at you, but he used to look at you like he knew you would fade, and now he doesn’t anymore. I think it might be because he really just can’t, and I don’t know what that might mean, with him.”

Tony’s brow furrowed, considering. “You think he considers me an anchor? Not necessarily his, but an anchor.”

“I don’t know what he thinks, Tony. I only know what I see, and he’s better at keeping me from seeing his deeper motivations clearly than even you’ve managed to get, after knowing me a while.”

“You used past tense, talking about how you look at me.” He shot her a questioning look, genuinely curious.

“This is my planet. I plan to keep it, and protect it as long as I can,” she said simply. “You, and the Avengers for now, and sometimes S.H.I.E.L.D., are what I need in order to do that. Even without S.H.I.E.L.D., I could work with the Avengers, and with you. If we lost the others, but you still remained, I could still believe you, of all of them, could come up with a way to keep us both going at this gig, Tony. It’s not hope; it’s not faith. I know you but there are things I will never understand about your particular variety of genius that are invaluable, and without you, my job and my life, and my goals, would be a lot harder to achieve and maintain. So I need you to last, and any way I can do that short of getting myself and others killed, I’ll do.”

Tony stared at her for a long, thoughtful moment, then half-smiled. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Natasha was only a little younger than Steve, and hadn’t spent any of that time on ice. It only showed at times like this, when she talked about the past, and the future, and the look in her eyes turned distant and cold, but not unsympathetic. “Thank you,” he said. “You’re one of mine, too.”

She offered him a nod, smiling a little herself. “I know.” The assassin folded her hands in front of her and tilted her head a bit again. “You don’t know what to think about it either, then?”

“Like he told Asgard today, I know better than to trust anything outside the terms of our agreement, or that isn’t supported or protected by those terms.”

“Like the fact you aren’t killing each other, guaranteed, so why not tap that?”

He offered a small, lecherous grin. “Oh hell yes.”

She hummed lightly. “I don’t blame you.”

“Thank you!” Tony groaned. “Jeez, you’d think the others just don’t have eyes!”
Natasha chuckled softly at that, and rose to her feet. She kissed his cheek briefly. “Let me know if we’ll need to kill him,” she said, light and affectionate, before slipping away.

“Will do,” he responded, and sank heavily back to lean against the counter.

He had a brief worry that Loki would appear next, having been listening the whole time, since the trickster had been MIA since he woke up this morning, but after five minutes and no reappearance, Tony was satisfied that the dramatic entrance window had shut, and left the kitchen, headed for his lab.

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Of all the things Tony might have expected to find in his lab, an unfairly gorgeous blonde in Aesir-styled garb less armored than most, leaving her shoulders and her admirable cleavage, as well as her mid-back, exposed, was not one of them. Even less expected was how closely, intimately she was tucked against Loki, who wore one of his usual Midgardian-casual-by-a-prince’s-standards silk button-downs with rolled-up sleeves, and still-distracting black denim. Amora was almost cuddled up against his back, her arms looping his waist and her chin resting on his shoulder as she watched an illusion dancing between his hands, a smile of childish glee on her face, lighting up her sea-green eyes.

Tony was torn between arousal and something disturbingly akin to a possessive pang of irritation, but strode in casually, unaffected as could be. “Friend of yours?” he asked lightly. He noticed that the illusion in Loki’s hands was actually a hologram, JARVIS’, and something in his stomach twisted between pride and jealous discomfort. It was a map he and Loki had been working on, to pass on to Asgard’s forces around various known orbiting bodies.

Amora turned her stare on him immediately, her grin widening still further as she squeezed Loki a bit, making the trickster roll his eyes and shoot her a mock-exasperated look that was still a hint affectionate, by Loki’s usual standards. He was relaxed around her, his shields lower in her presence in a way Tony wasn’t actually used to seeing the trickster, while anyone else was in the room. “This is the one that caught you into an alliance, then?” the Enchantress mused, looking him up and down, then glancing back at the hologram and eyeing it in a similar fashion. “Oh, now I don’t see why you’d be averse, knowing you.”

“Tony, this is Amora, long-time fellow mischief-maker and former aggressive would-be beau of my brother’s. I believe you’ve met her Executioner before, but I did ask she not bring him along today,” Loki drawled, sounding carelessly droll.

“Skurge doesn’t do well indoors, when the walls are made of anything less than a few feet of solid stone the likes of granite, I’m afraid,” the Enchantress sighed, untangling herself from the trickster and sidling up to Tony as though she had no idea what a hand-shake was, invading his personal space a little as she leaned in and examined his face closely. “You look like you’ve had a trying morning, I think.”

“Well, people,” Tony countered, beginning to adjust to the idea that Amora didn’t find personal space to be a thing with people she decided weren’t enemies for the time being. He’d seen her a few times, helped Thor our of skirmishes with her, but never really met her or been introduced. “Nice to finally meet you properly.”
“Oh yes.” She eyed the nearest suit of armor sidelong. “I’ve always been a bit intrigued by some of the mages this world produces, so astonishing what you all make with vast understanding and the resources you can bend to your will. Your means are the most elegant, yet still primal, that I’ve seen from Midgard yet.” She took hold of his arm and tugged him over to the table, pushing him into place between her and Loki, leaning close enough that Tony’s left hip and thigh pressed alongside the trickster’s, while Amora’s rested along his right. Tony was increasingly amused. It wasn’t often people recklessly disregarded his personal space; he was Tony Stark and people were used to respectful distance, or being almost afraid to dare touch him. Amora’s carefree forthrightness and fondness for casual physical contact without direct flirtation, was novel and oddly charming. “Loki was just displaying some of your illusion capabilities as well as explaining why I might need to lay low in Alfheim in the upcoming weeks. I never get on with visiting Aesir mages, these days.” Her eyes narrowed, her expression turning exquisitely poisonous all of a sudden.

“So yes, she’s a friend,” Loki responded, seeing Tony look between the two of them with good-humored understanding.

“I can see how.”

“You weren’t jealous were you?” Amora asked dryly, sounding bored as she reached out and tilted the hologram a bit, examining Polynesia with a small scowl.

“I’m aware blondes aren’t exactly his type,” the inventor shot back.

The Enchantress turned a wickedly amused grin at him for just a brief moment before the laughter broke free and she giggled behind one hand. “Oh, so true.” She wiped at one eye. “He wasn’t even fond of Sif until after the hair incident.”

“Wait, that was actually true? How even-” Tony started.

“It was, in truth, a bit more accidental,” Loki tried to qualify.

Amora, having none of it, added sharply, “It was only almost permanent on accident and even Odin isn’t sure how. She’s lucky that Dvergarheim specializes in various means of recovery from hair loss, despite their limited Aesir-compatible materials. Better black hair than permanent baldness.”

Tony laughed, low in his chest. “Seriously?”

“I was very young,” the trickster sighed.

“That was the excuse I heard for something involving you and a giant snake, too. You really must’ve been a bit of a menace,” the inventor mused.

Loki shot him a sharp look. “How did that come up?” he asked coolly.

“Sif mentioned that JARVIS reminded her of Fenrir.” Tony arched an eyebrow. “I was curious if Jormungandr was another invention of yours.”

“Not mine, no, though old tradition I had previously been unaware of, at the time, dictates that the one who soothes it back to rest, should it rise, is regarded as its master and responsible for its maintenance,” Loki murmured, his eyes on the map as Amora continued to turn and examine it with shrewd eyes.

“So are you?” Tony asked lightly.

“Odin decided to keep that job for himself, and awoke Jormungandr briefly to verify his health was
intact, and then subdued him again,” Amora murmured. “This constellation over this island chain puzzles me, Loki.”

Tony reached out, dragging his fingers along the panels and controls projected on the table before them. Orange-red dots showed up in the apparent open spots. “Kahunas have that area covered. We’re on good terms with Pele, and she’s happy to show off for the Aesir, given a chance.”

“Oh, I’d like to see that,” Amora murmured. “I haven’t spoken with her in ages, since she made that voyage back home to the rest of her people. How did you persuade her to come back?”

“She owes this world some favor, and her heart may no longer be tied to one of those islands, but they and their people still mean as much to her as children,” Loki explained. “It was not difficult to persuade one as passionate and loving as Pele that she would enjoy such battle, and a chance to revisit and repay those places.”

Reminded a bit of Pepper, Tony smiled fondly. “She sounds fun.”

“She is,” Amora mused, light and affectionate. “Not grand at subtlety or minor mischief, but for a cascade of fire and brilliance there are few to outshine her. She makes a fine friend, while she is near enough to warm.” She hummed, thoughtful. “I would see this war of yours, Loki dear. You always put on such fine shows.”

Tony could see the idle gleam of something more calculated in the trickster’s expression, and met Loki’s eye. The god of mischief held his stare a moment and tilted his head, one eyebrow raised: as much daring him to question as asking his thoughts.

“It would screw with Asgard a bit if you were on our side for this too,” the inventor mused. “They’re already pretty ticked off at Loki here.”

“They usually are, these days,” Amora responded, playful. *Try harder.*

“I knew I should’ve gotten video of Odin’s face yesterday, but I thought a raven would steal my phone,” Tony sighed.

That piqued the Enchantress’ expression a bit further. “What sort of expression?”

“Like someone pissed in his helmet and he suspected it was us.”

Loki himself snorted and coughed at the expression, while Amora burst out laughing, loud and bright. “Oh by the Norns,” she squeaked.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Loki. When we first came in, was that not the look?”

“I cannot disagree,” the trickster sniffed. “Though your turn of phrase does it a unique degree of justice.”

“Don’t act like you’re too surprised or any less crude deep down,” Tony chided.

“I am a prince,” Loki reminded.

“And who knows obscenity better than royalty with a lot of free time to enjoy all the privileges of their position? I’d know. I’m as close to royalty as you get in this hemisphere, these days,” the inventor riposted, with a leering grin.

“Well, I can’t argue your skill at matters obscene.”
“I’m no more inclined to know about your escapades, Loki, than you are mine,” Amora teased lightly. “Do keep that in mind, or I’ll detail the recent tricks I’ve taught Skurge to do with his—”

“Please stop,” the trickster deadpanned.

“What if I’m curious?” Tony asked lightly, grin widening.

“All you, really?” Amora turned her sharp eyes back onto him, avidly intrigued and smiling like she wanted to cut him into tender little pieces to be fed to her by her loyal servant.

Suddenly, the inventor felt instinctively less curious, particularly as he considered what he knew of Loki’s shamelessness and the fact the trickster still did not want to know to the point of asking her openly to please not go there. He also thought about Skurge being subservient to her delicate, expressive and almost bubbly self, and decided that maybe he didn’t want to know just how twisted and malicious her sweetness truly was, all the way down, to keep the likes of Skurge the Executioner deeply enthralled with no mind control, even while Amora chased after Thor’s affections at the same time. “You know, I think if it disturbs even Loki, maybe I need a bit more context before agreeing to that.”

The Enchantress pouted at him. “You don’t want to play with me, Mr. Stark?”

“I don’t know your game yet, no offense,” Tony responded, gently, but with a hint of fierce perceptiveness in his expression.

She half-smiled at that, a bit wickedly. “Oh, you must be fun.”

“I’d like to add a desire to see the look on Thor’s face, should you decide to ally with us,” Loki mused. “I’m sure that you and Skurge could wreak utter havoc on a single carrier-ship of the fleet just by yourselves, after all, and it’s so seldom you get to let him loose to his full capacity, no holds barred.”

“Yes, my pet does need exercising, and reward for enduring incarceration here, and for returning to me after his recent capture, the poor thing. You barely let him get any vengeance, Loki,” she complained, frowning at him melodramatically.

“How remiss of me. However might I make it up to him?” the trickster mused, light and airy, beginning to grin.

“Oh, I suppose a dose of pure, unadulterated massacre might make his eyes light up just delightfully.” Amora responded. “You may arrange for it, and I shall ally myself to you and this mortal for that purpose, according to your current war-plans as you’ve laid them out; I will refrain from pursuit of Thor, as well, as he is of less interest to me these days, in any case. I can hardly stand heroes when they get hung up on redemption.” she sighed, then added, “You have my solemn word upon this.” Her smile glittered with malice like sunshine over spilling broken glass. “It’s been a while since I’ve indulged in some therapeutic destruction myself.”

“You honor me, as always, with the benevolent gift of your divine presence,” Loki responded, in equally playful tones, like it was an old and familiar joke he could play straight even through cannon-fire and the end of the world, if he had to.

Amora beamed at him, then with almost innocent-looking childish glee, swaying a little so her skirt flared just a little. She looked then at Tony, expectant.

“I’m in awe of the opportunity to work with such stunning beauty and wit,” the inventor offered, sounding serious though his crooked grin and laughing eyes belied that more than a little, even as she
held out her hand expectantly, for Tony to gently cradle with his own fingers and press a light-as-air kiss to the back of it. She reached around him for Loki to do the same.

“I look forward to chaos and mayhem with you both,” she purred. “Now, I believe you mentioned something about the look on Thor’s face?” Her sweet, cheerfully giddy smile was somehow even more frightening than her more ferocious ones, when her eyes gleamed quite like they did then.

Tony leaned back a bit, his shoulder brushing Loki’s arm. “This is going to be violent, isn’t it?” he muttered, very quietly, his lips barely moving.

“Not if you play it so well as you did this negotiation. I’ll have to reward you later,” the trickster hissed in his ear, voice rich and dark with tantalizing promises.

“Well then,” the inventor said cheerfully. “I think breakfast should be ready by now. Nothing like a deeply disturbing shock to the system to wake everyone up in the morning, I suppose.”

Amora sidled around him to lean against Loki’s back again. “You should carry me,” she insisted, one hand gripping the fabric of his shirt.

Loki shot her an incredulous look.

She offered a mild pout, as much demand as it was plea. “I look more harmless that way and you know it.”

The trickster rolled his eyes exaggeratedly and pushed away from the table before dropping on one knee. “Only the once.”

Tony tried not to laugh, realizing suddenly that the Enchantress was like the slightly spoiled sister Loki never really had, as Amora wrapped her arms around the trickster’s neck and hooked her knees over his obligingly bent arms. When the god of lies shot him a glare, the mad inventor wore an expression of utmost innocence—except for the way he was clearly biting the inside of one cheek to keep from laughing.

“Not a word,” Loki intoned seriously, as he stood, Amora clinging to his back with an ecstatic smile.

“I said nothing.”

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The morning had been going so well, after the initial confrontation with Tony earlier, Steve couldn’t help but think. Monica Rambeau had dropped in, along with Maria Hill, for more updates on the Thanos situation, and also breakfast. Thor had updated them on the alliance with Asgard, Natasha supplied commentary and insight where applicable, Clint and Bruce bickered amiably over the last piece of bacon until Steve gave in and stood up to make more.

Monica eventually wandered over and stood next to the stove as he worked, leaning back against the counter and watching the rest of the Avengers and Agent Hill with some amusement. Hill and Romanov got on very well, but the rest of the Avengers still caused Fury’s second-in-command to bristle a bit with unease and mild offense, until she leaned away from them enough to be nearly pressed against Natasha’s side.
“You doing alright?” Monica asked. “I hear Stark’s, ah, relations with a certain god of lies might be a bit challenging to deal with.”

“I’m concerned for his health, is all,” the super-soldier admitted easily enough. “I’m not exactly surprised they’re, ah, so casually involved, given both of their histories, but they’re both not exactly used to getting involved with people who understand them so well almost without trying and I think it puts them both at more risk emotionally than they either realize, or are willing to admit.” He then shot her an amused, slightly teasing smile. “Are they why Maria is here instead of Fury today?”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing he was given some warning about their ‘alliance’ becoming ‘allies with benefits’ before he showed up here and shot anyone,” she acknowledged.

Steve chuckled. “I had a feeling.”

“You told me about Thor’s recent attitude change, though,” she reminded.

“He... mentioned a few things that made me almost think he’d been talking to you, except they all referred to Loki. I think... I think it’s something to do with him being adopted. Loki, that is.”

“I’ve read the files, yeah,” Monica murmured. “And I’ve done a bit of reading, but the myths are only so reliable, I know.”

“Jotunns, then,” the old soldier said thoughtfully.

“Yes. They sound pretty interesting, actually.”

“You think... I got the impression from Thor before, that he thought Loki had self-loathing issues, but I think that’s changed. I think he’s shifted the blame a bit, and it’s not Loki’s heritage he’s ashamed of, but everyone from Asgard he trusted, respected, or revered, and himself for letting them ever influence him as much as they did. I think he’s angry at them for believing his nature shameful, when a lot of his nature is just... more Jotunn than Aesir?”

Monica nodded, thoughtful. “That would make sense, given the transcript of that speech of his you emailed me, from the incident on Titan. I’ll talk to Thor about it later, maybe. It’s pertinent info to have.”

Then Tony strolled in, with Loki a bit behind him carrying...

Steve almost dropped the platter of bacon in his hand, but had the presence of mind to instead set it loudly on the counter and push it back from the edge, hopefully enough to keep it out of harm’s way. He and Monica then moved in tandem to physically restrain a suddenly enraged Thor, who had risen to his feet sharply with a noise of betrayal and rage, seeming about to lunge for his brother and the pretty blonde girl contently carried on his back.

“Easy, easy, Thor, let them explain,” Steve insisted.

“Why did you bring this Enchantress here, Loki?” the thunder god roared.

“Initially to warn her that Aesir mages would be more common around here in the coming weeks,” the trickster mused, “but then she offered to ally with myself and Tony Stark in aid against Thanos’ fleet, and we accepted.”

Thor’s expression was now 50% hurt, along with the anger. Whether that was progress or not was hard to say. “What?”
“She’s given her word not to harass you physically or romantically,” Tony said, trying to soothe. “Also she might have mentioned she finds your recent fixation on redemption unattractive.”

Amora giggled a little, setting her chin atop Loki’s head and beaming, but not contradicting the mortal in the least.

“Thor, please,” the mad inventor said. “She’s willing to help us destroy one or more ships of Thanos’ fleet with Skurge, as partial amends to Skurge for his recent incarceration on earth, and perhaps a...” He shot the Enchantress a quick, wary sidelong glance, and let his tone take on a dry, not-quite sarcastic edge. “-a benevolent gesture of something like gratitude for Loki’s returning her pet to her.”

The blonde Aesir snorted, looking aloof, but lifted her chin enough to incline her head in gracious acknowledgement.

Thor ceased struggling against the super-soldier and high-powered lady restraining him, at least. “If you touch me, or any I care about here in Midgard, or put them in danger even indirectly, Amora, then I will not hesitate to end your life,” he rumbled, low and dangerous.

“I’ve no intention to do so. You’ve come to bore me, thunderer,” Amora responded. “Be at ease; for the time being, I am Loki’s ally, and that of Anthony Stark, and have given my word to act within their war-plans until the battle with Thanos’ fleet is ended. Then I will return to my ways, but until then, trust me as much as you might your own brother,” she mocked, her smile very cruel, then.

The Avengers, sans Tony and Thor, exchanged uneasy glances.

“Tony, you keep making alliances like this, and S.H.I.E.L.D. may be forced to question your ‘hero’ status,” Maria Hill sighed, sounding both resigned and caustic.

“It’s in my planet’s best interest, Agent Hill,” the inventor offered, with a sickly sweet and cheerful smile of his own that showed all his teeth.

“Lovely to meet you all on such friendly terms,” the Enchantress sighed, as though infatuated with them all. She fluttered her eyelashes for emphasis. “I look forward to fighting in your amusing little war.” She waved her fingers at them all, then promptly vanished in a flash of glittering gold light.

Loki lowered his arms, hands settling in his pockets as though this were all perfectly normal. “Food, was mentioned?”

Thor, recently released in the wake of Amora’s absence, was on him in a second, pinning him to the nearest wall by his throat. The wall itself threatened to crack and the impact vibrated through the rest of the kitchen a bit. “You!”

The trickster was showing his teeth in a parody of mirth that didn’t have even enough feigned civility in it to merit being called a smile. He wrapped his hands gently around the thunder god’s wrists, staring him down as though he had all the time in the world. Then his hands glowed and Thor’s knees hit the floor, a noise like a muffled scream escaping the larger god. Expression cooling into stony, hateful sharpness, Loki hissed, “She has been a better friend to me than any of yours ever have, Thor.”

The thunderer lifted his head again, breathing hard as he met his adoptive brother’s unwavering stare with anger and pain in his own. “She has tried to kill me. She has violated my mind and attempted worse against me, body and soul.”

Expression unchanging, Loki tilted his head a little to one side. “I do not agree with or approve of her past actions. You are no longer trophy to her, for she knows how pyrrhic her victory would be.”
“How are you certain of this?” Thor snapped.

The trickster smirked faintly. “She sought to capture you, before, believing she could play with you, win your affection and selective blindness as I had somehow done, because she and I are so alike. Like myself, she lashes out at what she knows you most fear, in her words and threats, when she herself is undermined or insulted and cannot hold in her emotional response fully, but she wanted you for rather more than a puppet as you have always been quick to accuse her, Thor, and that fear made her hate you as much as she loved you, for you are a rare exception in her life: a noble man she still desired and wanted to struggle with as an equal she felt she might trust, in time. While inept and horrible in expressing her affections for you, she did not ever truly wish to break you or force you; she has myriad others with still prettier faces, for all that, throughout the nine realms, some of whom might offer themselves far more willingly to one such as her. I know her of old, Thor, and have for a very long time; why do you think she rarely dared meddle with you when I was close enough at hand to affect the outcome?”

The thunderer shook his head, disbelieving, but also curious. “Did you never bid her stop?” he rasped.

“I warned her, whenever she went too far, and I could hunt her down successfully after the fact, and those few occasions that I was on hand to aid you against her, I’m sure you’ll remember very well that I hardly encouraged her behavior. We fought over it, where you did not think to look or ask, but it did not destroy what trust and affection we had built before then.”

After a long moment, the thunder god’s arms lost some of their resistant tension. “But how could you remain her friend her at all?”

“We have much in common. She wanted you. I wanted to be you, once, a very long time ago, but still knew the jealous desire she felt well enough, by the time I met her, to be an utter nuisance to her until she learned the wisdom of me, and that I made a better friend than foe to her.” He let his adoptive brother go, then.

Thor’s arms fell limply to hang at his sides. “You trust her, in this?”

“It is not you she is after, and she has been trying for some long while to stop thinking about you as more than an entertaining pastime to annoy, almost nostalgic,” Loki offered. “She is my ally.”

“That does not make her mine, anymore than it ever did.”

A glitter of surprised, bitter amusement flashed in the trickster’s eyes and he folded his arms across his chest. “It is indeed high time you learned that lesson, but times have changed, at least for a little while. You are part of my plans against Thanos, and she has sworn to act within the bounds of those plans, until my war is done.” He stepped around Thor and strode out of the kitchen altogether, not sparing any of the others even a glance.

An awkward silence followed.

Tony, closest and least awed, strode up to Thor and rested a hand on one of the god’s heavy shoulders. “You okay, big guy?”

The thunderer wore a gutted expression when he tilted his head up and to one side to meet the mad inventor’s slightly worried gaze. “I think that I have truly known nothing all these long years, these many centuries.”

“You’ve known some. You just would have learned more if you’d picked up the art of asking
dangerous questions a bit sooner,” Tony assured. “You’re sharper than most, though, here or in Asgard, so far as I can tell. Don’t tell me you think you, of all people, aren’t stubborn enough to catch up just because Loki’s a bit quicker than you?”

Thor smiled faintly, bitterly. “There was a time that I could swear he was always chasing after me, but I think in truth I have more often followed where he led, chased him or chased what he wished me to, and he only chased me when I was fool enough to behave contrary to his plans.”

“His plans can be clever, but sometimes with the occasional fatal flaw,” Tony mused, low and droll. “Such as ‘well, if he wanted the whole planet gone and obviously knew the bi-frost capable of that sort of destructive power, wouldn’t Odin have done it himself a long time ago?’ and other examples.”

“You stopped him then,” Steve pointed out, approaching them, too, and sliding down the wall to sit beside Thor. “Maybe that’s what he still needs you for, sometimes.”

“You just say that because we use the two of you for that,” Natasha added, from her place at the table. “You and Thor, that is, Steve.”

Both blonds looked at her sharply, a bit puzzled.

“Sometimes Clint, but only out of desperation,” Bruce also added.

“Hey!”

“Your moral-compass rating is good, but you approve of a few too many of Tony’s crazier ideas with enthusiasm,” Natasha explained to the archer.

“‘Moral-compass’?” Steve repeated dubiously.

“Look, boys,” Tony said, mock-sternly. “You see before you a former Merchant of Death with a track record of questionable life choices and an amoral streak that the likes of you actual good-guys can often scarcely fathom unless you make the mistake of talking to me before I’ve had my coffee in the morning; a former assassin with a skill-set that allows for amoral tactics I don’t have the subtlety or physique to pull off, and some of which make even me squirm; and Bruce who is a good guy with serious rage issues and also a history of reckless self-endangerment and rampant destruction, albeit not with nearly as many civilian casualties as Natasha and I can probably be held accountable for. We are not ‘nice people’ and without people in my life like Pepper and Rhodey, I think we all know I alone would’ve likely turned out to be an actual super-villain fit to give Dr. Doom a run for his money, but where those two can’t follow me due to their own careers and lives, you guys can and do.”

The inventor gestured, like he couldn’t help it, at the two on the floor with one hand and Clint at the table with the other. “I mean just... You keep me from fucking up too bad, going too far, careening off the deep end and into chaotic depths of ruthlessness and apathy. You remind me there are innocent people out there who are more than numbers, because you’re so human and full of hope that I remember not everyone is as fucked up and broken as I am, and they deserve a chance to live to become just as jaded and full of regrets, or to maybe make your stupid faces light up with joy when they thank us for saving them later—those things. And it’s not just me who feels that way, I know that, we three chat about it. You do that for all of us.”

“Seriously?” the archer was shooting Nat a searching look, and she was trying not to meet it.

Tony waved both hands at Clint, then, like he was trying to quickly fan away a fog of doubt. “Yes,
even you fucking do it! You and the golden twins here keep us in the light, and anchor us there. If it were just me, Nat, and Bruce running this thing? We’d be a terrifying force to be reckoned with, yeah, but we’d also wind up being hunted down by everyone else on the planet because we’d scare them and leave behind more blood than we should without thinking as much of it as we really probably should.” He huffed. “There, now we’ve all had moments of emotional significance here. Agent Hill, stop smirking, and Rambeau do you need a tissue? You look suspiciously glassy-eyed.”

“I’m fine,” Monica said, but wiped at one corner of her right eye, blinking rapidly. “I was simply not prepared for lurid emotional drama when I dropped by, today.”

“Speaking of, I should probably find Loki,” the inventor muttered. “JARVIS? Where is he sulking?”

“He may or may not be deconstructing and reconstructing something elaborate in your private laboratory, sir,” the AI responded.

Monica whistled. “You let him play in there?”

“He can teleport, and while I could stop him, he’d be pissy about it and find a way to seek really inconvenient retribution. Besides, he leaves less of a mess around than Bruce and his various bacterial and viral cultures,” Tony responded vaguely, with a shooing motion in Bruce’s direction like he was recalling cleaning up after the other scientist, but his gaze was fixed on the ceiling, looking distant and thoughtful.

“We need to talk strategy, Stark,” Agent Hill reminded.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll let you know if I think cool-down will take more than half an hour or so. If not, I’ll have JARVIS call you in,” the inventor said, and turned his attention back to Thor. “You’re doing better with him, you know.”

“Am I?” Thor sounded unimpressed.

“He actually answered your questions almost-directly, and with a bit more sincerity than usual, you aren’t bleeding, and you’re not the only one whose equilibrium is thrown off this time.”

At that, the thunder god appeared thoughtful. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Keep up the good work.” Tony clapped Thor on the shoulder. “Don’t call me, I’ll call you. I’m the one he’s not allowed to kill, and he can probably find a way to replace any of the rest of you, so give me a while,” he declared, as he turned on his heel and stalked out the door, looking somehow both confrontational and wary.

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Tony knew when he was being provoked, passive-aggressively or otherwise. Finding Loki working on the mechanisms in his armor: that was an attempt to provoke. The inventor was touchy about the armor being altered by anyone other than himself, after far too many close calls, but there was a game here. There was what the trickster was hoping to do (get a reaction, see him sharp and irritated and have an excuse to extend his own claws) and there was how this was actually going to play out.

“What are you enhancing, exactly?” Tony’s voice lacked inflection, and his expression was mildly curious, as he approached.
The trickster shot him a quick, knowing look, not disappointed, but not playful as he might have been about such a tactic, were he in another mood. “Increasing the efficiency of your magic-repellent fields while lowering their energy consumption,” Loki responded, his expression an immaculate mask as he fixed his attention back on delicate fibers of machinery. He used small tools, but one of them glowed very faintly green, rather than the usual cold blue of Stark Industries lighted instruments.

“With magic?” the inventor asked.

“It’s hardly active at present.”

“Show scans, JARVIS?” Tony tapped the nearest display console, which obligingly lit up. “Simulations look good.” He nodded lightly. “Interesting way of clearing your head by means of being helpfully self-destructive in the long term.”

“There are not potent enough liquors on this planet for me to manage it less helpfully or amusingly with similar ease,” the trickster countered. “I thought I’d try one of your other vices for a time.”

The inventor shot him a sidelong glance, half-smirking. “By your standards, that’s taking pot-shots, Princess Peach.”

Loki’s expression did deign to sour a little at that, just the slightest hint of a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Perhaps.”

“You provided surprisingly direct answers to Thor, though.”

“And he seemed to almost understand them.”

“And that bothers you?”

The trickster carefully retracted his hands from the Iron Man armor, and leaned back in Tony’s chair, looking thoughtful and a bit distant. He folded one arm across his chest and rested the thumb of his opposite hand against the underside of his chin. After a few long seconds of silence, he admitted, low and calm, “It is not wholly rational, but yes, it does bother me.” Bright green eyes, quick and sly, darted up to catch the inventor’s in their stare. “And you believe that you understand why?”

“Actually, it’s one bit I don’t get,” Tony said, with a sincere shrug.

“Is it my turn, then, to extrapolate some of your own nature for you?” He sounded faintly amused, and a bit warning.

“Enlighten me, god of chaos,” the inventor shot back, moving around the table to perch on the edge of it, between one of the god of mischief’s long legs and the spread of tools and armor behind him.

“I observed it not long after we first met, in the tension between yourself and Captain Rogers,” Loki offered. “You looked upon him with an almost jealous condescension.”

“Jealous condescension. No wonder you recognized it,” Tony mused.

“Oh yes. The better, the more honest and yet morally clean (most particularly in his apparent lack of interest in questioning S.H.I.E.L.D.’s authority and truthfulness) in his approach to topics in conversation with you, the more deliberately offensive you would become.” The trickster turned the chair toward him more directly, looking into his eyes as though reading something within them that held him between fascination and something almost like hesitation. One booted foot tugged him closer to the inventor, so his knees were on either side of Tony’s legs. “The better he was, the more
you could not stand him, for you have never been able to stomach being so simple and earnest and straightforward. Your mind wanders too far from such set paths, you question until seemingly straight paths become as twisted and forked as your words and your ways. His presumption of simple goodness being superior to your own vision offended you.”

“In the beginning, yeah, that annoyed me. He’s got a practical streak, though. Just a few too many things he said sounded like what my dad would’ve said he’d say. Howard tended to compare me to him when he was being particularly critical of my lifestyle, which was one I had to adopt to survive living as his son, because being any less jaded and cynical just wasn’t an option, with so many people inclined to use me.” Tony added. “Yeah, not bad assessment, Loki. You’ve been building this resentment a lot longer that I have, though.”

Loki nodded. “Of course. We were raised together.”

“And his successes were praised disproportionately, because they were more golden.” Tony nodded. “You instinctively ache when he succeeds at something like worthiness, even it’s just worthiness of your own attention and keener observation.”

The trickster winced only a little. “Quite.”

“Thor isn’t actually a fool, and you know it.”

“It would be so much easier if he would remain so,” Loki muttered, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “I could have peace in hatred of him, I know that I could.”

“You could have the comfort of pride and righteous indignation, you mean.”

“Such comfort.”

“He deserves more than that. He was lied to almost as much as you were, and brainwashed into most of his ignorances to a deeper level than your nature allowed you to be.”

Lips curling back from his teeth, Loki shot him a brief glare. “You are suggesting that my nature lead me to doubt, rather than my intellect.”

“You make your own crooked path. It’s dissatisfaction that does it. His life was only dissatisfying when it proved boring to him, or hurt those he cared about in ways he could see and understand. You, by contrast, are always bored, always pushing, always craving more; you also were forced to become quickly adept at hiding when you’re hurt.”

“The same can be said of you.”

“Yeah. We’re both naturally pretty crooked people.”

“Yet you are the hero.”

“I used to be the Merchant of Death. Heroism is all in how you spin the story, and how many people want to believe it.”

That earned him a wicked smirk from the god of lies, crooked as both of them. “You do quite well at that. You keep your public quite enthralled.”

“The advantages of modern media and selective exposure. Brevity is the secret to selective omission, and the secret to only showing them what they want to see. Consider it one of few advantages to a shorter lifespan than a millennia,” Tony responded.
“I’d be curious what you’d be forced to do with longer exposure.”

“Working on it.”

The trickster’s eyebrows raised. “You really are a mage at heart.”

“Aww, you think I have a heart! No one ever thinks that,” Tony mocked.

“Ahem.” Loki pointed to a small, mounted display of the first generation travel-sized arc reactor, with its oh-so-unmissable plaque.

“That’s beside the point. That’s Pepper. She sees good where I can’t even bring myself to try.”

“Including yourself?”

“Especially myself.”

At that, Loki shot him a look that questioned, without quite demanding.

“I actually have no idea how that breakup worked out peacefully, even now, but it did. She’s family. She’s my best friend and she runs most of my life that isn’t focused on building things and being Iron Man, but the ‘being lovers’ part didn’t keep, with us. I’m just glad it didn’t kill us, frankly, so no, that’s not a sore spot that can be exploited really. She’s vital to me, obviously, but that’s been the case long before all that. Same as it ever was.”

The trickster nodded thoughtfully. “Fair enough.”

“You?”

“Hm?”

“You have family that you don’t hate. They’re safe? I’ve been assuming.”

“They are far from this war, and even were they less so, Hel is favored by Mistress Death, Thanos’ love, and he would not dare offend her by murdering one of her chosen.”

“He’s not the jealous type?”

“Hel is a favorite, but not beloved. There is no question that Thanos is far more than that, and furthermore not assigned any duties or matters of honor as Hel is. He is given favoritism without being assigned a particular role to fulfill, with rules and restrictions, let alone a kingdom of the dead to upkeep.”

Tony nodded. “That reminds me, actually, that there is a certain sort of good in Thor you can’t hate even a little, you know.”

The trickster shot him a questioning look.

“When he talks about how proud he is of his niece, and it’s clear all over his face that he thinks the world of her,” the inventor explained.

Loki considered that for a moment, and half-smiled a bit too sincerely despite himself. “I will give you that.”

“Sir, Agent Hill is outside, demanding that I unlock the lab doors,” JARVIS announced. “Miss Rambeau appears to have made attempts to dissuade her, to little avail, and is making noises of
disapproval as we speak.”

The inventor grimaced. “Here I was hoping S.H.I.E.L.D. folk would have learned to be patient, by this point.”

“They are here to discuss strategy, I presume?” the trickster mused.

“Yeah, but I told them to wait. So.” Tony took advantage of the lack of arms on the chair Loki occupied and settled on the god’s lap, pressing their bodies flush and letting his legs grip both Loki’s hips and the back of the chair slightly.

Loki made a low noise of approval, his hands snaking cooperatively under the mad mortal’s shirt as his lips parted when Tony licked hotly at his mouth.

“In thirty seconds, JARVIS, go ahead and let ‘em in,” the inventor announced, then captured the trickster’s mouth in earnest, their tongues sliding past each other quickly, teasing and dueling, slick and aggressive and filthy. Tony groaned at the slight drag of teeth when the god added it into the mix, and sucked hard on Loki’s tongue in retaliation, making the trickster’s breath catch. Hands trailed up Loki’s hipbones to his waist, under that silk shirt, appreciating the sleek, wiry yet defined musculature under the god’s smooth skin.

They made quite a sight when Agent Hill finally stepped into the lab. She made a loud, disturbed, offended and choked-off sound.

By contrast, Monica merely raised her phone. The beep-and-click of a few pictures being taken followed.

“Monica!” Maria Hill sounded positively scandalized.

Tony pulled back at that, chuckling softly. “Send me copies.”

Loki bit at his lower lip briefly, a warning nip, then let his head tilt back and a bit to one side so he could take in the two women now approaching the other side of the work table. He smirked a bit when Tony nipped the resulting stretch of bared throat, like he couldn’t help it, before similarly pulling back to eye the interrupting pair. Eventually he reached out and grabbed the table, using it as leverage to pivot them both so that they both looked sideways, neither straining their necks too distractingly.

“I told you to wait, Hill,” the inventor drawled, unimpressed.

“Given the rumors, I don’t think interrupting you while you’re both still thankfully clothed is actually that bad of a thing,” the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent shot back. “I can’t stick around all day, Stark.”


“Well, they’re still fresh, given Natasha only just mentioned your bragging, Stark,” Monica mused, pocketing her phone. “Copies sent.”

“I wish you wouldn’t humor him,” Maria sighed.

“I wish you’d lighten up,” Monica shot back. “You wouldn’t be blushing half so hard if you hadn’t similarly appreciated the view, anyhow. I don’t know why you bother being so flustered over it.”

Both inventor and deity beamed at that, smugly preening.
Agent Hill glared at them, but the hint of color didn’t leave her face.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, Miss...” Loki said to Monica.

She stepped closer leaning across the table to extend a hand. “Monica Rambeau. Former agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., current civilian consultant and occasional contractor. I’m also considered their unofficial, unconventional cultural attache when it comes to helping acclimate new arrivals to our world from other timelines, alternate universes and dimensions, or other planets.”

“She introduced Steve to the modern era,” Tony offered, as Loki reached out to shake her hand. “Also helped your brother out in the tact department.”

“Impressive,” the trickster acknowledged. “What think you of me, then, Miss Rambeau?”

“Call me Monica. And I think you’re a manipulative asshole, but all I’ve read in your files, and from what little I’ve seen of you so far, makes it pretty clear that you’re astute when it comes to people and avoiding unwanted attention, such that you most likely have caught on quick to the culture and etiquette around here on Earth, and most of your deviances from it probably tend to be more deliberate than accidental. Just at a guess,” she offered, with a casual shrug. “More than that, I haven’t really had a chance to observe from you.”

Tony cut in, “Pull up another seat or something, if you’re here to talk strategy. JARVIS, let’s change tables if you could please?”

The work table between them rolled away to one side, others in the room moving slightly to accommodate it, while one that was clear of tools and debris replaced the cluttered one.

“You need a chair of your own there, Stark?” Maria asked pointedly.

“I have a seat, clearly,” Tony shot back, smirking, as Loki pulled them closer to the edge of the fresh table, so they could both reach almost to the middle of it.

The agent sighed in resigned exasperation, even as Monica causally dragged a work bench over to rest on their side of the table. When the civilian woman shot her a pointed look and sat down calmly, Maria reluctantly followed suit. “Last we heard, you were looking into strategy for keeping our skies protected, and might need aid arranging organization of a number of powerful people around the planet to that end?”

“Taken care of, actually,” Loki said. “We have an arrangement with Asgard for that, now. We will still require S.H.I.E.L.D. to monitor the skies and track any downed ships to their eventual landing, and organize some forces to deal with survivors post-landing. The coordinates of any landed vessel which Aesir forces identify as containing any non-enemy occupants will need to be shared with the Avengers, who will be handling those, given that even S.H.I.E.L.D.-trained forces might not be capable of containing some of Thanos’ allies if they might have taken any Kree, Titan, or other non-enemy combatants hostage as means to negotiate safe passage, which we must factor in. Those containing only the enemy, S.H.I.E.L.D. forces should be able to handle the containment and neutralization of on their own; survivors will be fewer, if any, in those cases, as the Aesir will hold nothing back against them.”

“Are there any plans in place for deserters not heading for Earth?” Monica asked.

“They will be left to their own devices, having clearly come to their senses.”

“And if one of them happens to be Thanos?” Hill asks.
“I will prevent him myself, should he try that tactic, but it would be contrary to anything those who know of him, and of his history, would expect,” Loki responded.

“He’s got a history of not taking defeat well, and aiming to increase body count as fast as possible once he realizes he’s not going to win,” Tony added. “It’s almost ritualistic with him, given he considers everyone he kills to be a gift to his lady-love.”

“His lady-love?” Monica repeated, questioning.

“Death,” Maria explained. “A physical manifestation of Death.”

“Mistress Death, particularly. She has other forms, but that one is most common among sentient races in this region of the galaxy,” the trickster amended further.

Maria nodded grimly. “Yes, we’re aware of her. She has made a dozen documented appearances to some of our agents. Those are just the ones who admit to it, of course. Barton, for example, reported Agent Romanov explaining Mistress Death to him on the one occasion that he sighted her on a mission, suggesting she is more than a little familiar with Mistress Death too; although she’s never reported such a matter to S.H.I.E.L.D. herself, suggesting her own history with the apparition is longer than her history with us.”

Loki hummed. “It would not surprise me if she were a favorite of Mistress Death’s. It might explain a lot, actually.”

“How exactly will Asgard’s forces keep in communication with S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Monica inquired. “We have a knowledge gap, between Asgardian magic and our own technology. Is that being bridged?”

“Look at me. Look at this mage here,” Tony said dryly. “Now look back at me. What do you think?”

“That you both have a habit of playing things close to the vest, particularly where your trade secrets are concerned,” Maria shot back.

“When not allied with another mind capable of understanding our respective tricks of the trade, yes,” Loki acknowledged. “This is a unique case. I will be working with Aesir mages in the coming weeks. If S.H.I.E.L.D. will send one or two of their own experts, or else simply experts you trust to work with you, they may try to keep up with Tony as he works alongside us to design a communication system which supports receiving and translating information from a magic-based system, as well as sending replies of a sort that system can accept and deliver to the appropriate ears, but I personally believe Stark the only Midgardian currently qualified for such a task.”

“We could request the aid of Dr. Jane Foster,” Maria shot back.

Loki’s disapproving expression was worth a thousand words of condescension.

“She’s done a lot of impressive work on that front, actually,” Tony muttered. “She’s also closer to understanding the bi-frost and your own inter-realm teleportation methods than even I am, and she’s less likely to be traumatized by working with you again than Selvig is, and he’s the next option she’s likely to suggest.”

“For the record, I’d recommend against asking Selvig to do that,” Monica said sharply. “His last psych evaluation alone would be reason enough.”

“Dr. Connors has been working with him, and knows most of Selvig’s theories almost as well as Selvig himself, and he’s the one who helped Dr. Simmons perfect the system allowing us to get rid
of external receivers for the inner-ear comms, replacing them with embedded sensorineural silicone matched to individuals’ DNA,” Maria reminded her, almost soothingly. “There’s no need to get Dr. Selvig involved in interplanetary politics again.”

“I’m not on the best terms with Connors,” Tony warned. “I can work with Foster, but Connors might actually try to slit my throat, I think.”

“If you hadn’t sent him a pair of alligator boots with a card reading ‘sorry Iron Man helped Spidey kick your ass, but welcome back to humanity’ on them, when you found out he was working with Selvig, that might not be the case, Stark,” Maria sighed.

“It’s not my fault his sense of humor is lacking,” the inventor deadpanned. At Loki’s questioning look, he added, “The guy was trying to grow back his arm and wound up applying more reptilian qualities to himself than planned, which grew back his limb and all, but also turned him into a big rampaging lizard-monster.”

The trickster snorted, amused.

“See, he thinks it’s funny,” Tony insisted.

“Relying on the sense of humor of an interplanetary criminal responsible for one barely-botched attempt at genocide using Asgardian infrastructure and almost destroying an entire planet in the process, and a violent invasion of earth with frankly over-the-top theatricality even for someone being monitored for loyalty by a mad Titan, doesn’t actually help your case, Stark.”

The inventor huffed a sigh of mock-offense. “No fun at all.”

“I can work with Dr. Foster and Tony, on this project,” Loki assured. “They will more than suffice, and any further humans involved would only lead to further strained explanations, and slow down the process, given Foster and Stark are the most well-versed in the necessary fields of study and research for this.”

“Foster might not want to work with you again,” Maria reminded.

“I would recommend that you ask Thor to present the request to her. He has been visiting her for lunch on a bi-weekly basis already, and will be the only individual she might actually believe, if he tells her the conditions and restrictions my aid and alliance currently fall under,” the trickster suggested.

Maria nodded. “Not a bad plan.”

“Leave it to me. I need to discuss a few things with him, anyway,” Monica offered.

“That taken care of... Amora?” the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent asked lightly.

“I believe that subject has been covered,” Loki said coldly.

“She’s caused S.H.I.E.L.D. almost more trouble than you have in the past year or two, Loki. You can’t expect us to trust her,” Maria chided.

“She will not be involved with this war anywhere near your planet,” the trickster shot back. “She will be aiding forces to destroy Thanos’ fleet. No more, no less. That is what she has given her word toward, and any actions she takes after that will be outside any alliance with myself and Tony, and you may doubt and hunt for her at your leisure.”
After a long silence, Maria Hill finally nodded. “Acceptable.”

“Good. I strongly recommend that you leave now,” Loki responded, curling a hand around the back of Tony’s neck, slow and deliberate and a little possessive. “We were busy, earlier, as you might have noticed.”

Agent Hill swore at them and rose to her feet quickly, storming from the room.

Monica sniggered a bit, but also rose to her feet. “Nice to meet you, Loki. Have fun, Stark,” she said to each of them, then turned on her heel and strode out, closing the door behind her firmly. Locks clicked into place loudly a few seconds later.

Tony had every intention of saying something witty in response before the door fully shut, but the trickster’s mouth against his pulse-point on one side of his throat proved an effective enough distraction and he instead made a small, appreciative noise and lost track of his words entirely until the snick-snap sounds of the locks jarred him back to attention. “Interrupting my quips,” he muttered, not sounding as disappointed as he’d been aiming for.

Loki hummed, smug and not at all fooled, his free hand sliding down from the inventor’s lower back to cup his ass and squeeze hard.

With a low sound in his throat, Tony arched his back a little, pressing into the firm grip of the trickster’s long fingers. “Eager are you?”

“I feel in need of pleasant distraction,” Loki responded quietly, lips brushing the mortal’s earlobe as he spoke. “You are very much that.”

“Same to you.” Tony ground his hips down hard, grinning at the way Loki’s jerked under him in response and a ragged moan escaped the trickster’s lips. “It’s really difficult to maintain a civil conversation when I can feel you getting no less hard throughout the whole thing,” he panted a little.

“Same to you. Let alone the way you move your hips when complimented.”

“I could’ve avoided that if not for your dick twitching when I complimented us both before that.”

Loki chuckled softly and captured his mouth, silver-tongue sliding in quick and deep and conquering this time, enjoying the slick-slide, and edge of teeth that Tony was caught just a little off-guard by, and soon went pliant against him bodily even as his mouth remained aggressive and hungry and unyielding. Loki pushed up the inventor’s shirt with one hand, and released the back of Tony’s neck long enough to banish all of their clothing from the waist down with a complicated gesture.

Tony jerked in surprise at the sudden exposure, the sudden closing of space between them where denim and cotton had been keeping them narrowly separated, and jerked hard at Loki’s shirt in retaliation, ripping it open so fast that half a dozen buttons went flying, hitting the floor around them, clicking almost like rain-drops on polished concrete. The trickster gave a satisfied rumbling sound and rolled his hips again, this time his length free to slide along-and-between Tony’s cheeks between them, making the inventor gasp, breaking the kiss for a moment.

“How sturdy is this chair of yours, Tony?”

Finding it difficult to think straight while Loki trailed two magically-slick-and-that-was-still-so-unfair fingers down from his lower back, down, down, to push into his entrance slow and patient. “I made it to be pretty damn close to indestructible. How’s your balance, Loki?” he queried in response, only sounding a little breathless as those talented fingers opened him up. Then they twisted slightly and even-more-unfair magic happened again, all slick and deep and good and Tony gave a rasping
moan, hips rocking forward for a bit of friction, then almost immediately back again for more of oh yes that. “Ffffuck, Loki, your hands, hnnghfuck!”

“Ride me.”

Tony shuddered at the words. “Yeah. You ready for me?” he breathed. He gripped the trickster’s shoulders for leverage, lifting himself a bit, giving Loki room to slick himself and line himself up. He bit his lip as the head of Loki’s cock slid into him, the rest held back, and held himself up until he got the word, tormenting them both.

Loki seized hold of his hips and leaned back a bit further in the chair, while sliding down just slightly, his hips a bit nearer the center and front edge of the chair. “Down, Tony. Slow, if you can,” he commanded, holding the mad inventor’s gaze.

Accepting the challenge, Tony began rotating his hips in the smallest circular movements he could manage, working himself down Loki’s cock by minute increments with each counter-clockwise roll. Halfway down he slid an inch up and changed directions, admiring the desperation that flashed through Loki’s expression at the sight: the trickster’s jaw clenching tighter, as his long fingers gripping Tony’s thighs tightened their hold enough that the inventor knew it would bruise. “Too slow?” he challenged.

Loki was as breathless as him now, eyes a bit glazed but still staring into the mortal’s own steadily. “You’re a magnificent tease,” he grit out.

“You should talk, magic-fingers,” Tony teased, only to hiss sharply when the fingers in question wrapped around his cock and began stroking, tight but not tight enough, and far too slow, up and down his length. It took him a few moments before he realized they were perfectly in time with every rotation of his hips, and the last three inches before he had the trickster sheathed to the hilt inside him, were maddening for him, but he was too stubborn to speed up, not when he could see just how much it was driving Loki crazy, too. “You keep that up, I might want your hand slick for me,” Tony demanded. “And tighter.”

“Demanding,” Loki managed, even as his hand drifted away, gestured as he murmured an incomprehensible syllable, and returned slick, gripping him tighter.

Tony rocked his whole body hard into the feeling, almost trapping Loki’s hand between their stomachs, and making them both groan. “I think I want you to beg me to make you come, like this,” Tony panted, his grip on Loki’s shoulders tightening. He paused enough to reach one hand down and tug a lever under the chair, dropping the seat of the chair a few inches closer to the ground, making it easier to reach for his feet as he straightened up a bit. Leverage achieved, he spun the seat around and pushed it back until the top of its back met the table.

Loki was staring up at him curiously now, eyes very dark. “I’m inclined to see you try, Tony.”

“You’ve got the super-strength,” Tony reminded lightly. “Grab the edge of the table behind you. Keep us from rolling anywhere.”

Slowly, Loki obliged and reached back behind him with his less slick hand, his grip on the table firm enough the metal audibly creaked. “Both hands, Loki.” He smirked when the trickster obediently withdrew his hand, settling it on the edge of the table on the other side of his head, now framed by the lines of his whipcord-muscled arms, Loki’s now-messy black hair spreading a bit on the table top when he let his head fall back a bit. “Very good.” Then Tony arched back up slowly, only to push back down hard, taking Loki fully into him again, and grinding them together rough and tight, pulling a low groan from the trickster and a tight hiss of breath from himself. The grinding became a
sort of undulation, push-and-pull like he might be mimicking the tide, and Tony could almost feel heat over his bare skin just from how intense the god’s stare felt, fixed on the flexing and rippling of muscles along the inventor’s abdomen as he moved.

Letting each movement shift further from back-and-forth and closer to up-and-down, Tony found just the right angle to drag Loki’s cock hard across his prostate with each up-stroke, and within a few more strokes found just the right movement to get even harder friction in the same region with each downward shove, making him tighten reflexively, which caused the trickster to emit a low, breathless cry. “So good, Loki, fuck, I cold come like this so easy, but I think you need a bit more,” Tony panted, deliberately relaxing, slowing his pace. “Don’t you?”

With a ragged noise, Loki tried to arch his hips up, hard and sudden, but Tony could see it telegraphed from the set of his shoulders and the feel of his thighs, and lifted himself up in time, almost enough to dislodge the god’s length from him entirely, which made Loki give a desperate, broken cry.


Slowly, making certain the inventor followed rather than let them part, the trickster obeyed, his breathing now uneven and very harsh. “You’re good,” he admitted.

“Let me show you how good,” Tony countered. “You just have to ask nicely.” He began moving again, slower than before even, letting himself enjoy it more than the trickster as much as possible. “You look good like this. So good. You’re a mess.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed, but the way his head lolled back more limply, almost resting on the table, and the way that he couldn’t actually look away from the inventor’s own stare belied that minor attempt to appear quite defeated. “Fucking. Tease.”

“How do you want me, Loki?”

“Faster,” the trickster snapped, before he could stop himself.

“Ask nicely,” Tony reminded, slowing further, not even taking him in more than halfway, now, but letting himself get a bit of friction from rubbing against the god’s abdomen, so he moaned a little. “I really could leave you like this, and you’d have to let me.” He leaned in close to the trickster’s ear. “There’s appeal to that: seeing you quite that helpless and desperate, and denying you any relief.”

The sound that escaped Loki’s throat was a bit higher-pitched than before. “Don’t. Please.”

“I could even have JARVIS hit you with the field you just improved, and restrain you while you were stunned, and just keep teasing you like this as long as I pleased.”

Loki shuddered, squirming a bit in the chair. “You wouldn’t dare,” he snapped, but his voice had a bit of waver to it.

“I think you almost want to ask me to. You could stand to break open, feel that desperate and lost in need, couldn’t you?”

“N-no,” the trickster growled.

“It’d look so good on you, though” Tony breathed. “I’d get to pull you apart as far as I wanted, and you might even let me.”

Loki was shaking, now. “No, I would not.”
“Not if I forced it like that, no, you wouldn’t,” the inventor murmured. “But if you let me, asked me for that, I’d be able to, and you know it.”

A hiss, low and almost pained, escaped the trickster’s lips. “You could,” he admitted. “I haven’t allowed anyone that privilege in centuries, however, and neither you nor I are any longer so fond of severe restraints as we might have been when younger, I do not think. Not to that extent.”

Tony’s movement jerked a little, as he was in equal parts enticed and disconcerted by that insight. He let himself sink down all the way again, and held still there. “That’s true, but you still get impressively flustered at the thought. You could get free, you could make this move along faster, but look at you now, right here.” He ground down, lifted up again, slow and relaxed enough to frustrate them both this time. “I know you can ask nicely, Loki. I know you can beg, and you know I’ve got more patience than you right now. How long can you hold out from what you really want?”

“What is it you think I want?” Loki countered.

“You want to shatter open a little,” the inventor answered, moving only a little faster, but still only in shallow, incomplete downward thrusts, not taking all that he could, or even as much as he really wanted to, especially seeing how Loki’s arms began to shake a little and the rest of his body tighten like a bow-string with the effort of not thrusting up into him and being agonizingly denied again. “I want to fuck myself on you a lot harder than this, you know. I want you deeper, faster, and so hard my bones rattle with it and it’s like I can’t inhale properly when you’re all the way in, because there’s just so much of you it’s like there’s not room left for air.”

A stream of curses began to fall from the trickster’s lips, just a low whisper.

“You want that, too, don’t you?” Tony hissed. “You want to watch me lose it, doing that to myself, no effort from you. You want to see how desperate I am to come just from you inside me, that I’d do all that to myself, just for you to see.”

“Tony,” the god rasped. “Aaah yes, please, Tony, please.”

“You have to tell me what you want.”

“Please deeper, please harder, please come for me and let me feel how tight you get, how hot and desperate you can be for me,” Loki moaned, harsh and desperate.

“Very good,” Tony purred and began to pick up the pace again, holding nothing back, letting Loki fill him up hard and fast as he could manage now. “Keep begging, or I might stop,” he then threatened.

“Please don’t stop, please, Tony, fuck, need this, need to have this,” Loki gasped, rocking his hips up in time with the inventor’s rise-and-fall over him. He gave a low, hungry moan and began to shake when Tony tightened around him deliberately, and didn’t let up, making them both still more breathless. “Yes, so good, Tony, please.”

“My name sounds so good like that, say it again.”

“T-tony, I’m close, so close.”

“You think I’m not? Look at me, Loki. Keep those gorgeous eyes open.”

The god obliged, and moaned low in his throat as the inventor leaned in close to bite at his lips, then shuddered, panting hard and moving with a bit less grace. “Yes, Tony please, come for me,” Loki gasped.
Helplessly, the inventor obliged, climax cracking through him like a shot as he fell sharply down, squeezing tight as he felt Loki come inside him almost immediately, with a sound almost like a dry sob. Their faces lingered close, just touching, breathing, as they slowly cooled down. They didn’t speak, even once they both managed to get their breaths back. The silence was comfortable, and a bit too intimate, but neither of them acknowledged it by making it in any way less so. Loki’s eyes fell shut and he seemed more deeply calmed than Tony could recall seeing at any time before. Knowing he was capable of doing this, giving the god this sort of respite, made something ache in the region of the inventor’s sternum, but he chose to ignore it.

It had been necessary, he told himself, to keep Loki’s head clear, keep him able to cope with being around the likes of Thor and remain on fairly relaxed terms of not-quite-distrust-if-only-temporarily with the rest of the Avengers. Attributing anything more to it, though? That way madness lies.

“Thank you,” Loki murmured.

“You needed it,” Tony said.

“I did,” the trickster admitted. “I had not expected you to be this... uniquely capable an ally, I must confess.”

“Same to you.” The inventor slumped a bit further, burying his face against the side of Loki’s neck. “I didn’t think you’d let me see all that I needed to see, or that I’d need to see this as much as anything else.”

The god hummed, low and thoughtful, but Tony could sense an infinitesimal bit of further relaxation there, at the implication that the inventor, too, had needed this. “You see more of me than I should be comfortable with, alliance or no.”

“Again: same to you,” Tony murmured. “Difference is, you go more places I can’t follow and leave behind fewer vulnerabilities I might exploit.”

“You protect them well.”

Tony lifted his head, shooting the trickster a very keen, appraising look. “Yeah. And now you know more about how I do that than I should be remotely comfortable with, alliance or no.”

The tension in the air increased, then, rather sharply.

“You could ask what my upcoming plans might be, after the war.”

“Would I get your solemn word on any of them?”

“No.”

“Then I could, but it would waste both our breaths, I think.”

The trickster half-smirked. “And if I did give you my word? Perhaps if I promised never to harm, in any deliberate way direct or indirect, the likes of those under your protection by means of their closeness to you and how vital they are to you: Pepper Potts, the Colonel, Mr. Hogan, and even JARVIS? What then?”

Tony kept his breathing very even and his expression a blank mask, save for the way his eyes narrowed a bit shrewdly. “I’d have to wonder what you’d demand in return for something like that. We both know you wouldn’t do that without something offered in return for it.”
Loki’s expression turned thoughtful. “That might depend on your pride.”

“My pride, or my willingness to believe you seriously mean no harm?”

“Both.”

“I could sacrifice a lot of my pride to keep them alive, but doubt is in my nature as much as it’s in yours, Loki,” Tony responded lightly. “And I don’t think you know what it is you want to ask of me for that, even, or you’d have asked it by now. I know better than to owe you anything as ambiguous as a ‘favor’ or some unspecified time I’m supposed to just trust you without question.”

The trickster nodded, lightly. “All true.” He traced two fingers along Tony’s jaw. “I do enjoy the benefits of this alliance, and getting to sample you like this. The turns of your mind are captivatingly complex, beyond those of most mortals I’ve ever known.” He wrapped an arm about Tony’s waist and pulled him down again, closer again, letting the inventor feel just how appreciative he really was of Tony’s intellect.

Shivering as he felt Loki hardening again inside him, Tony felt raw and exposed suddenly, craving the heat of the trickster’s recuperative spell, wanting to lose himself in the physicality all over again, and again, and again. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you really like me, or something,” he breathed, a bit teasing.

“I’m allowed to have a favorite nemesis,” Loki countered. “And how rare an opportunity it is to have such a fine one, and also have the chance to fuck him senseless, with him so willing and eager, too.”

“So glad we’re on the same page, there. Could you—hsss yes that,” Tony groaned, as Loki’s fingers trailed up his sides with familiar prickling heat and magic, leaving him a bit breathless, but more than ready for another round.

“You are a rare and unique opportunity for indulgence in so many ways, Tony,” the trickster purred. “I almost think you must be a trap.”

Tony shivered. “I’m not quite enough like Natasha for that myself, to plan that out, and I sure as hell wouldn’t be fucking you for someone else’s goals and plans.”

“No, only your own.” The room vanished from around them, and Tony felt their balance shift slightly before another room appeared in its place: Loki perched now on the edge of his bed, rather than the chair, but only briefly before the god rolled them, pinning Tony down on the bed and beginning to thrust into him, deep and unhurried and ungentle. “You’re not bound to your words as my sort are,” the god murmured against his lover’s lips. “You are far, far too alluring to trust.”

Tony, already panting and starting to writhe a bit, shot back, “People who try to imprison you against your will or murder you have a habit of getting destroyed pretty thoroughly, and I’m a bit practical for that.”

“No, only your own.” Which begs the question what you might actually be after, given how aware you are of how well I know your weaknesses, Tony,” the trickster purred, picking up his pace sharply, grinning at the broken-off sounds each thrust earned him from the mad inventor. “You are too practical to be so obvious or direct against me.”

“Maybe I just want to survive you,” Tony shot back, his voice unsteady.

Loki gave a low hiss and slid hands from the inventor’s ass, up along the back of his thighs, to catch on the bends of his knees. Pushing Tony’s legs up and apart further, holding them out and down, the trickster ceased holding back as much as possible without actually injuring the mad mortal inventor,
and enjoyed the new, deeper angle, as well as the way Tony struggled a bit helplessly, but increasingly bonelessly, as shudders of imminent climax rolled over him. “That would set sights low, for one with such ambition as you. You could more than survive me, and you know it, Tony. You, of anyone on this planet who might bear me ill will, are more capable than any of potentially destroying me.”

“Why would I, knowing how much I’d lose in the effort?” Tony groaned. “I’ve got more to lose than you, asshole. I’ve got far fewer long-term guarantees in my life than a god does, and you know it.”

Loki leaned in close to his lips. “Yes, but you’re working on that.”

Tony met his eye sharply, but the predatory suspicion in the trickster’s look unexpectedly proved to be the last straw and he couldn’t hold back quite, coming hard, and shuddering as the trickster didn’t even pause enough to let him catch his breath. “Fuck, Loki, please, holy fuck.”

“If you were any more thief, with any less stubbornly confident pride,” Loki warned lightly, trailing fingers up his hip with the same spell as before, making the inventor give a strangled moan of relief. “I would be more concerned, admittedly.”

“You think I want to use you for that?” Tony panted, incredulous. “I make my own way. No point chasing after magic shit I can’t trust since I don’t even know how it fuckin’ works. What kind of mad genius do you think I am? I’m not Hydra, Loki, c’mon.”

The trickster gave a low chuckle, slowing his pace by way of communicating something not-quite-apology, not-quite-forgiveness. “I suppose not; you have no room in your heart for something as simple as belief or faith in the unknown.”

“Glad we got that straight,” the inventor managed. “Now are you planning to speed back up until we both come again, or at least roll over and let me ride you a bit more until we both can’t speak?”

After a thoughtful hum, Loki paused and rolled them again, this time sprawling on his back under the inventor when they halted. “You do put on an excellent show.”

“Damn right I do,” Tony concurred, leaning in to catch the trickster’s mouth, thoroughly declaring the conflicting words of mutual suspicion over in favor of purely carnal indulgence. Loki obligingly let him, once again relaxed and mellow and not accusatory at all, which put the inventor more at ease. He’d been worried enough about his own efforts not to get attached that he hadn’t stopped to wonder if Loki had noticed any change between them; it shouldn’t have been surprising that the trickster assumed the worst, assumed he was being played.

If only it were that simple.

Though how Loki thought the likes of Tony Stark might get something like near-immortality out of him, the inventor could scarcely fathom. He had mentioned interest in a longer lifespan, that was all. That didn’t make the means achievable just because Loki might have access to it. It wasn’t like Loki was blackmail-able or anything, and there wasn’t another way he’d get that sort of theft done for him by the trickster that Tony could even think of.

He abandoned the train of thought when Loki yanked his hips down hard on a particular thrust and Tony gave a sharp cry, after which coherent thought, as a whole, became much trickier anyway.

“Fuck, you’re good,” the inventor panted. Then he gasped sharply as the god wrapped a lube-slick hand around him and began stroking hard. “Oh. God, yeah, keep doing that.” He increased his pace, every rise-and-fall of his hips increasingly less graceful as those long fingers worked him over.

“Loki—just—oh fuck.”
“Yes, you’re very good at it,” Loki concurred, breathless. Then his voice hardened, sharpened as he growled, “Now break for me.”

Tony jerked, not expecting the commanding voice to be quite so effective, but it was worth it for how Loki’s breath caught and he came only a few moments after the mortal when the inventor continued to squeeze around him, even as he drifted back down from cloud nine. There was a moment where he felt exceptionally filthy, just from how much come he could feel inside him as the trickster fully withdrew and left him feeling stretched and empty all of a sudden. “F-fuck.” He shuddered.

The usual cleaning spell was limited to his exterior, which Tony found at once slightly satisfying and a bit embarrassing, because it didn’t make him feel that much cleaner this time around, as he sprawled out on the sheets beside the trickster and they both lay there, breathing hard.

“For the record,” Tony said, “I don’t trust you beyond this alliance deal any more than you do me.”

“I gathered.”

“But whether you believe it or not, I’m not actively plotting against you, either. I meant it when I told Thor that I think leaving you the fuck alone after this vengeance deal of yours is the better idea for minimizing excess havoc and a higher body-count.”

The trickster’s eyebrows raised a little. “Whether you might believe it or not, I plan to retreat and lie low for some while in the wake of this, recover myself, and then revisit Jotunnheim and survey the full scope of damage I’ve wrought there.”

Tony gave a thoughtful nod. “Not out of guilt.”

“Not a word in my vocabulary.”

The inventor snorted. “So it’s strategic.”

“You only half-believe me, a most, in any case. Will more specifics actually change your mind?”

“Depends on how they fit into suspicions I already have.”

“Then I’d best keep them to myself, I think.”

“Fair enough.” Tony let his eyes fall shut. “Not really my business if you want to see how viable whatever plot you’ve got up your sleeve for thawing out the whole planet really is.” He felt Loki shift on the bed, suddenly leaning over him again, and let his eyes fall open. “What? You think I didn’t catch that when Odin asked?”

“You are far too astute,” the trickster warned.

“You like it.”

The god’s expression remained grim for a moment, though his eyes flickered with something more heated that seemed to be made of equal parts mild offense and visceral appreciation. “It has a disconcerting appeal.”

“I’m not exactly planning on telling anyone your plans. They’re nothing to do with me and mine, and if they haven’t worked it out yet, they deserve the shock.”

Loki half-smirked, almost grudgingly. “Is this in return for something?”
“Well, you haven’t exactly been letting on that you were my info source against the Ten Rings, or that I happen to know where their main hideout is, but just haven’t mentioned yet. I guess it could be a fair trade, that way. Similarly not related to your own future plans, and similarly courteous.”

The trickster nodded, thoughtful. “I can accept that.”

“Glad we’re in accord,” Tony muttered, stretching a bit and grinning despite all the aches of recently taxed muscles. “Now, if you’ll be so good as to apply a little recuperative magic, I think you should suck me off in the shower.”

The trickster laughed a little, but reached out with lightly glowing fingers.

Thankfully, no one else disturbed them for just over an hour after that, until JARVIS informed them that their absence from lunch would be interpreted as grounds to invade the penthouse and drag them both out.

At least they were clean. Very thoroughly clean.
Classic Blunder: Never Bet Against Thor When Loki is on the Line

Chapter Summary

In which Thor has a brilliant plan, and a lot of alcohol is drunk in pursuit of it; Tony witnesses something for which he is rewarded/punished so he and the god of lies are back on even footing; and Loki's snooping around earth for so long before the war comes back to bite everyone.

Four weeks and three days until showtime...

It took a couple of days for Thor to cool down after the Amora incident, but then he seemed to mellow out all at once one evening. The rest of the Avengers weren’t displeased with the development so much as waiting for the catch.

At dinner, Loki made a show of looking fairly relaxed and almost languid when he strolled into the dining room just as Natasha, Bruce, and Thor unpacked take-out containers of rice, noodles, soup, various curries and other dishes, passing them around the table casually. Tony pushed at the trickster, steering him lightly toward the table and elbowing him when he seemed to glare at Thor and seethe a bit. The god of lies sneered at him in response, but it was a half-hearted thing, his focus primarily on the food, his nostrils almost visibly twitching as the bouquet of heavily spiced aromas seemed to pique his curiosity and more than a little interest.

Thor observed him calmly.

“I haven’t tried cuisine from this region that I know of,” Loki admitted, sitting down. “I must say I’m now very curious.”

Tony grinned and took a styrofoam container of vibrant green curry, and placed it in front of Loki along with a separate container of rice. “You might dig it. You don’t mind spice?” He sounded slightly amused, shooting Thor a look that had the thunder god glaring at him warningly.

As expected, the trickster didn’t miss the exchange and smirked faintly. “I’m quite well-traveled, Tony, and Midgard is not the only planet in the nine realms with biting and fiery cuisine. This smells not unlike some of the richer food from more tropical regions of Alfheim where they grow and produce more spices, in quantity and variety, than anywhere else in all the realms. Their botanists even have many plants which share heritage with plants Midgard and other realms. Alfheim is full of enthusiastic collectors of all sorts of flora,” Loki offered, and bypassed attempting chopsticks for the time being in favor of using a spoon to sample his first bite of the dish: beef and onion, mostly.

Tony, having recalled a previous incident involving a particularly hot batch of Bruce’s favorite curry recipe making Thor weep manly tears of burning agony, had admittedly been looking forward to seeing Loki’s reaction. He’d deliberately handed the god one of the dishes Bruce and Nat refused to order less than just-shy-of-boiling-lava-hot, claiming it sacrilege to have it any other way.

He hadn’t expected the trickster’s eyes to light up with shocked delight, followed shortly after by a small, distant and thoughtful little smile and regal nod and satisfied hum of enthusiastic approval. “I
will say this for Midgard: they put even Alfheim to shame in sheer variety of impressive and flavorful
cuisine, often enough. You are all quite inventive in that regard, with so many cultures and ideas put
into it from all around your world. You excel at this.” While the next bite did bring a bit of color to
his face, he seemed to appreciate it.

Thor grimaced at him a little. “I remember cuisine you made me try while you studied in Alfheim.
The comparison is apt.”

“You accused me of having lied about its origin, and instead fed you an import from Muspellheim,
yes.” Loki’s grin was utterly unrepentant. “They do so like spices in the more tropical regions, there,
and around their few deserts.”

“Spicy food makes people sweat, which actually cools their bodies down and makes hotter climates
more bearable,” Bruce mused. “Not surprising that it’s not just humans who do it.”

“Indeed,” Loki concurred, and reached for his drink. His pale face was only a little pink across his
cheekbones, but it looked disconcertingly like he was blushing.

Tony did not find it the least bit adorable. It was impossible to find a super-villain, mass-murderer,
trickster god adorable. Definitely. Absolutely. Damn, his lips are redder too, that’s just not fair.

Also not fair: Loki’s tongue darting out to flick over those heat-reddened lips, seeking out lingering traces
of spice, and how he then noticed the inventor’s attention fixed on the movement, which made him
grin an utterly wicked and salacious grin. “See something of interest, Tony?”

“Your mouth is usually interesting in all sorts of ways, yes,” the inventor shot back, even as his stare
flicked up to meet Loki’s. He smirked a bit himself. “Also it’s a bit hilarious to me that you can
handle spicy food better than Thor. You should’ve seen him when he tried Bruce’s curry.”

The thunderer was unamused. “I was merely surprised.”

“You usually, uh, weep when surprised?” Steve asked lightly, smiling a little because even he hadn’t
embarrassed himself as much as Thor that day with relative lack of heat tolerance.

“Don’t help them, please,” Thor sighed.

Loki was already chuckling at the image. Clearly, the damage was done. “Very much like Alfheim,
then.”

“Even you could barely handle those candies, to be fair,” the thunder god rumbled defensively.

Tony choked, coughing a couple times until Natasha, at his left, smacked him hard on the back. He
must know more.”

“It was coated in a mixture containing the compound that I believe Midgard knows as capsaicin,”
Loki supplied. “The core of the candy was designed to cool the burn enough to prevent any harm
and cut off the burn if it was too much.”

“Which you failed to inform me!” Thor exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger toward his adoptive
brother. “And you deliberately misled me by not biting into your own.”

“Let me guess, yours was milder?” Tony mused.

“Only a little. Still quite a bit hotter than this.” He gestured at his current entree.
Thor, who apparently hadn’t cottoned on to that part before, made a small noise of outrage. “It was?!”

Loki laughed more openly that time, despite efforts to contain it, at the slightly angry kicked-puppy expression on the thunderer’s face. He had to set down his fork and cover his mouth with one hand to smother it, but it had been contagious enough to get others among the Avengers laughing a bit too, and the resulting quiet made their barely-stifled chuckling and sniggering suddenly more noticeable, which set off a louder round of laughter even Thor almost joined; although, while his brows remained drawn in an angry furrow, it seemed much less sincere with a reluctant grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“How did you not work that out?” Tony managed to ask, once he could stop totally-manly-not-giggling-laughter from overtaking him again.

“They looked the same!” Thor protested. “I merely thought him more immune or adjusted to it.”

“So the candy was one deliberately designed to push past the limits of even spiciness aficionados?” the inventor guessed.

The thunderer gaped as Loki shot the mortal a conspiratorial half-smirk, and very pointedly didn’t deny it.

“That’s just cruel.” Steve muttered, but he was still clearly amused.

“He deserved it,” the trickster said idly.

“I did not!”

“You did,” Loki countered cool and almost scolding, if not for the slightly-too-sharp edge of bitterness, “especially after the spectacle you made of yourself the night before that, after trying their spiced ales. The mages I studied under, there, pestered me with queries for more stories of your humorous drunken antics for weeks after, always just when I had the vain hope they’d forgotten about you.”

“You told me the ale was good!”

“And warned you that it was far stronger than the mead you were used to and that you shouldn’t attempt to bathe in it.”

“I thought you were challenging my tolerance.”

The trickster rolled his eyes. “Do I look that foolish? I know your tolerance better than you do.”

“Willing to wager on that?” the thunder god challenged.

Loki suddenly seemed to recall that he and Thor weren’t actually on good terms anymore and frowned. “That would depend upon the wager, Thor.”

A slow, frankly ferocious and challenging grin lit up Thor’s face. The rest of the Avengers, recalling that they rarely saw that look on the thunderer without a really good brawl and a fair bit more blood on Thor’s face involved as he hurled himself back into a fray, subconsciously leaned back a bit from the table, save Tony, who remained very still and looked between the two gods warily for any sign that he might need to intervene.

“Dr. Banner and Tony took my tolerance for spirits as something of a challenge to be overcome,
some months ago, and have since then achieved a means of overcoming it. Mead in Asgard and elsewhere in the nine realms does not intoxicate by means of alcohol alone, but also other compounds which do not have as much effect on mortals’ systems, unless they have capacity to wield magecraft, and even then if their latent talent is not active, they are still more resistant than you or I would be. Midgardian spirits can be augmented with these compounds without altering their flavor, and increase their potency to the likes of us until it is on par with what we are more used to.”

The trickster’s eyebrows raised slowly. “You intend to challenge my own endurance.”

“I do.”

“I recall that the last time we did so, we were quite evenly matched.”

“Really? But you’re skinnier,” Clint pointed out, jabbing a finger in Loki’s direction.

“My system can resist intoxication more stoutly by virtue of slightly greater mass, but my brother’s metabolism is faster and burns through intoxication more quickly than mine, meaning that by the time I am feeling most of what I have drunk, he more usually feels no drunker than I, and is often ready for another round almost sooner than myself,” Thor explained off-handedly. “Given I have more experience with these substances and possibly my system might be more accustomed to them, I’m willing to consume 50% more than you, with each serving, Loki. Tony and JARVIS can monitor to be certain that neither of us cheat via magic or more mundane means.”

Loki’s curiosity appeared piqued. “What would be the rewards and punishments for the winner and loser in this proposal of yours?”

“Should you win, I will owe you one favor, the only stipulations thereupon being that I will suffer no loss of life or limb for it, nor commit murder or any acts for which the punishment under Asgard’s laws might be death,” The thunderer offered. “If I should win, however, you must admit to us both that I am not as well-known and memorized by you as I once was.”

A long silence followed, wherein the trickster’s expression remained a deliberately smooth, unreadable mask such that even Thor, who knew the other god best, seemed unable to make much of it. Steve looked conflicted, like he was caught between admiring the thunder god’s challenge, and disapproving of a drinking contest of literally mythic proportions happening both in Avenger’s tower, and while Loki was only with them under the auspices of The Serious Business of Preparing for a War. Clint just looked like he was considering taking his curry and hiding somewhere safer, away from crazy gods. Natasha and Bruce were clearly on the ‘surprised and impressed by Thor this time’ side of the fence, which Tony was willing to admit he was, too, but he kept his expression mild and blank when Loki shot him a silently questioning look, which dared him to state any opinion against or in favor, to dare presume to use their alliance for that purpose. Not taking that bait, the inventor only shrugged and raised both hands, palms-forward, as though to imply, This one is totally on you.

Returning his attention to meet Thor’s patient and wary stare with a cool and deceptively serene one of his own, the trickster gave a thoughtful hum. “I accept your terms, Thor.”

Sending a slightly amused look Steve’s way, Tony arched an eyebrow. “After dinner, though?”

“Please,” Steve agreed fervently, echoed by Clint in distressed tones, and Bruce in more droll ones. Thor inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Of course. Later tonight.”

Loki raised another bite of food to his mouth, but before biting into it said, “Not too much, though.”
A low chuckle from the thunderer. “Impatient?”

“With you, do I not have every right to be?” the trickster mocked, the glare he shot Thor belying the airy lightness of his tone.

“You certainly do, yes,” Thor responded, with a healthy measure of self-deprecation. “I can hardly claim otherwise.”

For just a moment, something like mixed surprise and disbelief cracked Loki’s mask, but he hid it quickly. Meanwhile, Tony pulled out his phone rather than telling JARVIS aloud to prepare the concoctions they’d need for the upcoming challenge. He always did love dinner and a show.

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About two hours after dinner, Happy showed up in the elevator with a large hand-truck full of crates of exceptionally fine liquor. He looked deeply concerned. “Don’t you, uh, have a war on, Tony?”

“Still got a few weeks to go, but this isn’t actually for me,” the inventor reassured. “Want front-row seats to two Norse gods having a drinking contest?”

His long-time friend looked intrigued, then slowly more horrified as realization struck. “You mean, uh, Thor and, uh...”

Still looking fiercely amused, Tony nodded with mock solemnity.

“No offense, but I don’t fit so well in any of your armor, if you remember.”

“Right, chafing, sorry.”

“So if things went wrong...”

“Yeah, you’d only be safe in the armor, except the bits that would chafe.” He nodded. “So I should just send you the video if it proves potentially hilarious?”

“Fuck yes,” Happy agreed, and held out his hand, pulling the inventor into a manly bro-hug.

“Thanks, man.” Tony pulled in the hand-truck of passing-all-security-protocols, not-tampered-with, and damned-expensive alcohol through the foyer and into the living room, where Loki and Thor occupied opposite ends of a large, elegant leather couch of bleeding-edge modern style. A large, low coffee table rested before them. The rest of the room’s seating was loosely arranged around them for audience convenience.

The inventor began opening crates and arranging bottles on the table coffee. When he was about halfway across he paused and gestured at one corner. “This section needs to be chilled, if you don’t mind, Loki? Recommended temperatures are on the labels.”

The trickster rolled his eyes a bit, amused, but leaned close to examine the labels briefly. He snorted. “Your measurement systems still leave much to be desired.”

“Well, most people don’t actually use Kelvin alone, sorry,” Tony sighed, as though this were an argument they’d had a few times.
“Yes, yes. The one that makes the most sense, of course it’s not in wide use,” Loki muttered.

“This is America, Loki. We still aren’t even on the metric system out of sheer stubbornness. Don’t even try to make us make sense,” Clint offered, from his perch on a chair several feet away.

“People make sense, individually,” the god of lies offered. “Your cultures and the contexts you all feel that they place you in are the parts that I question, since not enough of you all seem to.”

“I think no one in this tower is under the mistaken impression there’s such a thing as normalcy when you get down to it, though, so we’re less guilty than most,” Bruce chided, sounding amused and a little bitter.

“That, I will concede to be quite true,” Loki concurred, and picked up one of the chilled bottles with a smirk. “Ah, so you got more of this.”

“Well, I did seem to run out recently,” Tony said, only smirking a little, though the memories that brought up were... oh, very fine. The trickster had been inclined to lick most of it off his skin slowly. “Somehow.” His tone was blatantly lascivious.

“I don’t want to know!” Steve shouted from the kitchen. He emerged shortly after with a large bowl of sliced limes, two smaller ones of sliced lemons and salt respectively, and a few glasses on a tray. “I didn’t realize how many glasses we’ve broken in the past month. These were harder to find than I thought.”

“That’s because I started hiding them from the rest of you,” Natasha explained coldly. “I refuse to drink anything vodka-based out of a coffee mug, flagon, or anything made out of plastic, for fuck’s sake.”

“Next time just ask JARVIS to order replacements, c’mon guys,” Tony sighed. “JARV? Get on that, please?”

“Right away, sir. They should arrive within two days.”

The inventor gestured broadly. “See? How simple was that?”

“Yes, yes, we’re in awe. Now, though, drinks,” Natasha reminded, sidling over the back of the couch to settle between the two gods. Somehow, she’d persuaded the pair of deities to let her in onto the challenge. If she exceeded either of them, she would be owed a boon, though because they were both fond of her, there was no punishment established for her loss beyond the next day’s hangover. In truth, they knew she just wanted to find out for certain where her own slightly-better-than-human tolerance stood, compared to gods.

Tony bowed, and pushed a quite large bottle of tequila toward them, plucking the lid away and adding a sizable dose of his and Bruce’s Aesir-intoxication formula. He put the lid back on, swirled the liquor thoroughly in the bottle, and then re-opened it. “Let’s start with this.” He poured four shot glasses, pushing the first toward his favorite red-headed assassin. “Now, Nat, if you’ll help me demonstrate?” He licked at his hand near the juncture of thumb and forefinger, then sprinkled some salt onto it. Natasha did the same, and the both picked up slices of lime. Holding each other’s gaze they silently counted to three with the same ease they often did in combat, licked the salt off their hands, downed their shots, and then bit into their respective lime slices. The pair of gods watched curiously, before pulling their own shots toward them.

“Got the gist?” Nat asked lightly.

“Simple enough,” Loki returned.
“Good. Then get started,” Tony offered, picking up the bottle, ready to refill as needed. “We’ve got three bottles: this is blanco, the others are reposado and añejo. I plan to keep the shots coming until we run out. Thor does three for every two that you two each do. I’ll be keeping track. And... go!”

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The table was halfway clear, and Thor and Loki had experienced three kinds of tequila, six types of whiskey, five varieties of brandy, some Metaxa, two of Natasha’s preferred vodkas, and four different rums, before the gods were buzzed enough to be in no major hurry to consume a good deal more. Getting to that point had taken over two hours, by which time Bruce and Steve wandered off to seek other entertainment outside, once it at least seemed clear that no one was going to kill each other too soon.

The inventor considered the event successful so far. There had already been three officially sanctioned breaks, nothing had been blown up or inappropriately urinated on, and Tony was feeling pleasantly tipsy himself as he started making vodka martinis.

Thor couldn’t seem to keep a small grin off his face as Loki, at Natasha’s and also-now-drunk Clint’s behests, began to recount the occasion he’d managed to get Thor to cross-dress and pose as Freja in order to retrieve his hammer from a particular tribe of non-elemental Jotunns between Asgard and the province he and Thor called ‘Nornheim’ but seemed disinclined to elaborate much on.

Tony was fairly amused by it, too, honestly, and admired how much more relaxed and carelessly animated the trickster was, when storytelling, than he’d ever seen before. Loki’s long-fingered hands conjured images and suggestions even without any exertion of magic as his words drew in his audience, making them sputter with laughter here, or sit up tense and expectant there. Even if it might turn out that much of the story was made up, or fabricated (though Tony was increasingly sure this particular tale was truer than many of the others that lingered in earth’s legends) it almost wouldn’t matter, so solid was the weaving of the tale. Loki crafted not just a story, not just a hearthside yarn, but something with life of its own almost like a god in its own right: a myth, something more lasting than any mortal lifetime, and thus perhaps more real than any mere man. Of course, it would make sense that the lie-smith would also genuinely be a word-smith.

While he was unable to help but admire such craftsmanship, the inventor hoped it didn’t show on his face. He hardly wanted Natasha to notice and do something unthinkable like suggest he looked... smitten or anything. He desperately hoped, at the least, that no one, himself included, would remember it by morning even if anything even remotely like that had been visible before he caught himself staring quite so fixedly. Shaking off such thoughts, he took quick evaluation of himself so that he knew he was perfectly composed when it came time to hand out drinks again at the end of Loki’s tale: once the hysterical laughter had stopped, on his part and the others’ alike. Tony had perfectly measured out an extra half-serving into Thor’s glass, compared to the other two.

“I still resent every moment of that incident, but I cannot help but love how you do tell it,” Thor chuckled, wiping at the corner of one eye before sipping his drink.

Loki snorted, shaking his head a little, but a smirk lingered on his lips, and he didn’t stiffen or bluster as he might have when more sober.

Opening a bottle of red wine to let it breathe a little while they worked on their martinis, Tony made his way to the couch and perched on the arm beside the trickster for a bit of a respite. He was mildly
amused when the god of lies shot him a slightly fond leer, but without any accompanying commentary. “You get quieter when you’re drunk, storytelling aside,” said the inventor.

“Stories, I may trust, but with conversation I’m habitually more guarded. It’s only reasonable,” Loki explained, with a casual shrug, and sipped at his drink.

The inventor nodded. “That makes sense, yeah.” Then he suddenly grinned. “Hey, Nat, tell ‘im about Budapest!”

The assassin giggled, and Clint, who had been leaning against the back of the couch, now went limp and let himself slide down to slump behind it with a low groan. “Don’t even start, Clint. It’s a great story.”

“No for me it isn’t!”

“It’s a fine tale, Barton. Do not be so sensitive,” Thor chided fondly.

“Just for that, I’m telling them about the time you fought an espresso machine and lost,” Clint shot back.

A sputtering laugh escaped Loki almost before he could help it. “What?”

“Budapest first,” Tony insisted. “Clint tells his parts of that one way better when he’s pissy, actually. It adds to his performance.”

“Fuck off, Stark!”

The trickster offered a dramatic, flourishing gesture toward Natasha, as though conceding the stage to her. She swatted at his hand playfully, and downed her martini in one go, content to let the boys drink theirs a little more slowly as she began telling them about the mark she’d been chasing, in the last days before she was flung headlong, and rather unexpectedly, into working for S.H.I.E.L.D. full-time, despite having always been their antagonist before then.

Loki settled back, leaning a bit to the side so his arm pressed against Tony’s ribs, seemingly quite comfortable there, as he let himself get absorbed in the story Natasha wove for them.

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It was a bit over an hour later that Natasha had given up on drinking any further and joined Tony in sitting on the floor on the other side of the large coffee table, which now sported a wide array of empty bottles and three less empty ones. The remaining alcohol had all just been brought in from Tony’s own cellar; the initial crates delivered by Happy had been thoroughly emptied of their contents. The assassin had her arms folded on the table-top, and her chin rested atop them as she watched the two gods bicker over a long-ago quest they’d gone on in Dvargerheim. Clint’s head rested on her shoulder, his back and shoulders pressed back against the table where he sat beside her, and he seemed to be snoring softly.

The arguing deities, at last, had enough of their inhibitions worn away to be just shy of punching one another—mostly because they both now lacked sufficient coordination to aim a punch, let alone land one successfully without falling on the floor.
“If you hadn’t gotten us into such a debt for me to need to repay, I wouldn’t have had to wager my head at all,” Loki finally snapped.

“I would have preferred you wager mine in your place! I could have fought them off far more—”

“I could have fought them off, Thor, but not their entire clan and their allies, which it would have come down to, if you would bother to think of the full repercussions such an attack on our perfectly legal debt-collectors would have brought down upon us. That we were princes meant only that it might escalate into outright warfare, as never seemed to even occur to you in your presumptions!” the trickster shot back. “And if you think for even a moment that wagering your head rather than mine would have led to your lips being sewn shut rather than my own, you could not be more wrong!”

The thunderer deflated slightly. “But they—”

“It was meant to still my tongue for tricking them, Thor, when I made their debt an impossible one to claim. The punishment was not exacted on me for my debt, but as punishment for outwitting them. You would have been heralded all the more for being the one I used in the wager, who escaped some attempt by your ‘merely jealous’ brother to behead your golden self!”

“Even had I volunteered?”

“Would anyone in Asgard or Dvargerheim believe I had not tricked you, or cajoled you, into doing so? There is no means by which you do not appear all the more golden, and I all the darker, Thor.” His words, while still polysyllabic and eloquent, were slurred and a little stilted, while his gestures along with them were wilder, and less contained and controlled. “I have ceased even bothering to play that particular game. It is, to borrow from another pantheon, a—” He hesitated, and slowed down to enunciate the difficult bit of phrase as clearly as possible. “—a Sisyphean task, and I am tired of letting that particular burden roll over me and flatten me into something tame and more Aesir-like with each failure, when I could just leave the expectations of fools throughout the nine realms—particularly those of them in Asgard who have ever been so conceited in their belief in their own goodness that they believe their instinctive distrust of me to be all that they need to judge me evil and jealous and all but deranged when the truth, before my fall, was that I merely obeyed my own natural impulses, and even now have done most of them no great harm—at the bottom of that metaphorical hill, never to be lifted to anything better by my efforts ever again. They do not deserve me, and I certainly do not deserve their censure merely for being beyond their understanding in ways that it frightens them to even be curious about.”

In the ensuing long, awkward silence, Tony quietly pushed a couple more highball glasses their way across the table, Thor’s again proportionately fuller than Loki’s. “Add ice,” he suggested quietly. “I’m out, over here.”

With a gesture, not even looking away from Thor, the trickster did so, his skin all the way up to his forearm flickering rich blue as he did.

“You are not wrong,” Thor said, unfazed entirely by the color-display.

The trickster stared at him very hard, his expression all too clearly full of suspicion he couldn’t quite contain this time.

The thunderer’s hand moved as though he wanted to reach out, but then he reminded himself sharply that his touch would be unwelcome and let it drop again. He swallowed tightly. “You know me more than well enough to know I do not lie.”
“That tells me only that you believe what you are saying. Whether you actually understand is a very
different matter,” Loki said, his voice edged in a rasp. He picked up his drink, as did Thor, and they
both drained them swiftly before setting the glasses back down for the still-only-tipsy inventor to refill.

“I am far from certain that I do. It was not easy enough to reach what beginnings of understanding I
think that I’ve started to grasp, and it will be no easier to continue to discover all the rest of the things
that those threads are tied to, and interwoven throughout, which I’ve doubtlessly also missed all this
time, but I want to. I’m learning, as best I can and too late, but I am learning, to observe, and to
question more.”

The trickster inhaled sharply, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb
and forefinger for a long few moments. He sat up a bit more, only swaying a little, and let out a long
breath. Leaning a bit closer to his adoptive brother, he looked at Thor’s face quite searchingly, then,
still not even able to admit to himself any hope to find someone he might respect there, but he was
never blind. And Thor was rarely anything other than obvious. With a slight snarling, resigned noise,
he slumped back against the arm and back of the couch gracelessly and extended a hand toward
Tony, gesturing with long fingers now a bit clumsy. “Another, please, if I’m to withstand this,” he
slurred.

Thor tried very hard not to look hopeful. It almost worked. A little.

Seeing his expression over the rim of a freshly-refilled highball glass, Loki sneered. “You’re still not
forgiven.” Then he drained it, swallowing liquor and ice both.

“I’m not quite so optimistic as that,” Thor countered, and downed his own drink just as swiftly.

The trickster coughed and looked momentarily horrified by that statement. “Who are you and what
have you done with my brother?”

For a moment the thunderer looked outright stunned, then broke down into bitter, almost sobbing
laughter, covering his brow with one hand as he tottered forward, barely holding himself from
tumbling straight onto the floor. His laugh was loud and booming as ever, but there was a sad edge
to it. “I almost wish you said that wholly in earnest, if it might earn back some of the respect you
once grudgingly held me in, before I failed you utterly once more, and all too far: first in desiring the
crown before I was worthy of it, and then again in Jotunnheim thereafter when I should have listened
to you better,” he responded, pulling himself back up with an effort. He seemed surprised to find
Loki’s expression utterly shattered and broken open. “Loki.”

The trickster winced, and and half-covered his face with one hand, mostly only succeeding in
shielding his eyes, wiping at them quickly before his fingers curled together into a fist and fell to the
arm of the couch. “You win,” he snapped, voice jagged and torn, like his throat might be full of
broken glass, as he started to push himself up from his seat, if only his legs would cooperate a bit
better. “You’ve clearly gotten your boon, and I hardly need loosen my tongue or compromise my
judgement any further for your convenience.”

“Loki,” Thor said, more softly, reaching out without hesitation this time, catching and tugging at his
brother’s arm.

“What?” the god of lies snarled, his eyes far too bright with tears now leaking down his face despite
all the spite he could still muster coloring his expression.

The thunder god merely yanked him closer, hard, by both shoulders and wrapped him in a crushing
embrace, his face against the side of his brother’s head as he too wept, shaken with silent sobs that
seemed to further exacerbate the similar ones his adoptive brother had been resisting before that. Loki struggled fitfully in Thor’s grasp for only a few moments, then slumped—resigned and giving in grudgingly but not for lack of needing to—with his shoulders visibly shaking.

Tony took that as his cue to leave as unobtrusively as possible. For a moment, he deeply envied Loki’s ability to teleport, and resolved to find his own way or make one, in case he ever found himself in a position quite this awkward a dramatic ever again. He stood slowly, quiet as he could, and helped Natasha drag Clint’s sleep-limp form out of the living-room, then down the hall into the Hawk’s own room. They considered the bed, their own relative tiredness and intoxication, and chose instead to leave him on the pile of blankets he seemed to have kicked to the floor earlier that morning. He promptly curled up in them with a groan, seeming comfortable enough.

Natasha bid Tony goodnight and meandered down the hall to her own room, but he instead lingered for a long moment, glancing back over his shoulder toward the living-room. “JARVIS? How’s it going back in there?” he murmured, almost quieter than a whisper.

“It is a good thing you left, I believe, and I think it safe to leave them be.”

“Good.” The inventor nodded, thoughtful. “Good.” He cleared his throat, trying not to wonder if Loki would resent him or Natasha for witnessing that little breakdown, come the dawn and a hangover fit for a god.

He resolved not to dwell on it, but did so anyway. Especially when Loki didn’t make any appearance in the Penthouse before, or slightly after, dawn. At least, JARVIS assured him of as much when he woke up between fitful one- or two-hour bouts of unsatisfactory sleep.

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Four weeks and two days...

Tony managed to wander blearily through the living-room and into the kitchen at five in the morning once he gave up on proper sleep. He imbibed his first cup of coffee, and something tickled at his thoughts so insistently that he wanted to find a way to swat at it. It would have to be metaphysical, though, since it was just a thought. Maybe Loki had a spell for that. He’d been thinking for a while about asking if it might be possible to learn a few spells while he had a skilled mage around being all sort of helpful.

Slowly, he refilled his mug.

He was just over halfway through cup two when he woke up enough to realize that insistent, buzzing thought was actually fucking brilliant—albeit nonsensical, because he couldn’t seriously have seen...

No. Just... No fucking way...

Tony finished the rest of his coffee in one gulp.

Despite his doubts, the inventor had his phone out and at the ready as he slunk almost-silently back into the living-room and stood in front of the couch and coffee table that had been the site of so much
drunkenness and drama within the past twelve hours. Tony bit his lip to hold back a laugh, and lifted his phone.

He tapped the camera icon.

_BEEEep. Ka-click._

“Stark, so help me, I will _murder_ you if you do not destroy that image,” the trickster god muttered, sounding bleary and a bit pained, but also rather muffled, which was understandable, given he seemed to be tucked between Thor’s body and the back of the couch, his face buried between a small decorative cushion and the thunderer’s shoulder-blade. It would’ve been funnier if they were actively cuddling instead of almost-accidentally-spooned, Tony mused, but the fact they’d both been too drunk to leave the couch and just huddled there together on it like giant puppies was still pleasingly ridiculous and adorable, to the inventor.

“You like me too much, and you’d never give the likes of me four weeks under the same roof as you to plan for your promised murder attempt if you were serious,” Tony countered, grinning. “I’ll give Thor a copy to put in a locket.” He quietly changed from stills to video and began recording.

Loki’s head lifted enough to fix him with an only slightly-bloodshot glare. Thor, by contrast, merely tugged his own cushion out from under him and tried to bury his head under it to block out light and noise. The larger blond god gave a small, pitiful groan, but his brother didn’t seem nearly as affected.

“You don’t actually look very hungover,” Tony announced.

“He’s had a spell to cure that for years, by the Norns you’re both so fucking loud,” Thor groaned, curling his arms up to hide his face in them.

“Whether I’m merciful enough to share that cure has always been more variable,” the trickster reminded, light and sharply chiding.

The thunderer gave a less-than-manly whimper in response.

Loki laughed, deep and malicious (making the thunderer cringe a little) and pushed himself up, sidling casually over Thor and standing to better take in his brother’s abject misery. “It should serve you right for not even bothering to finish the competition before seizing your sought-after reward.”

“I will owe you the same boon I would’ve if I’d lost, if you’ll just please, please help?” the thunder god all but whined.

Sighing dramatically, the trickster proceeded to hum in loud, unmercifully off-key contemplation for almost a full minute. Thor curled on himself a bit further whenever the volume or pitch reached certain extremes. “I accept, you pathetic creature.” He drew his fingers along his elder brother’s brow and murmured a few not-quite-human-sounding syllables.

Thor relaxed bonelessly with a groan of rapturous, hissing relief.

Loki then slapped his forehead sharply, startling him. “Persuade the super-soldier to cook breakfast in perhaps an hour. I’m starving.” He then turned around to face Tony and suddenly broke out in a pleased, utterly cruel little smile. “You were _recording._”

“Oh yeah. Whole time.” He tapped the screen again to halt it, and pocketed his phone with a smug grin. They both ignored Thor rolling over and hiding his head under the decorative pillow Loki had formerly used as well as his own, one for each side of his head now, cursing them but also unwilling to look at them, sensing what was coming from the gleeful pleasure he’d caught in his brother’s
voice.

“You’ll be quite forgiven, then, for your earlier indiscretion, if you may provide me a copy and keep another in a location it might forever remain preserved.”

“The picture of your cuddling goes with it.”

Loki hummed, stepping closer. “Worth it.” He then caught Tony’s mouth for a warm, lazy morning kiss that made the inventor’s whole body tingle. “Shower?”

“Yeah. Shower. Good plan.” Tony felt relieved and happier than he really should be that he wouldn’t be inconveniently denied (by means of godly resentment from being witnessed in a state of emotional vulnerability) from enjoying Loki while he had—these opportunities. These oh-so-finite opportunities. To cut off that train of thought, he pulled the trickster closer. Low enough he really did hope Thor couldn’t hear it, he hissed, “In fact, I think that I want you to fuck me against the wall of the shower as soon as the water is heated up.”

“Well, if you insist,” Loki purred.

“I do.” He caught the trickster’s lower lip between his teeth, then sucked on it hard and sudden, while rolling his hips up against Loki’s.

The trickster gave a low moan and obligingly vanished them both from the room.

Only after thirty seconds of complete silence passed did Thor lift his head and scan the room to reassure himself of their complete absence. With a sigh of relief almost as great as the one he gave upon being relieved of his hangover, the thunder god dragged himself to his feet and shuffled off toward Steve’s room to determine whether the super-soldier, ridiculously early-riser that he was prone to being, was actually awake yet.

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Tony hadn’t expected to land on his back on his bed, stripped of all clothing, with an equally naked mad trickster god looming over him not-quite-touching, but really, he supposed he probably shouldn’t be so surprised. There was thoughtful, utterly evil look on Loki’s face, too, which probably shouldn’t have brought the inventor to full hardness from a combination of arousal and thrilled anticipation, but Tony had stopped questioning his reactions to Loki being predatory and dangerous long, long ago.

“Shower postponed, then?” the mortal managed to ask.

“I have a better idea, but if you might still have the strength to be taken in the shower as well, I may provide.”

That sent a shiver through Tony’s body. “This is you getting your own back, then.”

“A bit,” the trickster confirmed. “To do so, I’m inclined to show you a trick Angrboða was always fond of using upon my person.”

Tony blinked a few times. “Uh... so wait. Wasn’t she-”
“Hel’s mother, my lover and Sigyn’s both, for many years.”

The inventor’s eyebrows shot up. “I wish that’d made it into the mythology.”

Loki chuckled, trailing one hand down Tony’s chest, stomach, and lower still. “She was descended from a community of non-elemental Jotunn who settled in Alfheim after escaping the freeze of their home-world. She was one-quarter fae, and a shape-shifter even more talented than I.”

Tony glanced down quickly after he realized a particular sensation around the base of his cock wasn’t from Loki’s hand. “A cock-ring?”

“Augmented with one or two minor spells. The thing about Alfheim to keep in mind is that outside the main cities and courts where manners and etiquette are strictly enforced, they are an intensely sensual and hedonistic people. They developed many techniques for their men to achieve multiple orgasm without aid of magic, many similar to certain techniques here on earth, which you did mention being aware of. How accomplished are you, Tony?”

The inventor squirmed a bit, feeling almost too exposed. “Well—it’s been a while since I used tantric sorts of techniques, but I’m familiar with them. Separation of orgasm from ejaculation to keep going longer and get more out of it, right?”

Loki nodded. “The thing about Angrboða, was that she traveled quite a lot outside Alfheim, and grew weary of having to teach new lovers those techniques. She developed spells and a simple application—” His fingertips now traced along the edge of the ring on Tony’s cock. “—to prevent her lovers from finishing entirely before she was done with them, without injuring them or endangering their health, and allowing her to enjoy bringing them to orgasm as many times as she might please without pausing for them to recover.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “I think I see why you liked her.”

“Oh yes. Now, I think, we’ll find out just how much you can take without my magic to help you recuperate,” the trickster purred, his voice low and dangerous, as he leaned down and caught Tony’s mouth.

Lips parting quickly, the inventor let his head fall back, deepening the kiss quickly with a low, hungry noise as his whole body shivered with anticipation. He wasn’t normally—well, except several times with Pepper, but she was something else with a riding crop and a set of handcuffs—submissive like this, willing to give himself up for his lovers to crack open, but with Loki... Loki already dominated him so gorgeously, just when he topped in their less goal-oriented sex sessions, that the idea of the mad god really putting his mind to it made Tony curious and hungry and wanting.

Yes, yes, challenge and power-struggle and danger please more, please more.

“So responsive and eager you are,” Loki murmured, as he began working lube-slick fingers in and out of Tony’s ass, slow and unhurried, teasing his prostate but not applying anywhere near enough direct pressure and friction where it was most wanted, making the inventor squirm. “I begin to think you want to be broken as much as I’m inclined to break you.”

“You’re fucking good at this, and I’m hedonistic and self-indulgent,” Tony groaned, rolling his hips down hard, hissing in pleasure at both the improved friction where he most needed it and the greedy look that it brought to the trickster’s face. “You’re already the best top I’ve ever had, you think I’m not looking forward to what else you can do to me? Give me all you’ve got, Loki, I want to see what you can do, how you can surprise me even more.”
“Oh, that’s a challenge you might regret.”

The inventor rolled his hips down again, and reached both of his hands up to grip the headboard: inviting, showing he’d be good if Loki would give the right incentives, the right challenges. “I can take anything you might care to give me.”

Loki dragged his teeth over his lower lip slowly, the shrewd look in his eyes making it clear that he was scheming now, plotting. “We’ll see, Tony.” Then he leaned down and swallowed the inventor’s cock in one smooth movement.

Tony made a startled, but not at all displeased noise, hips jerking helplessly in an effort to bury himself deeper into that warm, wet heat. He knew very, very well by now that if the trickster really wanted him to keep still, his hips would be held down. No restraints, and being swallowed right to the hilt, meant Loki wanted to feel just how desperate and appreciative the inventor was of his mouth, so Tony held nothing back, and instead writhed and tried to thrust, panting and making utterly untranslatable sounds when Loki’s tongue dragged up the underside of his cock. The trickster’s cheeks hollowed with suction and those bright green eyes fixed on Tony’s own as he moved up, slow and maddening, just before bobbing back down, again taking him deep, this time swallowing around him, more than once.

The inventor was panting more shallowly now, as Loki’s fingers used their full array of skillful tricks against his prostate, while that perfect mouth played with him. It wasn’t long before his muscles tightened and jerked with orgasm, making him cry out, but tension lingered, and he didn’t quite become over-sensitive. It was enough to make him shake and shudder and gasp but he still wanted—needed more. “H-holy fuck, Loki, that’s not fucking fair let me—” He cut off with a choked noise as the god of lies swallowed around his cock again and sent a sensation up through him not unlike an after-shock, but it only made him a little more desperate. “Fffuck.” He may have emitted a sound not unlike a whimper with Loki’s mouth finally released him.

“By the time I’m done with you, you’ll feel more than filthy enough to need a shower,” the mad god promised. “On your stomach, now, Tony.”

Reluctantly, the inventor obeyed, hissing a bit at the friction he got from the sheets, until Loki yanked his hips up, spreading his legs and letting Tony get his knees under him for a bit of support. Tony gave a pleased huff when he felt Loki’s mouth against the back of his neck, and it became a shameless moan as Loki penetrated him, slow and unhurried as though he were utterly unaware of how the inventor was still panting and shivering with a mixture of frustration and desperation. “Please don’t fucking tease, Loki, just—nngh, don’t, please,” he rasped.

“I’m inclined to, though. You feel so good like this, struggling not to fight me, so strongly do you need this,” the trickster chided, keeping his thrusts long and slow, not-quite-gentle, but not nearly enough either. “I could let you fuck me like this, see how hard desperation might drive you. I’ve no doubt you’d be magnificent, trying so hard to ease the burn by loosing yourself in my body.”

Tony shuddered. He really hadn’t been affected by dirty-talk in general half as much until he’d started having sex with Loki, who really had mastered the art. “Please.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Loki mused, picking up his pace only a little. “This time you’ve offered to take whatever I might be inclined to give you, and I want to see if you can really take all I’ve got.”

“Fuck yeah, I can,” the inventor breathed, pushed back hard against Loki’s hips with his own, making them both groan. Tony shuddered a bit as Loki’s pace continued to tease more than relieve, but let himself focus on the pleasure of it, how close it came to being what he needed and the acute need itself, which was a throbbing sort of near-painful pleasure of it’s own. He was panting more
heavily again soon enough, shaking a little even when Loki slowed further.

“You trying to come just from this, Tony? Do you want it so badly?”

“What kinda fucking question is that? Yes I want to come, and either you can make me properly, of I can do it myself in spite of you trying to hold back on me,” Tony growled, shooting the trickster a warning look over his shoulder, until Loki leaned in and bit his shoulder hard, and the inventor let his head loll forward limply again.

“Patience will be rewarded.”

Tony fell limp again, then, pliant as he could manage, but he was painfully close, still sore from pressing close to the knife-edge with his first orgasm, and the desperation to really finish or, failing that, come again, at least, to relieve some of the pressure.

“Good, Tony.” Loki murmured against his skin, grinning, just before he gripped the inventor’s hips a little harder, tilting them just so, and began fucking him in earnest: fast and deep and bone-shakingly good.

The inventor almost screamed, struggling a bit under the sudden onslaught, but the trickster held him fast, and kept pounding into him, filling him up and almost bruising his prostate with each hard drag of his cock in and out. Tony came again, and was left crying out breathlessly as Loki didn’t let up in the least. It was good and it hurt and it wasn’t enough even as Tony shuddered through his third climax, feeling increasingly raw and stretched thin, like he’d never be done, like he’d need to be fucked for the rest of his life to stand a chance of getting true relief. He didn’t even notice he was all but chanting Loki’s name and pleading until he felt the trickster come inside him and that—fuck that was so unfair. He could feel the relieved shudder of Loki’s body against him, feel his own inner muscles spasming still, milking the mad god now relaxed and sated against Tony’s back. The inventor had never been so jealous of another man’s post-orgasm satisfaction in his entire life.

“N—not fair, so not fair, Loki, you’re a terrible person, please don’t stop.”

Loki chuckled softly and sat up, pulling the mortal genius up with him via an arm about his waist. “I’m far from done with you,” he promised, grin widening as the inventor squirmed a bit, feeling the trickster still hard inside him, already up for another round. “But I have to wonder just how much more you might readily accept, Tony.” He slid a hand between then, teasing fingers caressing the tender flesh where their bodies joined, making the inventor inhale sharply as one finger slid into him, alongside Loki’s own length. “Have you ever fantasized about having more than one of me in your bed?”

Breathless suddenly, Tony could only moan. He’d never—not even after college had he managed to quite try that one before.

“Tell me, Tony.”

The inventor’s head fell back onto Loki’s shoulder, his eyes fluttering shut while the trickster’s lips and teeth nipped and teased at his throat. “Y-yes, fuck, hard not to, seeing you use those illusions like there’s two of you in a room, of course I’ve thought about it!” And, on occasion, dreamt about it. Only two or three times, though.

“They can be more than illusion,” Loki said, but his voice came from the wrong direction, and Tony’s head snapped up at the feel of another pair of hands on him, moving up his inner thighs.

There were two Lokis in his bed. Tony almost came again just at that. “Well, fuck me,” he breathed
instead, arching into the caress.

The second trickster grinned wickedly, sliding one hand up to press in a second finger alongside the original’s, gentle as he could seeing the mortal wince hard at the burning stretch. “That’s precisely what I was suggesting.” His other hand reached around, traced unfamiliar sigils on the inventor’s skin.

Tony felt his muscles relax and heat, felt the stretch become easier. “Thought we were going magic-free?” he teased lightly.

“I changed my mind when you challenged me,” the first trickster purred, close to his ear. “I want to push you past your limits and make you scream my name as I do it.” Another finger, the stretch burning only for a brief moment this time before it was just—intense pressure. “If you’re willing.”

Tony nodded, eyeing Loki and his duplicate both hungrily. This was having a god in one’s sex life: the sort of fantasies only porn and dreams would usually provide, suddenly becoming genuine opportunities. “Fuck yeah.” He grinned a bit when their fingers left him, though he made a frustrated noise when Loki pulled out of him fully as well. Then Tony was pulled backwards, toward the edge of the bed, by Loki, while his duplicate took hold of the inventor’s wrists and held them high above his head. Both trickster-shapes murmured a spell, and Tony’s eyes widened a bit at the feel of invisible restraints holding his arms up, and more than that, lifting him up bodily by his arms a bit, once one Loki behind him stood up with feet on the floor, while the one in front of him knelt up and pressed close to capture his mouth. Tony hummed into it, then gasped a bit as the trickster behind him slid into him to the hilt once more.

Other noises escaped him as he was fucked with maddening slowness from behind, while Loki’s magic-summoned twin slid in two fingers, then a third, moving them not-quite in counterpoint, opening him further still until the inventor felt like he almost couldn’t breathe. Then a hand wrapped around his cock and stroked him hard, just once: tight and a bit dry and too much. Tony came so hard he saw stars and emitted a strangled, wordless cry. Then he all but sobbed as he experienced a sharp ache of incompleteness almost immediately after, directly proportionate, it seemed, to how close he’d gotten to finishing properly in spite of the spells in place. “Oh fuck, oh god, oh fuck.” His voice was cracked, but sharpened into surety as soon as his partner(s?) halted their movements. “Don’t you dare stop!”

Loki gave a breathless laugh against his ear and gripped his thighs hard, pulling them up and out to either side, making room for his duplicate to settle in close between them. “As you wish, Tony.”

The inventor made a wordless noise of equal parts eagerness and dismay, struggling a bit against the invisible restraints holding him up. His whole body was flushed, and he felt something almost like acute embarrassment, held open so wide like this, and then—the head of a second cock started to push into him and he lost the ability to form anything like coherent thought. He forced himself to relax, felt another spell across his skin ease his way as both Loki and the copy of him breathed less evenly, with each agonizingly slow inch Tony took.

It ached, and Tony shook with it, feeling full to the brim and then stretched further still. By the time both tricksters were deep in him as they could get, he was shuddering and over-sensitized and almost forgot how badly he needed to come.

Then Loki behind him emitted an utterly broken noise, and the one in front of him licked into his mouth with far less grace than before, caught between ecstasy and almost apology, as both tricksters rolled their hips forward and up and Tony felt his muscles try to tighten as orgasm hit him hard and sudden and blinding, met with resistance that stung sharply, but still set off aftershocks of acute bliss, one after another. He was shuddering with it, only for the stretch and pressure to not quite let him
come back down, especially as Loki—both of him—started to move. It wasn’t graceful, at first, just a slow inching out and shove back in, but the friction still made Tony’s eyes roll back in his head as he came again. He was making sounds, some of them might have been words, most were purely incoherent.

Tony felt like he hung there for a long while before he could quite see straight again, and he started to adjust, some of the ache of not enough whiplash making him regain awareness of the passage of time. He let his teeth drag along Loki #2’s tongue and then sucked hard when the tongue tried to press deeper into his mouth in response.

He felt the duplicate come first, hips stilling as he moaned into Tony’s mouth, but behind the inventor, Loki kept going, the way perhaps a little slicker even. The sound Tony made then was a broken one, small and desperate. He wanted to move his hips, but his position, the restraints, and Loki’s iron grip on his thighs prevented him. He could do no more than just take the pounding, as one party recovered after a brief pause and started up again, and the Loki behind him came, but still didn’t stop, just audibly pushed himself past his limits and kept going.

Tony lost track of how many times he came, after those too-familiar noises of post-orgasm-desperate Loki set him off again and he didn’t come back down for several minutes. When it did stop, both tricksters were still and panting, but not done, waiting for Tony to come back down to earth, the inventor was outright confused and more than a little dazed, and all of his muscles ached deeply. He said Loki’s name in a desperate rasp because he was still hard, he still needed—god, he needed to come without the ring on his cock, but the words wouldn’t form on his tongue. Words altogether seemed to be beyond him.

“One more indulgence, Tony,” Loki murmured in his ear, as his duplicate pulled back, leaving more space between them, changing his angle in a way that didn’t seem to make things easier. “Because you’ve been so—mmmh, so very good.”

Feeling open and exposed again, Tony shivered, almost letting his head fall back, but Loki nipped at his ear warningly and he kept his head up. When his eyes opened, he saw why a bit more space between his body and that of Loki’s double might be needed, and it was purely logistics.

Stroking a hand down Tony’s side to his hip was a third Loki sitting beside the second one, grinning wide and shameless, before leaning in and down and swallowing the inventor’s cock as the other two again began to move within him.

Tony did scream, at that point. He shuddered, came twice before he felt deft fingers do something at the base of his cock and suddenly all the pressure was off. The inventor came harder than at any previous point in his entire life, the climax rolling up through him like it meant to shatter him, as Loki swallowed hard around his cock and two more of Loki came inside him while making such incredible noises that Tony almost thought he might agonizingly climax one more time even despite the ring’s absence—or he might have, if he hadn’t blacked out.

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Tony returned to full awareness under the increasingly familiar sensation of long-fingered hands caressing all of his muscles, making them prickle with heat and relax bonelessly under the effects of healing magic. He reflected, with some amusement, that he didn’t even feel an ache from the earlier stretching endurance trial, and might not even be much looser for it overall. Tony had noticed Loki
seemed inclined not to leave quite such long-term effects in his wake, no matter what they got up to.

“Loki, you are evil,” the inventor mumbled.

“You enjoy it, I think.”

“Hard not to, when there’s quite that many orgasms involved, fuck.”

“Yes, Angrboða and Sigyn did enjoy putting me in a similar state through their combined efforts, on occasion.”

“That where you got the idea to involve more than one of you?”

“Perhaps.”

“You ruin me, but fuck, I think I like it,” Tony groaned.

Loki chuckled, and settled beside him on the bed. “We really should shower, before joining the others for a meal. I’m afraid we both reek of sweat and ejaculate.”

“I’m fucking you against the shower wall, though.”

“I’m not averse to this.”

“Good... now help me up.”

The trickster laughed at him openly, but obliged.

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That day, and the next five after it passed by fairly smoothly. Communications with S.H.I.E.L.D. were even almost as civil as discussions every day or two with otherworldly allies, arranging for a meet amongst them all soon. There was talk of involving Odin, but after Thor made a brief visit to Asgard again, he returned reporting that he would stand in as Asgard’s ambassador for their allies in this war. So that went smoothly, as did meetings with Kree dignitaries when Thor, Tony, Loki, and Steve made another brief visit to Titan after a long call from Mar-Vell. A few hours playing diplomatic war-dealings games (preventing Kree encroachment, assuring Titan that they could remain as isolationist as they might want to without seeming less than a united front to the Kree along with Asgard, etc) took up the rest of the afternoon, and things seemed to be running quite smoothly.

Except that Mar-Vell’s communicator kept going off, lights on it visibly flashing in his breast pocket. Eventually, so did Tony’s phone, after he surreptitiously had JARVIS hack the communicator and answer for them.

The memory of the utterly perplexed and slightly horrified looks on the faces of Kree and Titan representatives all (Thor looked amused, and Loki calmly concerned) at their first experience with Black Sabbath, as the first wails of guitar erupted from his pocket, was one Tony Stark would cherish forever. He pulled out his phone and cut off the first few words of Paranoid before Ozzy could perturb them any further. “Sorry, emergency sort of alarm. It means all is desperately not well at home. If you don’t mind?” He gestured at all of them graciously.

Nods from around the table. They had just been starting their overly-formal goodbyes, by that point.

Small mercies, Tony thought, and took his phone off silent-except-for-emergency-alerts. “JARVIS,
“Miss Potts, sir, has been taken. I tapped S.H.I.E.L.D. for all information they might have on incidents minor and major within a fifty-mile radius of her last known location, and found their systems on more impressive lockdown than usual. They seem to be missing some of their own. Mr. Barton and Natasha were the first to begin actively searching the area she vanished from, and we lost contact with them roughly two hours ago; they went unnoticed for longer than usual because they were known to be on radio silence for the first hour, but their communicators dropped off of any systems of ours long before that. Dr. Banner and the visiting Dr. Strange were picked up by S.H.I.E.L.D. thirty minutes ago, when robotic drones began to infest Manhattan. They seem to be looking for something, and causing a general nuisance, as well as traffic accidents. Wherever they go, sir, all electronic and telephone communications go down. They are not unlike a swarm.”

Tony took a deep breath and glanced up at Loki sharply. “S.H.I.E.L.D. leak.”

“Pardon?” the trickster inquired.

“I knew this was going to happen as soon as I saw your face on that footage,” the inventor groaned, running his hands over his face. “Terribly sorry, gentlemen, but we have to go save my planet so that any of the terms you’ve all graciously accepted won’t become a moot point.” He rose to his feet. “Loki, if you could please?”

The gods and Steve also stood, two worried blonds with frowns bracketing the two more somber dark-haired men between them, as the trickster made hasty apologies, brief reassurance of good faith, and accepted well-wishes with a polite smile right before teleporting them all out.

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They reappeared in the main lab.

As soon as they landed, the inventor said, “Suit up, Steve.”

“What is it?”

Tony sighed. “Doom.” He waved a hand expectantly toward the nearest Iron Man suit, and it obediently became a swarm of parts which coalesced around him, snapping into place perfectly.

The super-soldier swore and darted out of the lab for his gear.

“He’s a brilliant bastard, but he holds grudges worse than either of us, which is really saying something,” Tony said, aiming his words at Loki.

Realization dawned, quick and sharp. “You believe S.H.I.E.L.D. information alluding to our alliance may have sent the wrong message.”

“Not just to him, either, likely. Especially not if they’re picking up important S.H.I.E.L.D. agents as well as Avengers for collateral.”

“Who have they taken from S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Thor inquired.

“Any luck cracking that riddle, JARVIS?” asked the inventor.
“It’s clearance level 7, sir, and on high alert, and their new involvements with the Rising Tide seem to have benefitted their systems.”

Tony swore. “Should’ve known that girl was trouble when she sniffed me.” He ignored the faintly-bemused look from Loki and the more open bafflement on Thor’s face. “It’s held out this long against all you’ve got?”

“Mostly, sir. Only a little ways to go now... ah, I see.”

“What was it?”

“She was rebuilding everything real-time. Something distracted her.”

“That’s pretty fucking impressive, actually,” Tony mused. “Bright girl. Must be her boss in trouble? Maybe a team-mate?”

“Boss, sir,” JARVIS sounded almost... hesitant. “This may anger you, sir.”

The inventor steeled himself. “Go on.”

“It seems she works as part of an independent S.H.I.E.L.D. team run by Agent Phil Coulson.”


“I’m afraid that I am, sir.”

Loki looked at Thor’s relieved-yet-betrayed expression, and Tony’s fury, and raised a hand. “Excuse me, but did you think I’d actually killed him?”

“Yes,” the inventor hissed.

“Ah.” The trickster gave a nod. “This explains much.”

Thor looked betrayed, saddened, and a bit baffled. “I do not understand.”

Loki patted his shoulder. “You have been manipulated, brother. Politics.”

“But Agent-” He hesitated. “You did injure him quite badly.”

“Yes.”

“Fury announced his death, I was told.”

The trickster nodded.

“I do wish Director Fury would be less heavy-handed and easily caught, at times,” Thor sighed. “He lacks your finesse.”

At that, Loki gave a startled half-laugh despite himself.

“We have any scans of the bots currently swarming us, JARVIS? I want clues as to how many forces Doom has teamed up with, and who they are,” Tony said sharply, his voice cold and clinically distant. He could sense Loki stepping closer, mostly due to sensors in the suit alerting him to the fact.

The trickster god stood at his left, examining his face with curiosity: the first real glimpse he’d gotten of a Tony Stark at war since their first meeting. “Tony,” he said, low and not outright demanding his
attention, but touching on it nevertheless.

Jaw clenching a bit, the inventor turned his head to meet Loki’s stare. “Yes?”

For a long moment, the trickster merely stared back, reading him while keeping his own expression a careful calm. “We will find them.”

“And when we do, I’m punching Coulson in the face, yeah. Also, Fury... we need make him thoroughly miserable over this. Just saying.”

Loki offered a faint smirk. “I’m sure we’ll come up with something.”

Tony shot him a vicious grin, the only mirth in it twisted by fear and spite.

The trickster returned it, just before the lights lowered and a hologram appeared before them both. Thor stepped closer, to stand at his brother’s side, as they all heard Steve run back into the lab only to halt and stare with them.

“Insectile, practical, heavy materials,” Loki mused. “Rather like Doom’s designs, but of the sort he’s usually content to fob off on others. He uses rather more elegant ones for some of his more clever espionage tactics, but never in a swarm.”

“Less conspicuous, yeah. The materials are a bit pricy even for him to make enough to swarm half of Manhattan looking for you with,” Tony muttered. “I don’t know anyone off the top of my head with resources like that.”

The trickster’s eyes narrowed, his hands clenching into fists, then unclenching, repeatedly as a few thoughts, highly unpleasant to judge by his expression, seemed to occur to him. “One of the early stages of processing a cosmic cube, if done incorrectly, can produce a useful sort of paradox-event for a short period of time. It could be manipulated to duplicate small objects, as a mage might, but with minimal energy exertion. If maintained correctly and twisted just so, it might last long enough, or prove repeatable enough, to produce a swarm like this, with such a machine as this pressed through it: duplicating it 1:1, then 1:2, then 2:3, 3:5, 8:13...”


“It would take considerable focus, and someone who knew how to manipulate the field... like a Beyonder.”

Thor made a startled noise. “There is one on earth again?”

“I believe so,” Loki confirmed.

“Who has the Beyonder?” Tony asked. “You were looking for him, right?”

“I’ve yet to find him. The trail went cold, all persons connected to it going abruptly underground—” He halted, turning on Tony suddenly. “You sent them underground!”

“I what? Who?”

“The farce reclaimed by the genuine article. It’s so brilliant I want to set them on fire,” Loki growled. “But I believe I may have my target. Who owns the remains of AIM these days, Tony?”

“Sasha Ling,” Tony said quickly. “Well, she’s CEO, but she told Pepper that her father put her in charge of it as her first real independent project.”
“And who is her father?” Loki purred.

“JARVIS? Help me out?”

“Actually, sir, I’ve pulled up her records before, and do recall that her father is not actually listed on her birth certificate or any legal records. There is only rumor and speculation in Chinese newspapers, and no names prove altogether consistent.”

Tony blinked. “That’s... weird.”

“Oh, no, it makes perfect sense,” Loki murmured.

“Loki, talk to me, here.”

“I thought she might be just a pawn, but no, he must have gotten bold, coming so far with you seeming scarcely aware of him, until I brought the Ten Rings back to your attention. Has she been more infrequently in the public eye since Iron Man’s attacks against the Ten Rings’ bases, JARVIS?”

“What?!” the inventor demanded sharply.

“It does seem she has made fewer appearances at press conferences, and has been quoted as feeling a need for privacy, and not being the public face of her company, since that time,” JARVIS confirmed.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Tony waved his hands sharply. “This is wildly circumstantial even by my standards, Loki.”

“I have not pursued AIM. I considered them to be a threat successfully neutralized by you,” the trickster mused. “What a perfect place to hide weapons development for the likes of the Ten Rings, but the place that S.H.I.E.L.D. and yourself believed to be best purged of their influence?” He seized Tony’s chin between thumb and forefinger, leaning in with a hint of a grin. “This isn’t circumstance, this is what I would have done in their place, and I should have seen it far sooner. I am in awe, and I am furious, and I want to burn them.”

That, the inventor told himself silently in the back of his head, should not be such an incredible turn-on. He was glad that his current armor would conceal that from view a bit. “Ten Rings. Working with Doom. This... won’t be easy. JARVIS, how long until the swarm hits the tower?”

“Thirty minutes at best, Mr. Stark.”

“Good. Call Bruce, let him know we’re here and I’ve got a plan,” Tony said. “Loki, if they’re looking for you and have access to S.H.I.E.L.D. data, they’ll have enough readings on your magic to be able to identify it. Since the Ten Rings have a bit of magic-savvy, and Doom has a fair bit more, they’ll have some way to contain you.”

“Look closer at the scans,” the trickster said, releasing Tony’s chin and turning back to the hologram, manipulating it with a wave of his hand. “What do you see, looking at the power source driving them?”

“Common, from Doom, still not actually sure how it lasts so-” He stopped dead, and turned slowly to Loki. “Magic. You’re suggesting he supports it with magic?”

Slow and sly and wicked, the trickster grinned. “Magic, just a spark of it, feeding the power cell just enough of the improbable to keep them going far longer than should be feasible otherwise, with the materials and technology Doom keeps.”
“There’s secondary power, in all of them.”

“Enough to alert the source and keep sensors active and transmitting for a few hours, keeping them online to be remotely re-activated when most convenient,” Loki acknowledged. “What are the odds Doom has them set to still alert him if he’s sold this design to the likes of the Ten Rings, do you think?”

“How close does he have to be to re-awaken them?” Tony asked.

“For a few dozen of them, he would need to be in the same hemisphere, at the least, but for an army this size?” Loki laughed. “He would need to be atop your tower.”

“He assuredly is not,” JARVIS reassured.

Tony began to laugh. “Alright, then. We know what we need to do. We need amplification.”

“I’ll handle it,” Loki assured.

The inventor raised an eyebrow slowly.

“I’ll require time, of course, perhaps up to half an hour, but I’d prefer to do it quickly myself than give you the secrets to pulling off such a thing as this yourself, Tony. No offense meant.”

“Get Pepper back safe and we’re even.”

“I am your ally, am I not?”

“Not hers.”

“With her lost, you would be less useful to me, and to yourself.”

Tony swallowed tightly. “That’s not an option.”

“Precisely,” the trickster assured, droll and matter-of-fact. “Now, you other Avengers: you go fight back the swarm with lightning and skill and brute force to keep them distracted and away from the tower while I’m busy here augmenting Tony’s inventions with some trickery of my own devising to send the magic-canceling equivalent of an EMP throughout all of Manhattan. Tony, find Sasha Ling and bring her to me here, will you?”

“What do you have planned for her?”

“A meeting with her father,” Loki said, his tone light and airy. “That’s all.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully. “You heard him, boys. Move out!”
S.H.I.E.L.D. is harassed, Manhattan is under attack, and the Ten Rings are really unpleasant.

Also: Loki fights a dragon again. He really hates this dragon.

Three weeks and two days...

Pepper awoke with a mild headache and the distinct impression she was stuck in physical restraints in a moving vehicle. To judge by the low rumbling hum all around her and the smoothness of the ride, she was going to guess a plane, or something more advanced like a mini-helicarrier, though the ride wasn’t as smooth as the full-sized version if the latter were the case. Also, it was going way, way faster, at a sharp angle.

“I think I’ve known Tony too long,” she muttered, before even lifting her head from where it sagged limply forward.

“Certainly you’ve known him longer than most, and survived being close him for quite an impressive duration,” said a familiar voice that, for some reason, made Pepper’s blood run cold.

“Am I dead?”

“No, I’m also in restraints same as you, so we’re going just off of what I can see from here.”

Slowly, she lifted her head and turned it to glare daggers at the unassuming man in the immaculate suite-and-tie, hanging three feet away from her along the same wall, in the same restraints. “You were,” she said, cold and angry.

“Well. Sorry, but uhm.” He smiled helplessly, apologetically, and sadly. “Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated?”

“I wish I could slap you so hard right now, you don’t even know,” she hissed.

“I’m really, really sorry.”

“I cried over you!”

He looked touched and hurt at the same time. “I’m—I...”
“You son of a bitch,” she huffed, blinking back tears even now. “I’m glad you’re okay, but I’m so pissed off at you, I can’t even... You just—” Pepper tilted her head up and back, sniffing. “Okay. So. We’re kidnapped. Let’s focus on that, right now. Why are we both kidnapped, and who kidnapped us?”

“We were both successfully captured by the Hand, who gave us over to Dr. Doom, this time. I think he’s a bit unsettled by Mr. Stark’s recent alliances, and wants to have the right cards to play against him, and S.H.I.E.L.D. both, should they try to do anything like, say, protect a valuable defensive resource of the United States.” He shrugged a bit, as much as the metal and belt-like restraints would allow him to. “The usual, I guess, when you get trickster gods involved?”

“No invasion this time,” Pepper pointed out.

“Yet.”

She snorted. “More of a few crispy refugees, really, if things go right.”

“That would depend on a couple of Norse gods, and Tony Stark. You think the latter can manage without you, or while worrying about all this?” Coulson’s fingers twitched in a restrained gesture meant to encompass the whole of their cell.

Pepper got the gist, and dragged her teeth along her lower lip. “He might survive about a week and a half... two or three with divine intervention, which Loki might handle? If we’re optimistic, here?”

“Pardon me if Loki-related optimism isn’t my forte.”

She snorted. “Fair enough. He really stabbed you?”

“Through the lung. Heart stopped beating, too, for a long... long while.”

“You okay?”

“Eight seconds,” he said quickly, almost defensively.

Pepper’s brow furrowed. “I... guess it felt longer?”

“Things not adding up is still something I hate getting used to, is all.” He shifted his fingers a bit, and a small glint of metal appeared between his fore- and middle-fingers on his left hand. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, focusing on the first manacle. When it finally popped free, he said, “Want to get out of—”

Pepper dropped to the floor, stumbling only a little at the odd angle gravity was working at (seriously, how high are they taking this plane? she thought, uneasily) and dusting herself off. She reached out to the wall with both hands and two small, glittering little machines crawled off the wall onto her fingers. She lifted them to her earlobes, and they became again harmless-looking, only slightly heavy silver-and-diamond studs: clearly Stark Industries chic. “You need a minute?”

Coulson opened his mouth as if to ask if she minded helping, then saw the amused look on her face and just how much she was looking forward to his struggle. He suddenly understood why she got along so well with the likes of Tony Stark. Sighing, he went to work on the next manacle. “I suppose I deserve this?”

“More than this, but I’m amused by this for now.”

Again, he sighed. “I guess that’s fair.”
Pepper scanned their cell while waiting for him, and listening to the scratching and metallic little sounds of his struggle with at least a little satisfaction. The room was long, narrow, designed to allow pass-through inspection of prisoners; although there was something about some slots along the walls that made Pepper uneasy. She realized the compartment was air-tight, and spotted a well-concealed few cameras along the wall opposite where they had been kept, made to look like bolts holding things together, and utterly unobtrusive. “Shit. Phil, you may not want to bother.”

“Why?”

An alarm went off, and the room began to fill with gas visibly.

Pepper considered her options, and decided not to risk head-injury by staying on her feet. Thus, she sat down and leaned back against a convenient bit of wall. “That’s why.”


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When Pepper next woke up, she could hear someone swearing at Coulson at great length, in three different languages, at the top of his lungs. The voice sounded familiar, and so did some of the foreign languages. She could understand most of what was being said, and sympathized.

“He really does deserve it, Clint, but my head kind of hurts from the knock-out gas, or possibly the acoustics in here in combination with all the yelling and the air being thinner, or all of the above, so please knock it off for now?” Pepper interrupted sharply, in very curt professional tones.

“Oh, sorry,” the archer said meekly.

“Knock-out gas?” asked another voice, also familiar.

Pepper lifted her head, and tried to lean away from the wall enough to see past Coulson next to her. “They got you, too, Natasha?”

“Yes. We were looking for evidence of who took you, and some of Doom’s automatons were unexpectedly supporting the Hand,” the spy recounted. “But the gas?”

“As I was trying to say,” Coulson began, in slightly meeker tones than could be called commanding, “Pepper and I managed to get off the wall earlier, but we’re under observation from some fairly subtle hidden camera equipment, and before anyone came in, we were gassed. All the tools previously about our persons for escape from restraints were then confiscated.”

“Hmm. Looks like they expected you to warn us. All my tools are gone,” the red-haired spy sighed. “And I’m hardly doing it any of the harder ways if we’ll just get dropped by something in the air.”

“I’m cleaned out too,” Clint added.

“You two are more well-known active field agents with a long track record of narrow escapes. It’s understandable they’d be more thorough in disarming you and checking for all sorts of small and unconventional lock-picking equipment,” Coulson mused, his eyes moving slowly around the cell. “What are the odds of rescue?”
Clint grimaced visibly.

Beyond him, Natasha made a thoughtful noise. “Better than even the usual, actually. They’re reacting defensively to a perceived alliance between S.H.I.E.L.D., the Avengers, and otherworldly forces, but they don’t know the full extent of Loki’s capabilities anymore than S.H.I.E.L.D. does, and Tony knows them better and can contribute to the plans.”

“Will Loki actually help to the full extent of his capabilities, if it really comes down to that?” Coulson asked lightly.

“He needs Tony if he wants his war, and he wants revenge on Thanos more than he wants anything else,” Natasha explained slowly. “And he needs S.H.I.E.L.D. still with him, on this project, to a lesser extent. He can’t have your absence or ours distracting them, and you’re a high-level distraction based on the security clearance you must have these days, Coulson.”

“For once, I’m just hoping my team opts to lie low, and actually succeeds,” he sighed, head falling back to meet the wall with a low thunk.

“If they’re a team of yours,” Clint said, in cold and still-resentful tones, “I think we all know the odds of that are pretty slim.”

“I’m sorry, Clint.”

“No problem.” His voice was glacial. “Agent.”

Pepper coughed. “You have a team, though?”

“Yeah. Projects to keep me off the radar from Avengers-level activities, in a fashion not altogether unlike bribery,” Coulson admitted. “I’m just glad they let me back in the field at all.”

“About that...” Natasha sounded thoughtful.

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“Skye.”

“I’m busy.”

“Skyyye.”

“Ward, I said I’m-” She turned to glare over her shoulder and found nothing. She heard the sound of someone clearing their throat, and turned toward it, to find one of the other displays in the lab she’d been ignoring had Tony Stark’s face giving her a very judgmental look, but the angle and lighting was weird, almost like...

“Oh my god, you’re in the armor aren’t you?” she all but squeaked.

“Oh, I’m en route to pickup someone of interest, but having a little more trouble finding her than anticipated, so I might need a bit of a hand. On an only tangentially related note: you could’ve mentioned you had to lie about your boss because I was under the mistaken impression he was dead. Maybe in like, an apology post-it note. Anything, really, would’ve done.”
“You thought AC was dead?”

“Do... do you seriously call him AC?”

“Yeah.”

“To his face?”

“Yeah, we discussed it.”

“Okay, so maybe you’re in the clear. Doom has your boss?”

“Pretty sure.”

“And Pepper?”

“Oh my god he took Pepper too?! Why? What the hell is going on, Iron... Tony?”

“Please don’t call me ‘Iron Tony’; it’s just weird.”

“My question stands,” Skye insisted.

“Remember that robot head you delivered to me?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember maybe hearing about me doing a lot of stuff to the Ten Rings some weeks after all that?”

“Uh... yeah?”

“Loki had been snooping around both of them and making their lives a little difficult around the same time. He’s my ally.”

“Wait what now?”

“It’s an arrangement I got him to swear to, in a way gods like him can’t renege on. The guy who sent him, and who owned that army, and wanted the tesseract Loki stole? He’ll be here in about four and a half weeks, and Loki wants to get horrible, thorough and painful revenge against the guy, and I made sure that the only way he’d be able to get it successfully was to ally with the Avengers, which he refused, and instead offered to ally with just me. S.H.I.E.L.D. has known about it, but only recently has that info started making its way through their communication feeds all afresh, now that people like Doom and the Ten Rings are listening for anything to do with Loki. Now, here we are.”

“But what’s Coulson got to do with it?”

“Well, for one, Loki stabbed him through the chest, most of the Avengers knew him at least a little and he’d done right by us, so when we thought he died it sort of acted as a catalyst to us coming together as a team and saving the world. That makes him interesting bait/hostage against us. Also, he’s got level 7 S.H.I.E.L.D. security clearance, and no one with that kind of access, in Doom’s hands, is a good thing. He’s a valuable asset, enough that S.H.I.E.L.D. is almost tripping over themselves trying to find any traces of him around, anywhere, but they’re also not daring to step on Doom’s toes for fear of what he might do to dear ol’ Phil.”

“Shit, man, this is seriously fucked up,” Skye muttered.

“What are you swearing at n-” Agent Ward appeared over her shoulder, looking momentarily
bemused, then suddenly suspicious. “Tell me this isn’t a fan video.”

“No it isn’t, Agent... Grant Ward, right?” Tony offered.

“Uh... yes, sir?”

“Good. Nice to meet you. Skye, find out all you can about Sasha Ling, current owner of the remains of A.I.M., and anything that might be known about her mysterious father. Also, I need Coulson’s last known location and to know if he might be a cyborg.”

Grant and Skye both hesitated. “Cyborg?”

“Loki stabbed him clean through his chest, entered and exited the ribcage with a blade-tipped spear. He’s gotta have a few S.H.I.E.L.D.-issue replacement parts. Did you guys never ask? Or check?”

Seeing the wonder-twins exchange worried looks, in a clueless fashion, Tony sighed in exasperation.

“If he’s got parts like that, they can probably be tracked! That’s just how S.H.I.E.L.D. tech goes, medical or otherwise, how am I somehow the one explaining this to you people? Hang on, getting another call. Uh... Well, it’s only Fury, let me just conference him on.”

“What?” Grant sounded only a little almost-panicked.

The screen was suddenly divided between Tony Stark, and Nick Fury.

“I had a feeling you’d be harassing them by this point, Stark.”

“Fury,” the mad inventor said in cold, fierce tones, “I want you to know that my respect for you is not quite so high that I didn’t consider asking Loki to drop in on the Helicarrier and remove your good eye, and I think we both know he could not only get away with it, but he’d relish the opportunity. Fuck you and the black-hawk you rode in on, you ass-spelunking war-mongering fuckbishop.”

A long pause followed.

Skye tried her hardest not to laugh, biting her lip and the inside of her left cheek.

“Fuckbishop?” Fury asked, deadpan.

A hysterical giggle escaped the hacker before Grant could elbow her sharply.

“You heard me,” Tony shot back. “This bullshit led not just most of the Avengers to mourn, but also Pepper Potts, who cried over his loss precisely because Coulson is a good guy, somewhere under all the Agent-ness, and she was his friend. Now I find out he’s alive, and all the pain she went through over loss of a friend, was just because you used him, likely when he couldn’t exactly protest your plotting, might not even have been remotely conscious for days, in an out of surgery while the effects of us all believing that he was dead played out, and he had to adapt, once he woke up, to all that shit. What else could he do, by then, except play along and hope for the best? Fuck you, sir. Fuck. You.”

The director considered that for a long moment. “Thank you for sparing me my remaining eye, then.”

“You’re welcome. Same goes, individually, for all your limbs and your reproductive organs, too. They were each under serious consideration for potential removal by Norse god. Instead, Loki is on top of my tower with some of my tech, amplifying a distortion field I invented which will spread out over the whole island of Manhattan and disable almost all fresh and active magic in the area. That should take out the Doom-based tech swarm that the Ten Rings are using to go after Loki.”
“Good, because currently they’ve incapacitated Thor and seem to be trying to drag him off,” Fury shot back. “Where are you?

“They what?” Tony snapped. “Shit!”

“Before you drop off the line, Stark, I’m inclined to know where you think you’re going,” the director chided.

“That’s up in the air, now. We’ll be lucky if Loki doesn’t wreck half the city.”

Fury’s eyebrows raised. “Is he back on better terms with Thor? To that extent?”

“You misunderstand. As far as he’s concerned, I think, it’s more that if anyone is going to kill Thor, the only one with any right to even threaten as much, is gonna be Loki, you know? It’s that kind of... sibling thing? Is that a sibling thing?”

“It’s a sibling thing,” Grant confirmed.

“See? It’s a sibling thing. Thank you, Agent Ward.”

Fury shot the agent in question a warning look.

Grant swallowed tightly, and refrained from saluting, but it was a near thing. On the other hand, Skye was looking at Fury with a sort of shrewd, but intensely curious interest, like a passionate conservationist and cryptozoologist finally laying eyes on a wild chupacabra, and suddenly feeling uncomfortably aware of how much money certain ‘proof’ (requiring the creature’s injury or destruction to procure) might fetch with the right people, and how many people’s livelihoods might be saved by bringing the animal down, but trying to ignore the sensation in favor of more conservative scientific observation of the predator in its natural habitat—to learn more of its behavior and other secrets about its life and what sort of part it might really play in its particular ecosystem: did it really deserve to die or did it play an important enough part in the biosphere that it was best preserved, or was it parasitic and not actually a part of that natural balance? She looked like she was still deciding.

Tony, who always had an eye out for particularly perceptive and dangerously intelligent post-hippie types (ever since a certain blonde reporter from Brown University had more valid things to say than he initially could’ve expected; he had learned from that experience) barely had time to take stock of that before reminding himself of other more pressing matters at hand. “I’ve gotta call Loki. Skye?”

“On it, sir. Check your email.” She had the audacity to wink at him.

“A word of advice, ‘Skye,’” the director drawled. “Try not to flirt with Mr. Stark in front of any god of mischief you might encounter.”

“Unless you flirt with Loki too. He’s pretty flexible, in many ways.”

“Please stop,” Fury sighed.

“Woah, what?” Skye’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “Are you kidding me? Please don’t be, because I remember the footage, and he was hot.”

The mad inventor grinned devilishly. “Oh yes, he is.”

“I am suddenly uncomfortable with this on many levels,” Grant sighed.

“Who are you two talking to?” called a voice from just outside the lab: Fitz.
“I don’t know if we should ask, look at ‘em,” Simmons added, close behind.

Skye made a faintly incoherent sound familiar to fangirls everywhere.

Fury appeared faintly dismayed. “These younger generations terrify me.”

“Get over it, Fury, they’re the future. Remember how easily she can hack you.”

Skye preened a little, even as she covered her mouth with both hands. “Oh my god, are there pictures?”

“You’d only put them online, sweetheart, and I don’t need quite that kind of publicity lately. If I ever do, though, you’ll be the first one I call.”

The hacker made a small excited noise.

“Please get off the line, Stark,” Fury groaned.

“You first,” Tony challenged.

With an utterly exasperated noise, the director’s line cut out.

“Nice info in the email. Keep looking for more on Sasha Ling, please.”

“Can I ask why?”

“I think her dad is high up in the Ten Rings. Really high up. And the apple did not fall far from that particular tree, if she’s up to what I think she might be. If that’s the case, we can possibly use her as leverage to get the Ten Rings to turn on Doom, or otherwise cause them a lot of trouble.”

“Ooh, fun stuff. I’m on it, Tony.”

“Thanks, Sailor Skye.” The feed cut out.

“Ohmygod, he gave me a nickname,” she breathed, extremely excited.

By this point the two scientists had appeared behind them, catching only the last glimpse of Tony Stark and their hacker’s new nickname before the end.

“Was that Iron Man?” Fitz choked.

“Yeah. We’re totes friends,” Skye said immediately, with total assurance and a not-quite-casual bragging air.

Grant sighed. “He wants info on Sasha Ling and some of what the remains of A.I.M. might have been up to since she took them over. Are they still called Advanced Idea Mechanics, even?”

“They sure are, but they’re a brand within a brand behind two other brands, these days, and most of those are obscure and based in mainland China,” Skye responded quickly. “A couple of them are blatantly corporate shells for tax purposes for the extremely wealthy, owned by Chinese citizens but based in known tax havens: the usual. A few others aren’t, but they have really secure systems. Switzerland could learn a few things from them. It’ll take me a while to really get any traction.” He brow began to furrow as her fingertips tapped over the keyboard and she opened up several of her most reliable custom-designed decryption and password-bypassing programs. “A long while, jeez. This stuff is worse than if Stark Industries security had a torrid affair with Dr. Doom’s ridiculous levels of encryption.” She sputtered for a moment, upon getting a level or two deeper. “What the
actual fuck is this now? That... this isn’t even an alphabet I recognize, and I’ve hacked into a lot of Chinese government databases, so it’s not any of the usual regional ones... not even close, what is this?"

“Run a search through S.H.I.E.L.D. databases,” Grant suggested. “See if it might be extraterrestrial.”

“Are you serious?” Skye muttered. “Why is everything aliens?”

“Would you prefer we had to deal with actual gods, dragons and sacred quests?” Simmons asked, giggling. “Fitz would actually be a field agent!”

“I would not!” he protested.

“But you’d role-play one online,” Skye offered, only a bit distractedly.

“Well—if, I had... the time, maybe a bit.” The curly-haired engineer coughed behind one hand.

“No results on this alphabet. Nothing,” Skye sighed. “I’ll send it to Stark, though, and see if he can make anything of—”

Another window appeared suddenly on the same display Tony had earlier. This one showed the face of an angry, slightly singed god of mischief with bright green eyes and a mess of long black hair framing an expression of elegant, fearsome anger. “Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. and civilian contractors of same, I presume?”

“Holy mother of Tesla,” Fitz stammered, stumbling back. “You’s the one that attacked New York!”

Skye was looking him over far more appreciatively. Simmons looked speechless, mostly because she was observing an extraterrestrial life-form from myth and legend, inexplicably human-like and supposedly human-compatible as well as capable of myriad improbable physical transformations that made her itch to request someone catch him and hold him in a lab for her pretty pretty please; rather than utter any of this aloud, the biologist merely made a small noise in her throat of an only slightly more intellectually hungry nature than Skye’s earlier fan-squee.

“Yes, I did; however, I am the least of your problems right now. In fact, I am the key to solving many of your current problems. I am Loki, of Asgard, and for the time being I am ally to Anthony Stark in the pending war against the mad Titan who sent me to conquer your world and steal the tesseract in the first place, because I want vengeance against that monstrous wretch more than I’ve ever wanted a throne of any kind. Now, I’m going to send you a live feed I’ve detected, slightly magic-based in nature and thus more than a little tricky for the likes of S.H.I.E.L.D. to detect, particularly given that it contributes to a field which fries or otherwise shuts down and disrupts all electronic devices and their communications within a 13ft radius of wherever more than a few of these machines choose to land. I am busy constructing something to disrupt all of them at once, but I felt it might be more than a little useful to have someone ‘hack’ their channel, which is communicating back to the Ten Rings, who in turn are keeping up-to-date with Doom on the position and status of delivery of Pepper Potts and two of the Avengers into their ‘care’ for an unknown time. As far as I can guess, Doom will not give up a resource such as Agent Coulson, who might be quite useful for him, which might itself be a source of conflict between the two factions if we play this right.”

“So we can find Coulson through updates Doom’s transport is sending the Ten Rings,” Grant said, sounding fiercely relieved.

“You certainly can, soldier, if you’ll let the hacker at your side do what she does best. You come highly recommended, Miss Skye.”
“Just, uh... Just Skye,” she said, a bit shyly. “This is so awesome.”

Loki offered her a tight smile. “I’m sending the data to you now.”

“Yes, getting it. You want to, uh, shut them down anywhere specific while you’re working on... Oh, cool you do. And coordinates. Holy shit, they’re gonna be closing in on the tower in like ten minutes or less!”

“Yes, the arrangements I’ve made here are set to go off soon. I really am in quite a hurry, if you can find out the position of Coulson and his transport, I’d like to teleport there before this weapon goes off. I’ll be quite incapacitated otherwise.”

“Wow, no pressure,” Skye muttered.

“This one area you’ve marked out... most of them will slow their approach to your position, but not—” Grant started to point out.

“Agent Ward, I’ve seen your files, all of them, since I’ve been keeping tabs on important persons on this planet including your commanding officer Agent Coulson, and thus his team, you included. I’ve had months to do all of the research and I have an exceptional memory. As I recall, you have siblings, one of whom at least you may have come to resent based on his actions. If he were in the unenviable position to fall into the hands of enemies with a grudge against you, no matter what your history, what might you do?” Loki inquired in icy tones.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent met his stare evenly then, and swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, though his expression was perfectly calm and blank. “Okay, then. Yeah. Go for it.”

The trickster nodded to him. “Progress?” he asked of Skye.

“I know where they were five minutes ago, and what direction they were heading?” she offered, sounding unsure. “Not sure what I’m seeing here about their velocity can possibly be right, though.”

“Where?”

She told him.

Loki grimaced. “I am going to regret this,” he sighed.

“You know where they’re going?” Grant asked.

“Oh yes. Yes, I do. Last time I was there was not a pleasant experience. I prefer being the only extraterrestrial threat usually mistaken for mere myth and legend involved in any major battles on this planet.”

“Wait, wait. Aliens, right? Let me send you a thing!” Skye exclaimed. “I was trying to track down some stuff on Sasha Ling and came across this. I can’t hack it, because I don’t even know the alphabet, let alone the language, so anything I get from it would be useless even if my mad skillz did get me into their systems. S.H.I.E.L.D. has nothing on them so far.”

“Makluan,” Loki said immediately, and stored the files in an external device he’d connected to Tony’s systems, for storing all the related design information about his project atop the tower. It was his only real option to keep it out of the mad inventor’s reach, for the time being. “I will review those at length later; some time and effort should get me into their systems well enough.”

“You’re pretty tech-savvy for a guy over two thousand years old,” Skye teased.
“I am told by Dr. Jane Foster that I should refer anyone who makes such statements as those to a man called ‘Arthur C. Clarke’ and consider my point made,” the trickster retorted. “Thank you very much, Skye. Fare you all well. I’m off to battle a dragon. Again.” He offered a humorless, bitter half-smile just before the feed cut out.

“A dragon?!” Simmons all but shrieked, sounding like she’d just found out her favorite band of all time would be having a concert less than a hundred yard from the S.H.I.E.L.D. jet’s parking spot in less than ten minutes, and she’d just won free tickets.

“He... he can’t be serious,” Grant muttered.

“Well, he’s magical alien god,” Skye said. “He didn’t sound like he meant it as, like, a metaphor or anything, so he might actually be pretty serious.”

“Oh my god, Skye, please, please find a way to hack satellite footage!”

She considered. “I’ll see what I can do...”

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Word from Loki reached Tony Stark fifteen minutes later than he considered comfortable. “Tony.”

“You’re late. They give you the goods?” the inventor asked. “And are you in transit or stuck on my roof because they took too long?”

An explosion a little too close-by answered his question. It was from atop Avengers tower, and its force went upward, leaving minimal damage to the building itself, but Tony still winced to see it; however, the noise notably wasn’t echoed from Loki’s side of the audio feed, which was encouraging. From where he was flying, Tony could see the swarms of insectile machinery start dropping like rocks from the air, to lay still and lifeless on the ground. The hum of the field rolling off the tower made his armor jitter briefly.

“You had to blow it up?” Tony sighed.

“I’m not giving you that weapon against me, ally or no.”

“I know, but shit, I was still working on some of those, and now I have rebuild from scratch.”

“You were going to do so anyway once beyond the prototype testing stages, which you very nearly were, in any case.”

“You’re in transit, then?”

“No, I’ve arrived outside the Ten Rings’ main compound, and am awaiting the arrival of their recently-kidnapped cargo.”

“Wait... the one with-”

“Yes, with the dragon,” Loki snapped.

It was then Tony realized the god was actually speaking in a whisper. “Uh... Loki? How close are you to it?”
“It’s... they have one primary runway which provides the quickest means for high-importance and high-security incoming traffic to deposit their unique sorts of cargo where they can be sent underground as fast as possible. The runway ends fifty feet shy of a cliff-face, with a lot of intricate, jagged rock formations at the base of it, which form a veritable labyrinth of stone. Guess where the cave is that the dragon slumbers?”

“Shit. No way they’d use another runway?”

“No.”

“Odds that they’re expecting an attack from you?”

“High. They’re actually already on alert. My arrival must have tripped some sensors. I underestimated how far from their buildings they would be able to run them reliably. I have to go on radio silence very shortly if I am to avoid detection again.”

“You just sent me coordinates way closer to where I am. Why?”

“You’ll find Thor unconscious there, along with members of the Hand and a few Ten Rings thugs who had been inclined to transport him to a shielded vehicle with restraints fit to his specifications in it, after he’d fallen. They were good enough that Rogers lost their trail, but Skye was able to turn the nearest machines against his would-be captors, before the pulse from the tower began knocking them all out. Do make sure he’s not too near death, would you?”

“Yeah, will do. No way you can teleport me and any other backup to the side of the globe you’re on right now? You doing this alone-”

“Don’t underestimate me, Tony.”

“Never that. I learned not to do that long before this alliance gig, and I don’t exactly plan to stop now. Just try not to get killed. That dragon kicked you to the curb and scraped you along it last time, Loki. And they know you better, this time around.”

“Not as well as I know them. That’s the advantage I have against most of my enemies, and always have, generally. It will be most disconcerting to have an exception after this war,” Loki mused.

Tony didn’t know how to even begin to respond to that. Last time that happened to me, I didn’t even know I was the enemy. Thanks for at least being that honest with me, here, came to mind, but remained unsaid. So did, I don’t have to be that sort of exception if I’m not your enemy, but the inventor rejected that one almost violently. “I’m not done with you, you know,” he said instead, after an only slight pause.

“That much, I’m aware of, yes. Not for some weeks yet. And I’ve much left to do before then.” He sounded satisfactorily ferocious at that, despite how low he kept his volume. “I’ll inform you when I see progress. For now, however, I need to silence this device and use minimal magic to remain undetected until they arrive, which may still take another hour or so at the fastest speed I estimate them capable of, or much longer. I won’t be detectible even to you, for a time.”

“I’ll be listening. And—thank you.”

“You need not.”

“I know, alliance, and I’d be useless without—if she—but just-”

“At least save your thanks for after I’ve succeeded, Tony. And if you absolutely must fly out here,
don’t do so without the recreated dragon-sedative I’ve had Banner working on. He should be able to synthesize it in less than half an hour, with the samples I collected from that botanist of Alfheim yesterday; his equipment makes rather less sense to me than yours.”

“But-”

“The sedative, Tony. I will remove one of your eyes if you arrive without it, if you don’t wind up down a giant fire-breathing lizard’s gullet first.”

“Fine, fine!”

“Good. Fare you well.”

The line cut out, and JARVIS confirmed that Loki fell off the map entirely.

“Let’s find Thor, then,” Tony said, his voice a bit tight.

On the other side of the world, a mad god he couldn’t trust with his life was the only thing between his dearest and most vital friend (in fact, the woman he’d long ago entrusted his life and his heart to in so many ways, so many times) and his long-time arch-nemesis. And Dr. Doom was helping out the enemy.

No time to fly there, either. Not even if he pulled out all the stops.

Finding Thor, and the men piled around him sprinkled over by a small bit of mechanized swarming robots, were indeed down for the count, so there was no fight involved. Tony almost wished there had been, if only to clear his head and make himself feel a bit better. JARVIS scanned the Aesir, reported that there was an unfamiliar chemical in his bloodstream, which would require some research.

“Send it to Bruce. Tell S.H.I.E.L.D. they’ve got some extensive cleanup to do, and that we need Bruce back in the tower’s medical wing as soon as fucking possible if they want Coulson back even remotely intact.”

“Right away, sir.”

_Bruce better get back here in time for me to haul ass out there. It’ll be just over three hours in the SS3-eat-your-heart-out suit, and it’s about time I had another excuse to take a sub-orbital flight. C’mon, Bruce, please, c’mon._

~~

After two hours of waiting, Loki could see the large transport jet from his place at the edge of the cliff-face, just below line-of-sight from the base, and above a ledge that blocked him from the view of patrols passing below, and upon seeing it, could target it. The broad, sleek jet was large: large enough that its ability to handle a flight allowing for a sub-orbital hop to shorten flight-time was more than impressive; although its bulk did explain why it still took it longer than a rocket-propelled transport might have.
The jet was warded against any spells of detection, tracking, or other extra-sensory measures. It had wards of protection too, but they were weak things, earthen and uncertain of themselves, too young and too simple to stop the likes of a god of chaos altogether; however, pulling together the power to transport himself there, and bypass the protections on the jet, would make him visible to anyone watching for spikes in magical activity anywhere within a two-mile radius of their main headquarters.

And if they could pinpoint his location here, they would know it to be high time they woke up the best weapon they had against him: scaly and enormous and far, far too powerful.

Taking a deep breath, the trickster pulled power to him anyway and shut his eyes, just for a moment, to concentrate, and make the process quick as it could be. Then he opened them again, fixed on his target, and vanished from the cliff-face.

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He landed in the cockpit of the jet just behind both captain and co-pilot. He touched the backs of their necks, grasping firmly before they could even turn and look upon him. “You heard nothing. You have seen nothing. The last minute and a half of time that you have experienced will vanish from your memory, as soon as you hear the cockpit door shut behind me,” he purred, in soothing tones, his long fingers glowing darkest green. Both pilots sagged forward a little, staring at their instruments as though they were suddenly the most fascinating objects on the planet.

Loki backed away slowly, opened the cockpit door and slid out, snapping it shut solidly, and quite audibly, behind him.

There was a force of a dozen heavily armed and armored men in the compartment right behind the cockpit and they all had weapons aimed at him within less than two seconds of his appearance. The trickster grinned, raising both hands as if to indicate he was unarmed and harmless. “Hello gentlemen. Sleep.” A near-transparent wave of green-black energy emanated from his exposed palms, rolling over every body in the room. The clatter of weapons dropping to the floor and men slumping heavily in their seats was as music to Loki’s ears. “Good boys,” he praised, and strolled down the aisle between their rows of seats. Alarms began to go off. Loki swore and aimed a spell at the nearest visible security camera—a small thing, unobtrusive and seemingly embedded into the decor—causing a shower of sparks.

Now the alerts were about camera systems in half of the jet going down.

“Only half?” the trickster muttered. “Better failsafes than expected.”

He placed a hand over the nearest door, detecting a flurry of activity on the other side: mostly armed men, these ones dangerously confident in their weapons, like they expected something about them to be a big surprise. Loki side-stepped the door just before it was blasted back off its hinges. As the first soldiers charged through it, the trickster took them each down with a simple application of dagger-blades under their chins, which he retrieved before they even hit the ground, allowing him to keep their falling bodies between him and the rest of their fellows as he threw fire-charged daggers into their ranks, which buried in flesh and then distractingly exploded if left there longer than a few seconds.

The carnage lasted perhaps five minutes before all of the guards were bleeding on the ground, most
of them fatally. Loki put the others to sleep as he had the previous non-flight-vital personnel, and finally found a control display worth speaking of. After a few minutes’ manipulation, he found the location of the holding cells, and which of the two were occupied by live cargo, as opposed to merely highly-dangerous cargo. Both cells were designed to allow for either option, and could be ejected by emergency commands entered at the helm if things went too awry with a delivery.

Loki locked those protocols for the moment, not wanting to have to factor in any too-unexpected sudden drops from the sky into his current plans.

Announcements in panicked Hungarian were coming from the captain now, about a horrible monster flying right for them. Wincing at the thought of that confrontation, the trickster quickly teleported into the holding cell.

“There’s knock-out gas!” Natasha yelled immediately.

Sure enough, Loki heard the hiss of air and saw a hint of chemical fog. He growled and the temperature in the cell dropped like a stone, frost forming on every surface and cold penetrating the metal deeply. The gas, carried as part of a component in a water-based vapor, fell to the floor with a sound like a box of tiny beads overturned on a glass table. The tube systems feeding the gas into the chamber quickly iced up and clogged. Pressure-sensors in the machinery, detecting blockages, triggered built-in failsafes and shut the systems down before pressure could build up, to prevent any pipeline-breaks which might put half the jet’s ventilation systems at risk for contamination if they burst.

Loki was half-tempted to disable the failsafes just for fun, but knew he didn’t have the time. He snapped his fingers and restraints came off the two Avengers and Agent Coulson, as well as Pepper, who stumbled a bit. The trickster caught her by the arms gently and steadied her “You’re all well?” he asked lightly.

“Yeah. You?”

“There is a dragon on its way to attack this plane. I could be better,” Loki said, cool and droll.

“Where are we?” Natasha demanded.

“Not important. This teleportation will be very tricky; they will be able to trace me wherever we may land, and the efforts it took to finish my work in Manhattan and make the journey here with such haste will prevent me from getting too far without the dragon following us into some highly populated areas. They will have a proper lock on me by now and heading to another continent won’t actually be enough to make the beast change his mind about following us. The fallout, as you might imagine, would be on par with the invasion of New York, or worse. The dragon’s size is... well, you’ll see.”


“China. The rest, I leave to Tony. This is his arch-nemesis, and he’ll be informing the rest of you and S.H.I.E.L.D. where this base is when he’s better prepared to take it down for good.” Seeing Coulson, the spy and the archer were without weapons and footwear, he performed a quick possession-trace-and-locate spell, then summoned the objects back to them, except their phones, GPS, and any other navigational equipment, which he slid up his sleeve into a small pocket-dimension for temporary short-term storage. He looked Agent Coulson over oddly for a long moment. “You appear well, but not quite yourself, somehow.”

“Does that make you less likely to stab me through the chest again?” Coulson asked, in utterly blithe
tones.

“I require S.H.I.E.L.D.’s aid in the coming war, to keep my word, as my nature requires me to do, or
suffer an agonizing sensation akin to my blood boiling in my own veins for an indeterminate amount
of time based on various factors I’m not inclined to explain here and now. I intend to deliver you
back to your team whole and... healthy as possible, all things considered.”

Something in the agent’s expression appeared a bit disconcerted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Loki stared at him for a long moment. A brief flicker of uneasy realization flickered across his look,
then vanished. “Ah,” he said. “Nothing, it seems. I must be mistaken.”

“About what?” Coulson insisted.

The whole jet shook, shuddered, and began to lean heavily down-and-left.

“Ask me another time,” the trickster snapped, pulling Pepper closer by an arm about her shoulders as
though to shield her, though his other hand reached out toward the others. “Romanov, Barton,
Coulson, take hold of my arm. Now!”

The spy, the spook and the archer reached out, and as soon as they all touched him, they vanished
from the cell entirely.

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The four humans and the god reappeared under a large rocky overhang at the base of the cliff Loki
had clung to earlier. Overhead came a tremendous roar and the sound of a plane being hurled against
the cliff with frankly unnecessary force, sending a shower of shattered rock and flaming debris down
the cliffside, the impact making the stone shake almost to very base. The rockslide and bits of plane
landed only two hundred yards from Loki’s chosen landing place.

“You couldn’t get us any further?” Clint hissed.

“The dragon isn’t meant to let us go, Clint. Do you want it following us home?” Natasha reminded,
her eyes tracking the swooping shape overhead as it began to approach them. Her eyes widening,
she swore softly in Russian as she worked out just how massive the thing was. *Big as a sky-scraper,*
she thought hazily.

“Thank you for realizing that so quickly, Natasha; I do so appreciate your competence,” Loki
approved, and pulled from his coat (or so it appeared) a paper map on thick, heavy paper, drawn and
labeled in his own hand in surprisingly clear English for someone who hadn’t been familiar with the
Roman alphabet until a bit over seven months previous. “This is a map of the cave system and
labyrinthine rock formations of this place. Can you and Agent Coulson navigate them and keep the
others out of harm’s way while I distract this creature?”

Natasha began unfolding it, thanking Phil coolly when he pulled a multitool from his suit’s inner
breast pocket and used the LED flashlight to better expose the map.

Loki flicked lightly at the flashlight and shook his head. He traced a sigil on the back of Coulson’s
hand before the agent could pull away, leaving a green stain in his touch’s wake that faded quickly,
then drew another on Natasha’s, and the same one over the map key. “Turn your light off.”
Hesitantly, the agent turned the little light out, and blinked a bit when the lines of the map appeared to be made up of a clear glow, with more depth than should have been possible. It was, he realized slowly, three-dimensional this way, with the subterranean tunnels and the above-ground paths superimposed without interfering with each other in ways that made his head hurt to think about much. He then noticed he and Natasha were both small, bright pinpoints of light on the map: one red, one blue. Loki was a green, slightly darker pin-point near them. “I want this to be standard issue.”

“You can’t afford me as a consultant,” Loki chided. “Can you lead them?”

“Yes,” Natasha said firmly. “You’ll be, ah, able to take care of that... I can’t believe we’re dealing with an actual Chinese dragon.”

“Extraterrestrial in origin, actually, though he’s been on this continent a very long time,” Loki assured. “Makluan explorer, most likely. Also a shape-shifter. Let’s hope the rest of his crew are not also hidden around this planet.”

“But you can kick it’s ass, right?” Clint asked.

The trickster shot him a look. “I am not certain.”

A pause followed.

“We need you,” Natasha reminded him sharply. “You have promises to keep.”

“I’m aware. I’m working toward that as we speak.” He glanced pointedly in Pepper’s direction, but his expression remained a cool mask.

The assassin looked at him oddly for a moment, but nodded. “Go, then.”

Loki inclined his head toward her briefly in acknowledgement, then looked up toward the dragon and took a slow, deep breath. Turning away from them, his form shifted: armor dissolving along with the humanity of his form. The shape he took instead was large and scaled, with a longer neck than the dragon over their heads, and a narrower muzzle full of long teeth, but he was just as clearly a dragon as his opponent, albeit only one-third the size. Darting out from under the stone overhang, eyes visibly glowing green like lanterns, Loki launched into the air with a thunderous roar fit to send any more terrestrial fauna within a five-mile radius running in the opposite direction.

“Holy shit,” Clint breathed. “Did he just-”

“He just turned into a dragon,” Pepper said faintly. “If I recall Thor talking about this at length with Tony, no matter how hard I tried to stop him pestering, Loki won’t be actually at full strength when he’s, uh, not in his more natural shape. He’s still pretty strong, but uh... Not enough to actually take on that thing, which is actually in its natural state, I think. Shape-shifter thing. Also something about magic and density...” She waved a hand vaguely. “Basically, I think we need to run. Like now. Before they crash anywhere near here.”

“This way,” Coulson barked, pushing Clint ahead of him and keeping himself at Pepper’s as Natasha shot him a nod and took point, leading them along under the overhang, and out into the open only very briefly, before heading down into a long tunnel: a naturally formed cave, that only required them to stoop very slightly.

They had gotten perhaps twenty yards in, just less than halfway through the passage, before the whole tunnel shuddered around them, under the impact of something massively heavy hitting the ground with immense force, way too nearby. The escaping quartet paused, barely breathing, to listen for any groans or crashes of falling stone ahead or behind them: nothing much, just the hiss of dirt.
and rubble along the sides of the cave walls and rolling along the floor. They moved forward with considerable haste once the shaking stopped.

It took them less time to complete that last leg of the subterranean tour than it had the first one, thanks to panic-induced rush. They paused under the shelter of a few cyclopean boulders to catch their breaths in the less-stale and dank air.

“How do you think Loki might get out of this, if he somehow can’t kill the thing?” Clint panted, looking between the two redheads of the group. “I mean, it seems like he’s mostly creating a diversion right now, which I can’t really get over on some levels, but uh... he seems convinced it’ll follow him if it possibly can.”

“He might knock it out,” Natasha mused. “Though I imagine that might be pretty difficult if its skull is even harder than his, which it might well be.”

“I’m thinking he has a sort of plan. If his magic would work on it, he’d have used it to knock the thing out already, and I get the feeling not much else will really do the trick, here,” Pepper offered.

A near-blinding flash of green caught their attention, where it leaked through a gap between two of the boulders they were under. Pepper and Clint had to shield their eyes, since they were facing it more directly. “What the fuck is-” the archer began, but was cut off by a cracking sound almost as loud as a sonic boom.

In the wake of it, Loki’s voice rose to an outright cacophonous volume, seeming to make any rocks around them smaller than elephants, as well as the humans’ very bones too, rattle with it as he enunciated an incantation with expert ease. It was almost entrancing, for several moments, as he vocalized syllables untranslatable into human language; instead, it seemed like his voice was a bow pulling across unfathomable strings and drawing reaction from them like music, in an almost-hypnotic melody. The ground began to shake and the dragon roared horribly close, but Loki’s clear voice was still louder, cutting through it, the chanting incantation now rising from him faster in pace, like war drums quickening at the promise of fresh blood.

The blinding green light darkened from the color of the sun through leaves in spring to something more poisonous, but no less intense. Loki’s spell concluded with a horrific sound of steel and stone and animal screaming, and a single colossal tremor through the ground that made even the boulders the four humans huddled under groan waringly, though no more than a shower fresh rock-dust fell from them. The hum lingered in the stones all around them, and the humans barely shook off the sensation of being utterly transfixed.

“We need to keep running,” Natasha said sharply. Seeing the others still a bit more dazes, she shouted, “Clint! Pepper! Phil!”

The other three shook their heads to clear them.

“Ow,” Clint groaned. “Like a spike in m’brain, what the fuck? Ow.”

“You okay, Pepper?” the assassin asked sharply.

“No pain, but... my vision isn’t clear. Too much light, and I couldn’t quite close my eyes. I’ve got lots of blue dots happening. Phil?”

“I... don’t know what I just experienced,” he said slowly. “I can’t actually remember anything after that light first hit except the sounds of it, like I can’t unstick them. I... don’t understand.”

Natasha shot him a long, wary look for a moment. “It’s gods and their magic, Phil. Nothing you ever
got really trained for, especially not of this caliber.”

“I wrote most of the training we now have for it, so that’s not a good thing,” he responded, droll as he could.

“You sound like yourself, at least.”

“Do I?” he asked quietly.

“Phil?” the assassin sounded more uncertain, more concerned.

“I’m fine. Let’s move out and-”

The humming of the rocks suddenly cut out, leaving the previously low-seeming sounds of struggle less than fifty yards away seeming suddenly much louder: too loud, in fact, for them to be at what might be considered a safe distance.

“Run!” Natasha hissed. “Now!” She shoved Clint and Pepper ahead of her a few steps, and grabbed the agent’s sleeve to drag him away from the rock he leaned back on so heavily. “Come on, stay with me, Phil.”

He shook his head sharply, as if that set off something unpleasant. “I’m fine. Let’s just-” He glanced back over his shoulder and swore as he saw an ominous burst of flame and the scuffle beyond the boulders audibly escalated into something more like a landslide in reverse. “Run faster!”

Not even looking, the assassin obeyed, glad he kept pace with her, and pushed at Clint’s shoulder when they caught up with the others, and tried to drag them under a heavier, sturdier outcropping of stone.

Just as they ducked under it, the boulders they had sheltered under before had a god of mischief, back in his natural shape and full armor, helmet included, flung into them with enough force that one cracked and collapsed into the space the humans had occupied just over a minute ago, followed by a shower of larger stones that Loki barely dodged and deflected, with a visible effort.

A veritable mountain of scales and teeth wrenching itself free of earth and stone was visible beyond him: battered and bloody, clearly injured, but now angry as all hell. The dragon was at least fifty feet tall at the shoulders with a broad head that had ear-like horned flaps on either side, which seemed able to lay flat and almost conceal themselves amidst a ruff of larger and almost feather-shaped scales along the back of its head and neck. It had a long body and forelimbs somewhere between those of an eagle, and almost-humanoid arms, clearly dextrous as well as murderous. Its hind limbs were almost panther-like in shape, but with similar talons. As its head reared back, it roared accusation and menace at the god of mischief barely back on his feet.

“Oh my god,” Pepper hissed, covering her mouth with both hands.

“This way,” Natasha urged. “Follow me.” She ran lightly along the back wall of the overhang, fast as she could manage while staying quiet and letting the others keep pace with her. The distance between the back wall and the outer edge of the stone over their heads increased, though Natasha knew from the map that it was providing steadily less protection as they went: thinner and thinner amounts of heavy stone between themselves and the sky from which dragons might dive-bomb. She hesitated at something like a crossroads. On one hand, they could continue under the risky overhand. On the other, was a narrow passageway to her left, deeper into the cliffside, but slower going and a little exposed after several yards, not only at this end and the eventual exit half a mile in, but also from above where the passage’s ceiling gave way to a thin strip of sky.
“I think we should-” Coulson started, but a falling dragon straight ahead of them interrupted: it had launched at Loki and been flung over him and back reflexively by a deafening and apparently bone-cracking blast of magic, hitting the stone at the end of the ledge they hid under, which shook ominously, chunks falling from it and—

“He’s spotted us!” Natasha said crisply, stepping away from the back wall. “Coulson, take point, then Pepper, then you Clint. Go, go, go!” She waved them along, and sidled after them. It was barely wide enough for their shoulders, and promised to get narrower as they shuffled in, fast as they could, only pausing when Loki made a sudden reappearance at Natasha’s back with a crackling sound, wreathed in fast-fading green flame. He reeked of smoke, blood, burnt flesh, and a scent that reminded Clint and Natasha of a horrible mission they once undertook at an alligator farm, which they had both sworn to never speak of again. Loki was panting heavily and quite obviously drained to the point of looking rather grey.

“What are you doing?” Clint hissed.

“Preventing you from being roasted,” the trickster snarled back, raising his hands and barking an incantation not a moment later, just as the others noticed a set of glowing yellow eyes peering after them down the passage. The spell threw up a crystalline-looking energy shield from floor to ceiling, and wall-to-wall, just before a pillar of flame headed their way. The shield held, but the rocks around them still groaned under the force, and the enclosed space began to feel very uncomfortably warm.

All of them shuffled a dozen feet further along before getting cooked by the heated air and stone.

“That will hold for thirty minutes,” Loki panted. “Hurry, you fools!”

“And do what when we reach the open section?” Natasha asked.

The trickster hesitated. “His flames will have trouble reaching you all: the distance is too far. He may, however, set other things on fire and drop those down. I had hoped not to have to teleport you all again quite so soon after...” He gestured vaguely. “You all actually were far safer further from me, where your location isn’t being tracked by those keeping tabs on my magic.”

The flames on the other side of the shield faded abruptly, and the dragon audibly took to the air again on the other side.

Loki leaned heavily against the stone at his back, catching his breath for a few moments. “I have decided that I hate this dragon,” he announced. “S.H.I.E.L.D. took Dr. Banner aboard the helicarrier just over an hour and a half after you and Barton vanished, Natasha. That was roughly four hours ago by now, I think? How long do you suppose it may take them to return Banner to the tower once he’s informed that Thor has been incapacitated to the point of being comatose, by the swarm of machines that infested Manhattan?”

Clint began swearing a blue streak.

“Swarm?” the assassin asked.


“For Banner to... well, if they send him in a helicopter, that would be fastest. He might get back there within thirty minutes if he scared the shit out of his pilot.”

Loki nodded, doing a few quick calculations in his head. He flicked off of radio silence, activating the comm he’d absconded with before he left the tower. He wasn’t surprised when it immediately
gave a chirp of alert and alarm, and tapped into the appropriate channel to answer. “Tony?”

“Good to have you visible again! Be there in thirty, darling.”

The trickster tried not to heave a sigh of relief, and barely succeeded. “With the sedative?” he asked, in warning tones.

“Yes. They’re in missile form, which I figured you wouldn’t mind: three doses, because backup plans are clearly necessary.”

“Which is precisely why I was hoping you’d bring that here soon.”

“You could admit you actually needed me for this, you know. Are you feeling a bit toasty? Or otherwise too close to being lizard-chow?”

“Just hurry,” the god snapped.

“Will do.”

A click as the line of communication ended.

“Uh... Loki?” Barton said cautiously. “You mentioned a swarm? Because guess what’s joining us, here.”

Loki looked over the heads of the others in the direction the archer was staring, and heard the clicking metallic hum of something approaching. He could see the glitter of dozens of little lights on the machines, heading toward them. “Fuck.” He snapped the line of communication back open. “Anthony, please tell me you’re in a suit armed with your horrible magic-disruption field.”

“I am. Why?”

“That may not help you, little god,” boomed a voice from the swarm.

Loki swore further, tugging the humans closer with a word and a gesture, getting sufficient physical contact to lock onto them despite his exhaustion and teleport them away, away, AWAY from the machinery capable of incapacitating an Aesir by unknown means, and causing fatal damage to humans by both mundane and creative well-known ones. Vanishing from that tight space into a large cavern almost half a mile below the surface so quickly, and with an edge of panic, left him winded for a moment, but he recovered enough for their landing to be smooth.

The cavern around them, however, was pitch black, and eerily silent as a tomb, save the faint trickle of water at the very edges of their awareness. Loki cleared his throat. “Coulson, your light please. It’s best I conserve my energy, if I’m to fend off those infernal machines once they trace our location. It shouldn’t take them more than five minutes. It will then take them another several minutes further to reach us.”

“You can’t teleport us away again?” Clint asked.

A buzz in Loki’s ear caught his attention and he tapped his comm.

“What the hell was that?!” the mad inventor snapped. “And where the hell did you go? You’re lucky I can even reach the com, the signal is such shit.”

“Doom’s swarm. Notably with his support. I should have predicted he’d be on hand in case the Ten Rings tried to keep his prize catch from S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Loki sighed. “We’re underground, quite far.”
“Oh yeah, tell Coulson he’s a dick.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Coulson, Tony is insulting you in a rather crude fashion.”

The agent shrugged. “I’m not surprised.”

“Pep is alright?”

“Miss Potts?”

“You can tell him I’m fine so far. Lost my earrings from him, though.”

“She’s intact, but has been lightly burgled,” Loki offered.

Tony breathed out sharply. “Good. You can handle Doom’s swarm?”

“I’ll let you know, if I’m still conscious in the next... twelve minutes.”

“That’s so not encouraging.”

“Neither is this situation,” the trickster responded. “I’m going to try and lure the machines into dragon-fire shortly, once I’m sure most of them are in the tunnel leading down into this cavern. There are only a few places for them to then come back out, and they’re close together.”

“Good thinking.”

“I’ll let you know if it succeeds.” Loki tapped off again. “Now, all of you mortals please stand together with your shoulders touching. Lean your weight back on your heels. I will be delivering you to a location wherein you will need to be standing very, very still, once the swarm comes after our bait. Please be ready.” He listened to them shuffle into position and closed his eyes, concentrating on the sounds filling the cavern around him: echoes of their movements, their breathing, the trickle of water a dozen feet away, but also something distant, humming, becoming slowly louder and louder.

He began drawing power from the stone under his feet, from the half-inch of water they all stood in, and from the dark engulfing him where Coulson’s LED beam failed.

Once the humans stood appropriately still and mostly quiet, Loki let out a long breath. “You may have trouble moving your feet in a moment. Don’t be alarmed,” he said softly, still not opening his eyes as the temperature around him, and within him, began to drop.

He could shape the way the ice crystals formed, and used that to his advantage, piling them up, using the nearby water source to reinforce it, growing walls around them over two feet thick, rising slowly in a column. It took more effort to add the domed top, but the ceiling was far too high to reach. The rest was whipping the air around the initial ice shell with a more airy incantation less to do with the cold in his blood, and more to do with the spark of power always so natural to him. The sudden whirlwind allowed more movement of water, allowed the manipulation of more thicker, reinforcing layers of ice to wind their way around the structure, making the original shape into a perfect dome on the exterior. Manipulating the interior to match it for the most structural integrity possible was a bit trickier, but still less wearying, for the moment, than any further spellcraft might have been.

“Holy shit, man, it’s fucking freezing here,” Clint groaned, his teeth audibly chattering. “Is this really necessary?”

“Yes,” Loki said flatly, opening his eyes and smirking a bit at how the archer and Agent Coulson both visibly twitched a bit at the vivid red of them, visible when the agent’s flashlight beam touched him.
“I admit I’m impressed and a little horrified,” Coulson said, his voice even.

There was a sound like scratching all over the outside of the dome. Scratching of metal on ice and the crunch of machines tugging, scraping, cracking. Dim red light appeared at several points where the swarm began applying heat to the dome just as they would to any metal barriers.

Loki struggled to maintain it, but the direct application of a laser was not deflectable by ice alone. He sent another spell along the surface of the dome instead: a heat barrier, just strong enough to deflect the few lasers applied so far, causing the sound of suddenly-backfired wreckage to just over a dozen amongst the swarm. Repairing the damage before any of the machines could squeeze their way in was easier thereafter. “This should hold for a few more minutes. If it does, and Doom himself is anywhere nearby, he’ll send one of his automaton avatars down for reconnaissance and to aid their endeavors. It will have far less trouble with the ice.”

“Which will be bad,” Natasha reminded.

“It will be my cue to teleport you all out, actually.”

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Eight minutes later, after a large armored fist most distinctly not of Stark Industries style or design shattered a large section of their icy dome, Loki did indeed teleport them out of the cavern.

The four humans reappeared on a stone ledge just wide enough for them all to stand with their backs flat against the sheer rock face suddenly behind them, with about six inches between their toes and a very long drop.

“Loki, I’m not okay with this,” Natasha said sharply. “The dragon and swarm can both fly!”

“But you cannot. They will assume I’ve dropped you off at my next stop, before I reappear over there.” He pointed to a few tunnel-openings in the ground over fifty feet below them and two hundred yards northeast of their position. “Just watch.” Then he vanished again.

“This is the sort of terrible idea I’d expect more from Tony,” Pepper sighed.

“Don’t say it,” Clint said to Natasha sharply.

“What?” the assassin inquired, oh-so-innocently.

“Something about saying they’re rubbing off on each other being both obvious and accurate in more ways than one?” Pepper mused.

Clint and Coulson both grimaced.

Natasha chuckled. “Thank you, Pepper.”

“Anytime.”

They all fell quiet as the disconcerting sound of a hideously ticked-off dragon erupted from under them, and they saw Loki running hell-for-leather in the opposite direction, toward the tunnels he’d pointed out earlier. He was making impressive leaps and bounds over obstacles, occasionally vanishing and reappearing a bit further ahead to fling glowing green and sharp-looking projectiles at
the creature pursuing him. He managed to land one in its eye, which enraged it thoroughly and caused Loki to change forms into an oversized wolf to get better speed fleeing from it as a result. He leapt over one of the tunnels he’d pointed out to them earlier and changed shape again back to his more usual one, so that he skidded to a halt on the other side while raising both hands, which glowed poisonous emerald in warning.

The dragon halted too, huffing like it was amused with his bluster, and squared off with him. It’s head lifted up and back, serpentine, then snapped forward like a striking viper as it exhaled a nigh-volcanic burst of flame. The light from it caused the sudden burst of swarming machinery flying up from the tunnels in front of Loki to sparkle and glitter brightly just before they were engulfed in fire so hot the stone began to glow a dull near-molten red.

Loki ducked behind his cloak and another, much thicker, energy-barrier as some of the conflagration rolled over him, as well as down into the tunnels. He murmured another spell to loosen the heated stone around the tunnel mouths and caused enough molecular instability that as soon as the flames faded, the tunnels collapsed on any remaining bits of the swarm, and at least one now-very-mangled doom-bot.

“Tony, I’m alive. Where are you?” He growled into his comm, before glancing up at the dragon and rolling back and away from its jaws only two seconds later.

“I can see the light show from here, now. What the fuck was that?”

“Melted the swarm with a cunning application of dragon,” Loki shot back. “If I could only remember what I’d planned to do about the dragon after that, I’d be fine!” He teleported away, to four different locations, doubling back on only two of them, before landing back near the two Avengers, Pepper, and Agent Coulson. He raised his eyebrows as they treated him to a round of polite golf-clapping.

“What? It was well done,” Coulson offered.

“Until you forgot what to do right after the swarm-destroying part,” Natasha chided, sounding a bit amused.

“Yes, and now I need to come up with a less exposed location for you all now that the swarm is no longer a factor,” Loki mused. “Tony is on his way with a sedative that should incapacitate the damned lizard.”

“Should?” Pepper questioned.

“Well. In theory. And if I can get it down his throat.”

“How can you tell it’s male?” Clint asked, morbidly curious.

“He introduced himself the first time I met him, as ‘He Whose Limbs Shatter Mountains and Whose Back Scrapes the Sun’ among other titles,” the trickster explained. “He has pretensions at grandeur beyond even my considerable ego’s capacity to fathom.”

“That’s a feat,” Pepper mused. “Given you’re on par with Tony Stark.”

Loki gave an amused hum and touched Natasha’s shoulder, vanishing them just as the dragon turned and seemed to spot them, heading their way at speed.

They reappeared in a cavernous crack in the cliffside, exposed overhead, but well-obfuscated by a wall of stone almost parallel to another section of the cliff-face, shielding the ledge from immediate view. The trickster immediately vanished again, reappearing in several other places, scattering his
apparent presence before making a brief return to the humans. “This may get complicated. Here.” He handed Natasha the communicator he’d been wearing. “I’ll have to get back on the frequency by magic means here momentarily, which will again take their attention away from this spot.”

“For the record, I’m really glad you’ve mastered this misdirection thing,” Pepper said, with feeling. Loki offered her a quicksilver smile before vanishing again.

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Tony arrived in time to be treated, via the glories of his HUD’s zoom features, to the sight of an enormous black wolf, with unearthly green-glowing eyes clinging to a dragon easily four times its size, jaws latched around its throat enough to slightly weaken it and anger it, but not nearly enough to stop it. Loki-the-wolf had a strong grip, and far sharper claws than any natural earthly lupine examples Tony had ever seen, sunk in deep under and between the dragon’s large scales as the reptilian monster thrashed and rolled, finally resorting to an attempt to scrape the wolf off along the rocks.

A last-ditch effort of the dragon to dislodge the annoying god involved another roll-and-scrape along the rocks, this time exhaling fire at an angle to the rock face which led the inferno to be re-directed toward both of the struggling beasts. While the dragon was unaffected, the wolf emitted a pained cry as a plume of foul smoke full of the smell of burning fur rose in the air. It forced the trickster’s jaw to release its hold, and those sharp claws visibly slipped. Both beasts then reared apart, Loki taking his more natural shape, skin darkened to blue to ward off heat and heal the damage done by it a little quicker. They seemed pretty ill-matched, god or no: the dragon was over fifty feet tall and more than twice as long, and Loki was... staggeringly human-sized in his natural form, standing ready to combat that.

Suddenly, Tony felt like he wasn’t the most insane person on this particular battle-field, and kicked in the thrusters, trying to get there faster, before the god of lies got eaten or something, because holy shit.

When the dragon lashed out again with its massive jaws, Loki leapt to meet it with enthusiasm enough to make Tony’s breath catch in something almost like horror. He was almost there, flying in low as he watched the dragon rear back with a howl of rage and pain, blood spraying from its lips and tongue, which were pierced by wicked ice shards as large as old tree-trunks. Landing on the ground hard, but with cat-like grace in spite of all, Loki was soaked in a slurry of blood and ice, and grinning like a complete maniac.

“Loki, you complete mad bastard,” Tony growled over the comm.

“Not sure he’s on the frequency again yet,” Natasha said in his ear.

“What? Why?!?”

“He put us enough out of sight he figured we’d need to be in communication.”

“Fuck, that’s logical.”

“I thought so, yes,” Loki rasped over the line.
Tony watched the trickster darting and dodging the now utterly enraged dragon’s claws with increased clumsiness. He had one arm pressed against his side, forearm around his stomach as though covering a wound. “You’re hurt. How?”

“Some of the ice I used gave way at unexpected angles when met with parts of the beast’s mouth that it couldn’t pierce,” Loki growled. “I may have had a close encounter with my own weaponry and dragon’s teeth in conjunction.”

The dragon huffed as though attempting to breathe fire at the god of mischief and wound up rearing back, in visible agony before even managing to clear even half the ice. Tony dove in close, since long-range roasting seemed to no longer be on the menu, and realized Loki was laughing hysterically even as he continued to retreat. “What are you laughing at and how do I get one of these missiles down its throat when it keeps thrashing like that?” He was circling now, trying to get a clear shot, but the damn thing wouldn’t keep its mouth open enough, and kept trying to shake free the too-slow-melting ice that seemed to be causing it so much pain.

“The ice I used wasn’t purely water. Each spike contains a core of almost pure salt, so that when the ice is melted a bit, such as by fire...” He dodged the monster’s claws again, laughing harder still.


Then Loki dodged not-quite quick enough and was hurled back against the cliff-face hard enough to rattle it.

“Shit!” Natasha shouted.

The dragon roared and charged at Loki.

“Fire, Tony, this is not a drill!” the trickster shouted suddenly. “The rock behind me is cracking, and guess who is behind it!”

“Fuck!” the mad inventor put on the throttle and dove between a rock and a dragon, firing down its throat just as its jaws opened wide. To his still-slightly-panicked satisfaction, he saw the heat-seeking missiles safely dodge around the freezing stakes piercing the dragon’s jaws and shooting down into the beast’s gullet, then felt something tug him back just before everything vanished in a familiar fashion and suddenly the world was a lot darker and more cramped, but at least he wasn’t ten feet from being swallowed by a dragon along with the rest of his tech.

“Once you have your bearings, if you could provide a hand,” the god groaned.

Tony looked up and realized the battered god of lies had arrived at a different location, and was holding a massive chunk of stone at bay. “Holy shit.” He blasted up started pushing too, barely feeling like he was having an impact until he braced both feet against the nearest fully-solid wall of stone and applied more than 80% of the suit’s strength capacity. “Can’t keep this up for long,” he groaned.

There was the sound of frustrated roaring in what Tony realized, somewhat belatedly, was a rhythmic sort of series of sounds, like words formed primarily by sibilants and rough vowels. “That’s an alien language, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and let’s hope that dose you provided was enough, or this will only get more difficult,” Loki hissed. As though on cue, the world around them shuddered as the dragon frantically clawed at the stone around them, sending cascades of rockslides down the rough cliff-face. Both the god and mortal groaned under the strain.
“You’re sure the stuff you left for Bruce to make... you’re sure it’ll work? That was a bigger goddamn dragon than I honestly expected. It got two doses.”

“If it were all ingredients from earth, we would need more. Alfheim, however, has much richer poisonous gardens. Two doses of the resulting mixture might knock the creature out for a few whole days... I hope.”

“You really know how to inspire confidence. Look, how much time do you need to get them out?” Tony asked sharply.

“I’m hardly taking them without you. What would possibly be the point for me?”

“Come back for me. The scratching actually eased the weight a bit, changed the angle of the pressure. If I can just-” He slid one armored boot back slowly then the other, keeping his feet slightly apart at a forty-five degree angle. He pushed harder, using far too much power, but enough he could feel the rock shift an inch away from Loki’s hands before the trickster could quite adjust. “I can hold this on my own for five minutes. You’re faster than that.”

Loki put his own strength behind the push again, taking a considerable load off. “Wait until we know the thing is-”

A loud crash, this time of a massive body hitting the ground abruptly, all at once, sent much finer tremors through the rock walls around them.

The trickster took a deep breath. “Okay. Rescued hostages, please grab ahold of each other for my convenience, or I will not hesitate to leave you behind!”

“Ready when you are!” Coulson shouted back.

“They’re all okay?” Tony asked.

“Yes.”

“Holy shit, you’re good,” the mad inventor praised, clearly trying to laugh with hysteria made up of mixed relief and fear alike.

“I have my moments,” the god admitted. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“If you’re wrong, and this kills you, I will make sure my daughter makes your afterlife as miserable as she possibly can, and she is often more creative even than I, you should well know,” Loki warned.

“Got it. Hurry back, though. That’s all I’m saying.”

The trickster nodded. “Letting go now.”

Tony nodded, but still strained audibly as much as the creaking metal at his suit’s extremities did when the god finally vanished, but he held firm, staring down at Pepper’s worried face, Natasha’s concerned one, and Barton and Coulson’s surprising hint of actual fear, before they all disappeared.

It was only half a minute later that Loki returned, again taking over some of the burden for a moment. “The dragon is quite incapacitated. I kicked it in the injured eye to be certain.”

“You are such a dick,” Tony accused, but without any actual disapproval.
Loki shifted closer, got an arm around his waist. “It’s always tricky when both parties are touching the same surfaces. The surfaces themselves can tend to want to follow, which is not what we want in this case at all.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“We may both have to let go.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “Can you get us both out in time?”

The trickster took a few breaths before responding, his eyes a bit distant, which the inventor had learned to recognize as a sign that Loki was hyper-focused on something tricky and metaphysical. “Yes.”

“Say when.”

“Count of three?”

“Yeah. One...”

Together they said, “Two... Three!”

Tony let go. So did Loki. There was an instant of free-fall, and the rock visibly dropping toward them. There was another moment, and another, still in free-fall, just enough to make the inventor’s heart almost skip a beat, so quick did the panic hit him.

Then it was gone.

The dark lasted a bit longer than Tony usually recalled, between vanishment and reappearance. Then they were on a hill, the cliff miles away in the distance.

“Tony!”

The inventor pulled up the face-mask just in time for Pepper to crash into his unoccupied side, her arm fitting in just under Loki’s as she tuck her herself under Tony’s outstretched arm, letting him pull her a little closer so she could cling a bit.

“I’m so pissed off at everyone right now. Why do you keep pulling shit that almost gets you killed, Tony Stark!” she growled.

Loki pulled his arm away with an amused noise and promptly collapsed onto the ground, sitting with his legs outstretched, knees bent up slightly so that he could rest his elbows on them, and let his head loll forward limply. He was a complete mess, with skin only barely starting to fade back to pale rather than blue, revealing bruises and cuts that had seemed less conspicuous before. And he was still covered in some of his own blood, a lot of frosty-looking dragon’s blood, and streaks of slushy dark red mud streaked with swirls of paler fresh rock-dust. His armor looked like it had been put through an oversized blender with him still in it, and his helmet had, at some point amidst being thrown around by a dragon and teleporting everywhere, been lost. He was aware of the two mortal Avengers settling down next to him in the grass to catch their breaths too, and then of Pepper letting go of the mad inventor to crouch in front of him.

He looked up at the least warrior-like (if only barely) human of the rescued four, noting that her pale blue eyes showed both concern and something more shrewd dangerously akin to intuitive understanding so acute that he wondered (with momentary distress) whether she might be an empath, but then dismissed the worry as irrational.
“Thank you,” Pepper said. “You’re pretty damned amazing, actually, and it’s an honor to merit this sort of grand effort, even if not exactly for my own sake alone.” She touched his hair almost hesitantly, and leaned forward to kiss his brow when he didn’t protest. Quiet enough that Tony wouldn’t hear, she added, “Thank you, for not dismissing his heart like everyone else does, aside from me. It’s good, that you know how important it really is for him to be who and what he is. That makes me think yours isn’t exactly missing either, or you wouldn’t get it so well.” She stood up, then smiling a little, “Can you take us home, or do you need a bit of a breather? You look exhausted.”

Loki considered, staring at her with new interest. It was suddenly much clearer to him, why she appealed to the likes of Tony Stark, and why he still needed her in his life as much as he did. She was even capable of making the likes of a god of mischief really wonder what she saw, looking upon himself, and find that he did not know, but that he might like to, one day. It was an unfamiliarly gentle, almost wistful sensation, and Loki wasn’t certain whether he liked it, or was disturbed by it. “I could use a minute or two to recover some of my composure, if you don’t mind.”

“Take your time,” Clint said. “I think you just persuaded me to drop my grudge against you, and you fought fucking godzilla like a boss. You’ve had an eventful day.”

The trickster snorted. “This is your gift to me as one of the day’s rescued damsels in distress?”

“Don’t push it,” Clint and Natasha both responded, in eerie unison.

“That’s just unnecessarily creepy,” Coulson commented, standing a bit to Pepper’s left, in front of the two other humans sitting in the tall grass.

Loki shot the agent a look, again curious and somehow suspicious or mildly off-put by something about him.

“I’m not forgiving you anything yet,” the agent said blithely.

“I quite understand. I’ve had my life saved reluctantly by people who attempted to murder me on a few occasions, and I would still be more inclined to gut them than trust them, without considerable repercussions attached to their disembowelment.”

“Yeah, you’re a bit lucky to be a god probably capable of ripping out my spine with relative ease, and also currently an invaluable resource against an imminent alien threat, or I’d be really inclined to find creative ways to maim you,” Coulson admitted.

“As a gesture of good faith, I can tell you something you do not know, and that others clearly do not wish you to know,” Loki offered, his eyes glittering with almost-cautious mischief, like he was curious, and unsure what effect his offer, if accepted, might really have.

“Loki,” Natasha said sharply, her tone warning.

“Is it as obvious to you as it is to me?” the trickster asked, directing the question at the assassin without taking his eyes off of Coulson’s.

“It’s not obvious, no, but I’ve been around a long time,” she said, in a language the others barely recognized, and clearly failed to understand.

Enjoying the benefits of All-speak as he always did, Loki hummed, thoughtful.

“Why is it something I shouldn’t know?” the agent asked warily.

“I have no idea, but if I tell you, I think you might develop a few,” the god promised. “It’s nothing to
worry about overall, as far as your ability to function. You’re still alive, and quite capable, it seems. Though perhaps some... muscle-memory, and old habits requiring it, have seemed more difficult?”

“I don’t want to know,” Coulson said firmly.

“Really?” Loki sounded quite surprised, and perhaps even a little disappointed.

“Yes.”

“Lie,” the trickster said.

“Yes, but if I tell it to myself enough, I might eventually believe it,” the agent said sharply, without hesitation. “I know my job well enough to know the importance of that.”

Loki raised both hands, palms-forward, in a gesture of apparent harmlessness. “As you see fit. I will press no further.”

Pepper shot the agent a look of concern, but he waved it off with a tired half-smile that did not quite reassure as it once might have, before his faux-death and still-fresh resurrection into their lives. About two minutes of only-slightly awkward silence ensued thereafter.

“Let’s return to the tower, shall we?” the trickster offered then, pulling himself to his feet with an effort. He held out both arms, palms up in offering. “I’m far too exhausted to target you individually. Physical contact is easier: just a hand on my arm will do for each of you.”

Tony rested one on his shoulder instead. Pepper and Coulson took the arm below it. Natasha and Clint stood, and touched his other arm.

Loki closed his eyes and the field around them vanished.

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Reappearing in the foyer of the Avengers’ rooms in their tower, everyone seemed a bit disoriented by the journey, swaying only a little, save Loki, who outright stumbled back a step, and might have fallen altogether if he weren’t held upright primarily by Tony then gripping both of the trickster’s shoulders firmly, helping him regain balance.

“Hey, you okay?” the inventor asked.

“I am far from well, but I will recover within a few days.” He straightened a bit, still looking utterly drained, but a bit more steady.

Tony looked at him with concern, but nodded. He took his hands away and muttered a command under his breath that had his suit detaching in pieces and zooming down to his lab of their own accord. He snorted in amusement when the god of lies then shooed him away and stepped aside to lean against the nearest wall in a way that might have looked more successfully casual if he didn’t do it so bonelessly, his eyes falling shut like he might actually nap there.

Tony shook his head, but let himself pull Pepper into a hug properly and breathe her in for a moment, reassured she was whole, before letting go. “I’m glad you’re okay,” he said firmly. “I’m sorry people keep kidnapping you.”
“As I understand it, the fault wasn’t entirely yours.” She shot a look at Loki. “But you’ve both made up for it.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m calling Happy, and going home to have a drink and sleep the rest of the day to recover from the adrenaline. If anyone needs the CEO of Stark Industries, they’re getting routed to you.”

He smiled sweetly. “JARVIS will handle them.”

She snorted at him, and strode away into the kitchen, speaking to JARVIS.

Tony turned to the remaining three rescued damsels. “Clint, Tasha... take Philly to go apologize to Cap. Make sure he doesn’t have the option to look away from the Disappointed Face.”

“What! But—no, please?” Coulson looked suddenly horrified, as the two ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. agents took hold of each of his arms and dragged him toward the living-room. By the time they rounded the corner, out of sight, Coulson was either swearing, praying, or both only semi-coherently under his breath.

“You are going upstairs,” Tony said, turning his attention suddenly back to Loki. He stepped in close to the god, settling a hand on each of his shoulders, pushing at him, and steering him toward the elevator.

“Am I?” Loki inquired.

“Yeah. You are. Because you drained yourself enough you haven’t even gotten all the blood off you, and I know that’s gotta be cold, wet, slimy and just uncomfortable. Plus you got it on my walls. You’re showering before you go anywhere near my bed.”

The trickster smiled weakly, but humored him enough not to struggle, though he still made actually steering his person as casually inconvenient as possible, stumbling deliberately just to trip the inventor up.

“You’re not funny.”

“I am as entertaining as I ever wish to be.”

“Nah, way more than that, to me, but that’s beside the point.” Once they were in the elevator, Tony hit the button to take them up to the penthouse.

“You seem irritated with me,” Loki mused.

“You’re hurt enough it bothers me, is all. And jumping into a dragon’s mouth is crazier shit than even I... no, wait, I’ve done similar shit, but not with something I wasn’t damn sure I could blow up from the inside. I know you had no such certainty!”

“I knew that the inside of its mouth was less armored than anywhere else I might access, an the only location that sufficiently enhanced spears of ice might pierce.”

“Not the same at-” he cut off sharply when Loki tugged him in close, pulling them flush together in a way that was disconcertingly non-sexual. “Uh... what are you doing?”

“This looks worse than it actually is,” Loki said slowly, firmly. “I will be well. The wound on my side stopped bleeding twenty minutes ago. I’m a god, Tony Stark. I do not need coddling.”

“You still really need a shower, though. Seriously, the blood is starting to thaw and congeal a little, and it’s pretty... seriously unpleasant.”
“And now you’re covered in it too,” the trickster countered sweetly.

Tony jerked back out of the god’s grasp, dismayed to find his clothing was indeed thoroughly ruined. “You complete fucker!”

Loki laughed, low and tired, but quite sincere, until the elevator doors opened. “It seems you now also require a shower.”

“You just want me to wash your hair for you.”

“I’m injured,” the trickster protested, going so far as to bat his eyelashes.

Tony glared at him. “You, sir, are a jerk.”

“And you are a professional satirical ass. Are you going to join me or not?” Loki shot back, strolling toward the master bathroom only a bit stiffly.

“You’d better banish that armor somewhere it won’t stain anything.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Fine. Banish it, and the clothes I’m wearing—I don’t care if this stuff goes into some sort of incinerator later, at this point; dragon blood is officially my least favorite smell right now—and in exchange I will wash your hair for you in your weakened state, despite how much of a jerk you are.”

“We have an accord.”

Tony followed him into the bathroom and tried not enjoy just how ridiculous his life was looking just now. He tried, but failed, laughing at the absurdity despite himself as he took a shower with the god of mischief without having sex even a little bit.

So he still copped a feel extensively. Loki didn’t actually seem to mind.

Totally fine.
Chapter Summary

Loki is a sneaky bastard even when he appears dead to the world, and let it never be said that he doesn't have enough irons in enough myriad different fires, some more literal than others. He also doesn't work too well with most other mages of Asgard he's not considered family at any point in time, with one or two exceptions. The exception that isn't Amora will have none of his bullshit, and Tony is impressed by her. She, also, isn't unimpressed by him.

Amora learns a lesson about Tony Stark's shamelessness and leaving when she has the chance if she interrupts certain things.

*Three weeks and one more day...*

The morning after the dragon incident, Loki slept like a dead thing. Tony didn’t prod him too sharply, really, given he didn’t want to lose a limb, but the fact that Loki didn’t even twitch when a pillow was thrown onto his back from across the room was actually a little impressive, given how light of a sleeper the paranoid trickster god usually was. It was only with an effort that Tony mustered enough survival instincts to resist the urge to draw anything on him in permanent marker.

After confirming that there was, for now, no safe way to get Loki upright and functional, the mad inventor descended to the medical wing to check on Thor unaccompanied. The thunder god looked wan and pale, but his eyes were open and he was patient under Dr. Banner’s scrutiny even as the doctor flashed a pen-light in his eyes and counted his pulse while eyeing the results of JARVIS’s scans of the thunderer.

“You look upright! Much improved!” Tony announced.

“Yes, I am well as can be. The toxin in my system is fading as we speak, and Dr. Banner believes I will be mostly-immune to it if our enemies make any attempt to use it again.”

“As long as you rest for a day or two, and don’t get dosed again with any altered forms of it in the next few days while the old traces are in your system,” Bruce added.

“The benefits of a godly immune system,” Tony sighed. “Speaking of, Loki is passed out like a dead thing after taking on a Makluan dragon.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “You’re certain it was Makluan?”

“Well, Loki sure as hell is. I don’t exactly have much of a clue other than that, given I’m not exactly an expert in reptiles bigger than the average blue whale. Oh, he said Skye, Coulson’s hacker consultant.”

“Yeah, how about that whole thing with him being alive?” Bruce interrupted, sounding irritated.
“Yeah... long story, apparently.”

Thor sighed. “Go on, about the dragon.”

“Right. Hacker-girl found some systems that probably belong to the Ten Rings, which seem to be entirely in not only an alien alphabet Loki confirmed is Makluan, but also an utterly alien programming language she can’t begin to make headway into, and that girl is pretty talented, even by my standards.”

“How came it to earth?”

“No idea, big guy. All I know is that I watched your brother got thrown around a lot, very violently, by a lizard-like thing about 50ft tall at the shoulder, on all fours, and about a hundred feet long not taking into account the full length of its tail. To me, that just makes it a massive fucking dragon-like thing. It seemed to have a language, but I couldn’t begin to pronounce it, given I have only an average human vocal range.”

“It must be quite old, to have reached such a size as that,” Thor murmured. “No small wonder that it gave Loki such difficulty.”

“Yeah... by the time I showed up he was in wolf-shape, huge wolf, but still way smaller than the dragon, and trying to gnaw through its throat. That didn’t work out too well, but it was damned impressive,” Tony offered.

Thor’s eyebrows raised slightly. “But my brother is well?”

“He insisted he’d be fine in a few days. I presume part of that is his current comatose state. He’s not actually in a coma, I’m pretty sure, but I wasn’t going to try too hard to wake him up, you know? I like having both arms attached, and all.”

The thunderer chuckled. “A wise choice, I will admit.”

“You’re healthy, go eat as much as half a dozen mortal men like you usually do, and you’ll be almost your usual self again by noon,” Bruce said, finishing up his assessment of the scans. “I’m thinking maybe the Greek place three blocks over?”

“We’re forbidden from their buffet, but they are quite alright with Tony paying for however many individual entrees we might consume instead,” Thor recounted. “I would not be at all averse to visiting that place again.”

“You in, Tony?” the chemist prompted.

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

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Loki the trickster was dream-walking.

The landscape was not forgiving, even before he reached the mind he was looking for, which, while deeply asleep, was not without the ability recognize him, and sense the intrusion. It was also not without inclination, and ability, to rebel against that intrusion very, very violently.
“It is not I who _keeps_ you in this sleep,” Loki challenged, twisting away from all psychic snares and traps within the dragon’s mind. “Speak to me, and I may deal with you as my equal, child of Kakaranathara, and I may make a deal with you to arrange your freedom. Refuse me, and I will use you as I see fit regardless, to spite yourself and your current master both!”

A clear dream finally formed: the interior of a vast cavern, lit by a large fiery forge at Loki’s back. The dragon was curled opposite him, massive and regal in posture, regarding him with a cold and wrathful glare. His eyes were large and cat-yellow; his scales were smooth, almost metallic-looking, in hues of copper and bronze long exposed to the elements, such that his belly, throat, face and joints appeared lighter as though well-polished, but the rest of his body seemed darker, as though oxidized in ways similar to the metals he so resembled: giving them an almost oily green-black sheen. While utterly inhuman and starkly alien, the dragon regarded the trickster god before him with a cold, unnervingly patient and aloof intelligence. _You are an impertinent and tiny creature, but a powerful and stubborn one_, he greeted, the voice of his mind rich and deep enough to fill the cavern, yet not intrusive: not pressing too deep into the brain of his audience. _Polite, that. You are called Loki, I know, but I have slept too long, either in stasis for my initial voyage, or in the wake of my landing on this backwater little planet, and I know little of you. Who are you, Loki? What are you? What strange world shaped you, only to land you on this small backwater planet?_”

“I am a fallen prince of Asgard; I am known to this planet and the rest of the nine realms of Yggdrasil as a god of chaos, lies and mischief,” the trickster responded. “I am also considered a wanted criminal in most of those same realms, this one included, for acts of war including accusations of an attempted genocide, as well as invasion of this world with an army borrowed from the mad Titan Thanos.” He tilted his chin up a bit higher. “And you have not told me _your_ name, in any truthful sense: merely titles.”

_Nor shall I give it so carelessly. I have made that mistake one time too many on this planet, the dragon assured._

“A favor. I need to reach a place far below the earth’s surface, some hundred or so miles northeast of here, where it is very cold and sparsely populated. A creature of your strength and with such powers and claws as you possess can easily break through the last few hundred feet or so of solid rock left to be cleared out of my way, if one starts at the lowest part of the abandoned mines humanity once made there. Once we reach the gate to the chamber below, I will need to open it by very particular means, mimicking a creation of Odin’s known as the _Destroyer_. Once the gate is open, I will require your strength to break a few chains that I myself cannot touch, and then you will be free to go on your way.”

_You are of Asgard?_

“I am. My promise to you, should you accept it, would be binding; yours to me will also be, given the magic in your own nature. I will have no choice but to free you, but I will not do so until I am ready to put my own plans in place.” His smile became wicked, almost gleeful. “I have a war to conduct first, and a few other matters to prepare.”

The massive creature gave a low, thoughtful growl that the trickster could feel up through the floor as well as he could hear it. Then his maw opened, and he uttered a phrase in the rumbling speech of his native tongue.

All-Speak allowed Loki to understand that he’d just been given the creature’s name. The limitations
of his own vocalizations, in his natural shape, prevented him repeating it perfectly, but he worked out an approximate equivalent. “Fhyen Fjiang Fhoulm,” he tried, sampling the shape of it. “Charming to meet you properly at last.”

*You have my word to aid you, only if you can free me from M’s grasp.*

“What is *his* true name? It would aid me in my efforts to know.”

*My mind has shared space with his own for too long. I cannot tell you, by his compulsion, as though it has become my own,* Fhyen admitted reluctantly.

“I am seeking to avenge myself against one who sought to use me so, in my current war. Feel free, upon your escape, to destroy whatever of M’s you so please,” Loki said, bowing from the waist.

“You have my word that I will free you, when my war is done and I am prepared for the plans that I require your aid for. I will do my best to make certain you can burn much of what he loves to ash in your wake.”

*Good hunting to you, and may your vengeance be dire.*

Loki’s smile changed from polite to knife-like in the blink of an eye. “My thanks. I look forward to working with you soon enough.” Then he vanished from the dream, letting himself fall, more than wander, back into his own mind-scape.

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After lunch, the rest of the day passed fairly slowly: reports given to S.H.I.E.L.D. about the rescue-related incidents, Thor and Steve having a long discussion about loyalties and Director Fury and Agent Coulson, and Skye sending in pages upon pages of indecipherable alien script from systems she was hacking. Thor, it seemed, had not learned to read the simplified Makluan alphabet, let alone lines of their computer code, and therefore the pages remained interesting, yet deeply unhelpful.

Tony waited out the whole thing in his lab, rebuilding the devices Loki had destroyed in order to take out the swarm. Well, after he spent over an hour trying to glean any of Loki’s secrets form the (now rained-on and wet) wreckage on the roof. No matter how he scanned the pieces, he found no clues, and cursed the trickster god’s cleverness for a long while, before setting about proving to himself that he could make his own goddamn improvements thank you very much.

So he wasn’t *entirely* surprised when he looked up only because Pepper arrived in the lab, looking more like her usual immaculate self than the night before, and realized with a glance at the nearest digital display that he’d been working for eight hours straight without noticing. “Hey,” he said, smiling softly.

“Hey,” she said back, sitting on the workbench next to him. “You’re hiding in your lab like you’re desperate to be able to do something.”

“Well, I had to wait around with an unconscious, poisoned thunder god while my erstwhile questionable ally took on a dragon (one that kicked his ass a bit once already, by the way) tried to save you from my arch-nemesis, and it took a minor toll on my psyche. I *am* aware of this, but hey! Look, shiny magic-disabling technology!”

She laughed at him both fondly, and shamelessly making fun of him a little. “You’re ridiculous, I
want you to know.”

“Oh, trust me, I know exactly how ridiculous I am, lately.”

“Do you?”

There was a challenge, gentle and almost cautious, in her tone that made him deeply uncomfortable. “Don’t tell me you think you got a read on him and think he’s falling for me, or I swear on Albert Einstein’s grave that I will defenestrate myself as soon as you leave.”

“No, it wasn’t him I got that impression from.”

Tony swore under his breath.

“Still infatuated?”

“A bit, yes,” he admitted, with terse reluctance. “It’s really uncomfortable and I don’t want to think about it.”

“Why uncomfortable?”

“Because I can’t trust him. I can’t—he’s lied to me successfully. He can con me.”

“Even now?”

“The more time he spends around me, the more and better he knows what signals might convince me. I look at him and all I see is... awareness and recognition. He gets me, on so many levels, that he could twist me up and break me open worse than Obie ever did, if he put an effort into it.”

“Which he hasn’t,” Pepper reminded softly. “Put that effort in, that is.”

Tony’s fingers, still busy with manipulation of detailed wiring, stopped. His whole body, in fact, went stock-still for a long moment. He then carefully removed his tools from their work and set them aside, rubbing his hands over his face with an exasperated noise.

“What am I missing, Tony?”

“Everything... everything about him drives me crazy, a little bit. I can’t tell if he’s actually playing the game as cautiously as I am or if I’m being manipulated into believing that he is, so I’ll let my guard down. And even if he is, even then he’s just in the same boat I am!” He could almost feel Loki’s breath against his lips, hearing again in his memory: You are far, far too alluring to trust. “I can’t trust that I’m not projecting that, though.”

“You want him that badly?”

Tony winced. “Please never say that again. I’m trying to ignore thoughts like that, a lot. All the time.”

Pepper reached over and tugged at him, pulling until he gave in, until he let her draw him into a hug, and his forehead pressed against her shoulder as her fingers trailed through his hair. He relaxed, slowly, some tension he’d refused to acknowledge between his shoulder-blades half-melting, as he leaned into her slightly.

“You worry too much,” she said softly.

“When I worry less, people get hurt more,” he muttered.
“I mean about Loki. Not in general. You play carefree, just in general, and more of it’s true than you let on to those of us who care about you, even while more of it is false than the general public knows,” she chided.

He sighed heavily. “If it were just me at risk, I’d agree, but he has a history of inflicting the most emotionally traumatic collateral damage that he possibly can, given the chance.” Raising his head, he trailed his fingers along her cheek for a moment. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking he’s a good person because he saved you this time, Pep. He’s every way I might’ve gone wrong without the likes of you to steady me and anchor me, and that’s the core of why we understand each other so well.”

“You’ll miss him, though, won’t you?”

“Yeah, but I really don’t like thinking about that.”

“You’ve really given up already on any other options? You? Giving up?” she asked softly, her brow deeply furrowed.

“It’s more that I haven’t gotten convincing evidence that he might even want more, and if he doesn’t, it’s putting your life and everyone else’s on the line for me to even show my own interests. The most I can do is watch and wait. I need... data. Evidence. Material to work with, I guess. It’s not in me to give up, so it’s not like I’m not watching, but there’s not a lot of information I can actually trust. It’s maddening.”

“What might convince you?”

“I don’t even know,” Tony said, with a helpless shrug. “Probably an actually selfless act from him, but fat chance there. Even I don’t do that much and I’m supposed to be the hero.”

“And outside contract, it’ll be hard to believe I’m not being manipulated, and that I didn’t already give myself away somehow, here.”

Pepper kissed his cheek. “I’m glad you’re playing it safe for once in your life, but I’m sorry it’s going to hurt.”

He smiled wanly. “I’ll be fine. I’ve weathered worse.”

“Have you?”

“Yeah. Sure I have. At least I know he’s my enemy and he hasn’t sold me out to terrorists yet.”

Seeing the hint of heartbreak in her expression, he pulled her into another hug, tight and reassuring. “Hey, hey, don’t look at me like that.”

“Okay. I do understand.” She rested her forehead against his. “I just... I hate that you have to think like this just because of Stane, you know?”

“It’s not just that. It’s what that whole... it’s what I learned about myself, from that, and what I know I’m capable of. And what I’m not capable of.”

She sighed, and just lingered close for a few minutes, providing comfort and taking some both. The both needed it. They were both scared and tense with worry over each other like they always were when the apocalypse came knocking. A long silence and a bit of platonic cuddling was just how they coped these days.
“If he did fall for you, hard, you’d have to cope with immortality, you know,” she teased lightly. “That’s what Thor tried to get for Jane, but she... there were trials. She balked at some of them, rather vociferously, and it didn’t go over so well.”

Tony had a fleeting thought (you’re working on it) but dismissed it quickly. “Well, I’m working on immortality anyway. You want in?”

She considered seriously. “I... I don’t want to lose more of my humanity than I’ve gotten back, you know?” Pepper raised her eyebrows a bit for emphasis. “With Extremis I started to. And it was thrilling, and being indestructible has some serious appeal...”

“Actually.” Tony pulled back, looking her over sharply. “You’re not even bruised, are you?” he asked, almost cautiously. “Not even a little. Even Natasha, with her healing being a fair bit quicker than human, still had a couple scratches this morning. You weren’t that shielded, everyone got a bit scuffed by debris falling and other stuff.”


“I removed the foreign material, yeah, but... maybe something residual, epigenetic?” He lifted one of her hands to examine it.

“Still not likely enough to make me immortal,” she chided.

“You’re gonna make me go on without you?” he asked quietly, sounding very small, almost lost.

“I’m going to love you like family all my life, Tony Stark, but I won’t be around for eternity. I wouldn’t stay if I did. I’d be someone else, and if that happens, I can’t promise we’ll be what each of us needs anymore. You know that.”

“You really did think about it, with Extremis, didn’t you?”

“I had to consider I might outlive you and it really hurt,” she sighed. “But I... I knew if it had happened to you, you could cope. I knew I could cope even though it would break my heart. I knew even, that you might try to follow me.” She raised her eyebrows pointedly. “You’re still studying it for your own potential immortality anyway, aren’t you?”

“I... have an increasingly good understanding of it, and might have improved from the original formula in several ways so far,” Tony admitted. “If I’ve stabilized it... if it would work and not put you or anyone around you in danger from spontaneous combustion—would you want it back?”

She considered. “Maybe. You let me know.” Pepper’s smile was a little thoughtful, and a little wicked. “I did enjoy the power-trip while it lasted, and maybe... I did think, if you followed me, it could have been really interesting.”

Tony smiled back. “I’ll let you know.”

“You do that.” She kissed his cheek again, and disentangled from him. “But for now, you should have dinner with me. Come on.” She tugged at one of his hands. “Change into something decent, though.”

He chuckled, but didn’t resist.

Changing clothes required a trip up to the penthouse, briefly. Loki still appeared almost dead to the world, curled on his side and sleeping very deeply; although most of his wounds looked better, and half of his bruises had faded to less vivid purple/green/black hues, too. The visible progress was
reassuring.

“Sleep well, sweetheart,” Tony murmured, on his way out.

He was amused to hear a pillow hit the door shortly after he closed it.

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Three weeks left...

“You capable of more than a few seconds of consciousness at a time, today?”

Loki made a muffled noise that sounded suspiciously like “Fuck off.”

“Hey, verbalizations! That’s totally progress or-mph!” The inventor was not actually expecting to be interrupted by a pillow to the face. It hit him quickly, but not as hard as he knew the Jotunn could’ve struck, which he did appreciate. “Rude,” he responded, understandably muffled.

“So is pestering someone very clearly enjoying their sleep.”

“So you don’t want to tell me why I explained a super-soldier serum called Extremis to Thor and he said it sounded like it turned humans into fire-giants?”

After a short pause, the pillow dropped away. “Repeat that, please?”

Tony did so.

Loki turned his head a bit, revealing one only slightly-bloodshot green eye. “I’m listening.”

“I have footage, and a full breakdown of the serum and how it affects the human body. Also some theoretical improvements, since the original formula had a nasty side-effect where it frequently caused people who had taken it to be unstable and explosive, to the point they could completely burn up anyone or anything around them within a certain blast radius. Nasty thing, that. Brought to you by A.I.M.: the original, under Aldrich Killian, who used it to fuel panic surrounding attacks from ‘the Mandarin’ who claimed credit for all those explosions and so forth.”

The trickster’s eyebrow raised. “And you’ve been improving this?”

“I make my own way. I told you that, but I’ve got a few theories I’d like to run by you because fire-giants and because of Pepper’s epigenetic make-up possibly retaining a few things unexpectedly.”

“It was applied to her?”

“Yeah. I reverse-engineered it, which might be useful to you one day if you ever need to disable a fire-giant by rendering its elemental abilities useless. If you help me figure out the connections between their similarities to someone injected with Extremis, that is. You interested?” Tony offered a knife-sharp smile.

A flicker of mad mischief lit up Loki’s expression for a moment, not quite smothered when he sat up and offered a smug half-smile. “I will certainly get out of bed for that, yes.”
“Excellent.”

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“I’ll start basic. Here’s my favorite footage of Extremis in action ever,” Tony began, tugging at one of the lab’s larger displays so that the lower-right corner almost met his hip and the top of the screen was a few inches above his head. “JARVIS, you know the clip. Roll it.” He stepped back to stand beside Loki and enjoy the view.

In HD, footage rolled of Tony scrambling for his life only to be rescued by an incandescently enraged Pepper Potts destroying Aldrich Killian with anger and fire and a bit of Iron Man armor, coming together like a ballet of ferocious destruction.

Loki inhaled sharply.

Belatedly, Tony realized he was used to it being a lot easier to get a gasp out of most people with any number of things in his lab. With Loki, he could count the number of times he’d managed it on one hand, still. Now Pepper has officially done it, and the mad inventor found that quite appropriate.

“It affects the whole system. Lost limbs lost regrow. Blood-loss seems to mean nothing. When they’re injured, it kicks in automatically to heal any injury, even if they try to keep it from activating. It also flares up in subjects under extreme stress or feeling intense negative emotions, but not positive ones: distress, anger, pain, and panic. The thing I found a bit odd, because in humans the responses and chemistry of fear and arousal are very similar, was that sexual arousal didn’t kick it off even a little.”

“It would be quite counter-productive to biological drives along the lines of reproduction and strengthening interpersonal bonds,” the trickster murmured, his expression thoughtful and a bit distant, same as his voice. “It is precisely the same with Jotunns with elemental gifts in their nature. Most of the time they look little different from most other races in the nine realms, although some of them, usually elders with a propensity toward magics of stone, soil, flora, and fauna, are indeed twice as tall as myself. Their secondary forms are akin to an instinctive form of defense mechanism, and while they can be summoned at will, they can also be brought out by physical stimuli—cold temperature in the case of the element of ice, being injured or exposed to flame in the case of the element of fire—as well as negative emotions, extreme pain, and of course anger.”

“But not sex.”

“You would’ve noticed,” Loki said blithely. “And you’d have frostbite.”

“So I don’t get to find out if you taste any different while blue?”

The god shot him an incredulous look.

“Well, your body chemistry has to undergo some sort of change so you’re still able to move and function despite all scans indicating you’re below the temperature water freezes at, which for any human and probably Aesir since they’re frostbite-susceptible, would cause damage at a cellular level. When you’re not blue, you seem to be denser than a human but not actually made of completely different stuff; you have a pulse, you bleed red, and you feel like you’re flesh and bone that happens to be denser than mine. Also when you’re blue, your skin texture changes and I kind of want to touch you all over to find out a lot more about that because I’m curious, as well as because you just
generally look unearthly and gorgeous and intimidating.” He shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I want to apply my mouth to that? For science.”

Loki’s eyebrows raised and a hint of a smirk tugged at his lips. “I will take it into consideration.”

Tony’s grin was wide and thrilled, then gestured back toward the footage. “So. How much does Pepper look like she was imported from Muspellheim?”

“Very much so.” The god stepped closer to the display, fingers trailing across the bottom of the screen to rewind the action. He paused over a few different frames, first zooming in for detailed examination of Killian as he was destroyed, then giving Pepper’s transformation and subsequent cool-down similar attention. “Jotunn, like Aesir, are generally much denser than humans. You are, in fact, lucky that I habitually use spells to make myself seem to weigh as much as a mortal of my height and built would, for certain activities; although it halves my physical strength when I do so.”

“Habitually?”

“I have taken many lovers in my time. You are not the first human, and many fae also have potential to be harmed more than I prefer my lovers to be, if I did not take such precautions.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully. “Even half-strength you’re not exactly a pushover. Or actually very lightweight.”

“But you remain physically intact, so clearly it works out well enough.”

“I appreciate the courtesy, yeah.”

“The point is, humans dosed with this Extremis may be so unstable simply because there is not enough matter in them to support, contain, and appropriately divert and cycle the energy powering them. If they had as much mass, as densely packed as that of a Jotunn of the same height and build, they would have more of it to spare in burning off, without losing too much energy and strength to hold the more chaotic and destructive qualities of their power in check.”

“About that... Extremis did more than alter DNA. The reactions in it pulled energy in from around subjects dosed with it. After the first dose, if they survived it without combusting, their metabolisms increased and so did their appetites,” Tony pointed out, stepping up and pulling up a few charts on the display, and images of subjects performing superhuman feats of strength that required more than raw strength and toughness. “For most subjects, their weight increased, though they didn’t exactly, uh...” He pulled up a particularly wiry female example, one who had hunted him in a bar once. “Not exactly plump, any of them. Something else about their physiology underwent change less immediately, more for some subjects than for others. I think you’re close to the mark, though, because I’d already noted that those who didn’t gain much mass were less stable long-term, less able to regulate, and more prone to accidental combustion.”

“The others?”

“We killed all of them—well, except Pepper obviously,” Tony said, his eyes cold. “None of them seemed exactly sane, but they were all hand-picked and lovingly brainwashed into Killian’s plans for world domination, so that’s hardly surprising. The less loyal ones, I think, got used as bombs.”

“Convenient way to ensure dissent takes care of itself,” Loki mused.

The inventor offered a bitter half-smile. “I had a feeling you’d say that.”

“The changes they all underwent were not purely to do with DNA, then,” the trickster prompted. “It
must have been other changes, triggered by the type of alterations made to the human DNA as well as the other contents in the serum..."

“How many Jotunns have visited earth throughout human history with the ability to, ah, politely not destroy any mortals they might’ve tried to have sex with?” Tony mused. “Just a thought.”

Understanding dawned in Loki’s expression. “It wouldn’t have to be merely Jotunn. Many Aesir have old Jotunn ancestors in their family trees, of non-elemental varieties, but fire and ice abilities are not always inborn.”

“They aren’t?”

The trickster shook his head slowly. “No. The Three of Niflheim are three powerful Jotunn mages, all women, who were the first of their kind to venture to that cold and distant world with intent to stay there, rather than merely visit. The cold was troublesome, but not unbearable to them, with the aid of their powers. The first of the three was the most enamored with the place, with the silence of some regions, and the endless howling of winds and biting winters in others. She wanted to create something which could hold the very heart of the place, breathe life and soul through it and into it, and with the help of the other two, who were just as enchanted with the idea and inventive in its execution, a way was made. The third of the three constructed the intricate and elegant container, and the second summoned the forces they would need from not only the whole of that world in that moment, but from thousands of the fiercest winters before it. The first of the three brought them together, wove the forces through her own mind, body and soul, and through those of each of the other two with their consent. The forces they wove together became the Casket of Ancient Winters. The Three became the first Jotunns of ice. Their offspring were born with the gift, while their lovers and pupils earned it through rites involving the casket, if they had enough desire, understanding and appreciation for the powers they courted.”

“And fire-giants?”

“They are so old that no one, not even the three, understand how they first came to be. Any who change their nature to that of fire seems unable or unwilling to tell how. It seems that elemental qualities instill different varieties of alien silence to those who most passionately embrace them. With giants of fire, most often they are mages who follow the desires and powers that most enrapture and fascinate them, and they are led deep beneath the surface of their world, whatever world it may be, until they find the lifeblood beneath: molten-hot and bright. Something about it, and about fires in general too, speaks to them the way that music does to others, or perhaps deeper still even than that.”

“What if they aren’t mages?”

Loki shook his head. “Without natural inclination to magecraft, they would require the aid of other mages as well as, in all likelihood, an artifact such as the Casket. If any equivalent invention resides in Muspellheim, it is well-hidden or long-lost.”

“So adding that elemental quality must be something a bit like adding Extremis, and Extremis somehow causes humans to become more... Jotunn-like,” Tony mused. “Here’s the part where I mention that some of the research the inventor of Extremis got into was old S.H.I.E.L.D. intellectual war profiteering nicked from Hydra, who were still trying like you wouldn’t believe to achieve something like the serum that was used on one Steve Rogers to make him into the fighting machine we know today as Captain America. The thing about Hydra is that they go after the weirdest shit, by scientific standards. Occult stuff ranging from things that could’ve made H.P. Lovecraft feel prophetic along the lines of whatever is fucked up with the region of space on the other side of the portal you opened over New York, which still makes for skin-crawly nightmares because eldritch unspeakable horrors creeping around the edges of a massive explosion.” He ignored the thoughtful,
appraising and slightly too empathetic look the trickster shot him at that. “-to things like the tesseract: lost toys of Odin and the rest of the Aesir lot.” He flicked through a few Hydra files showing a few artifacts other than the tesseract that they had tried to steal.

“Now, there are enough parallels between Thor’s capabilities and Steve’s to tempt some S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists into positing correlation, but our Cap doesn’t have the tissue-density that Thor and you both have. He’s simply the best a human can possibly be, with the ability to heal quickly from injury and immunity to disease, age, intoxication and poisoning—yes, even with the same stuff I laced your liquor with to make it about as strong as Asgard’s mead. Plus, he doesn’t need golden apple upkeep to maintain his youthful vigor thus far. So with this info…” He pulled up some of research involved. “It’s like they started looking into another source altogether. There’s none of the chemicals they knew were in Dr. Erskine’s original serum. There’s just mention of unknown test subjects and the ways they seemed to recover from injury with little or no scarring, despite how they might cripple a normal human.”

Tony tapped the display, flicking a few decades ahead. “The lab was destroyed, by means unknown even to S.H.I.E.L.D., before their research could be completed and most of their records were, ah, lost to fire. These are all copies sent to other scientists throughout Hydra, none of whom got the full story. The thing is, a couple of them got tissue samples, not preserved in something awful like formaldehyde either, but living tissue. The one who was able to keep his samples in such pristine condition? Arnim Zola. He’s still alive, albeit in a really goddamn creepy fashion. S.H.I.E.L.D. raiding one of his labs got some of those tissues back to the scientific community outside any of his creepy bunkers, about the time not-yet-Dr. Maya Hansen was studying under one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s brightest biochemists. She got to work with them, in helping him try to understand them, and I think she might have picked up on a few things.” Tony turned back to the trickster, then. “Now, back before that lab I mentioned was destroyed and all, who do you think managed to accidentally open a portal in the north pole which led to an unknown, icy world full of strange beasts, and were stopped only by Captain America and his team arrived and closed the gate just as an ‘enraged giant’ described as being at least twice Cap’s height tried to make them really regret having ever opened that door?”

Realization dawned in Loki’s expression. “They opened a portal to one of the other realms. You believe they captured Jotunns.”

“And I think their captured subjects got even on their way out,” Tony added.

“The fire, yes. It’s possible, with their experiments, they pushed one of the captives too far. Even a very weak mage, when under sufficient duress, can perform extreme feats,” Loki murmured. “I wonder if any of them still survive.”

“Maybe,” Tony mused. “Unless they got caught up in all the warfare we had going on. You guys are tough, and bulletproof, but there were a lot worse than bullets dropping from the skies all over the place in those days.”

“Possible, yes.” The trickster nodded. “You’ve been studying Extremis with intent to stabilize it for your own gain?”

“Yeah. So far, I did work out a number of the factors necessary to tailor the outcome toward maximum chance of stability, but there’s one more thing still not quite adding up for what I want out of it,” Tony sighed, with the frustration of months spent on this puzzle. “Aldrich Killian looked a lot better the last time I saw him than he did the first time, but he still also looked his age. By human standards.” The bottom half of the display he covered with the simplest map of Extremis’ molecular structure he’d been able to draw up so far, while the top showed before-and-after pictures of Aldrich
Killian on the left with a 10-year gap, and Steve Rogers on the right with a seven-decade-or-so gap.

The inventor continued. “It’s only a little, but it’s telling, and was enough for me to find a bigger underlying problem. Lines around his eyes and mouth had deepened a little, even though his complexion overall was a lot better. He was immune to injury and disease, but age was still happening whenever he wasn’t lit up like the world’s most malevolent night-light so far as I can tell, because human DNA, human cells, are designed to allow for age and its most obvious signs: looser skin, frailer bones, organs getting less efficient, an so on, and so on. It’s all down to the cells, and it’s not injury. It’s in their nature. So it’s still going to keep on going unless I can fix that, which I’ve got only one reliable example for since gods apparently age, just on a much slower scale, which can be reduced by magic and golden apples, but again not permanently.”

“Steve Rogers has still only been alive for less than a full century since being dosed with Erskine’s serum,” Loki reminded. “Even if I abstained from golden apples for that long, I would not age very far in any visible manner such as this; although my recovery from injuries would require more time, or more effort in the application of my magic. The Captain may yet begin to show signs of the passage of time. All do, and he is still, as you say, almost entirely human.”

Tony let out a long, hissing breath through his teeth as he eyed the map of Extremis on his display. “I don’t want to rely on anyone else’s stop-gaps if I can help it, but Cap’s seem a decent bet. The main risk with it is the, ah, what is within a subject coming to match that which is on the outside. The Red Skull and the Hulk are both charming examples of exactly how that can go wrong, and I know enough about the inside of my own head not to risk that by any means, but I can isolate what does and doesn’t factor into that, with a bit of time.”

“Is Dr. Banner working with you on this?”

“No, I don’t want to ask it of him. He gets this pained look when anyone talks about Dr. Erskine’s serum that just hurts to see. That’s the thing, really: Bruce is a better man than I am, and his monster is horrible enough for him to hate, but I work with the Hulk a lot and he does a lot less collateral damage than I do, is more aware of pedestrians and other people who might be stuck in parts of places he’s being smashed into... he cares. I think any monster of mine from a serum like Steve’s would be way worse than the Hulk, in several key ways.”

“I think you already hide your monstrousness in plain sight quite well, such that your exterior matches what is in your soul more than most may realize or even think to observe,” Loki offered. “I, of all people, would know.” His expression was more severely masked than the inventor thought the situation quite merited, as the trickster observed both the display, and Tony in the cool electric light from it.

“Thank you, I think,” Tony responded, his half-smile cold but not ill-humored.

“You’re most welcome.” He swept his own fingers across the display, dispelling the images from the top half of it. “Show me how you reverse-engineered this.”

“Sure thing.” Snapping out of his colder thoughts, the inventor started bringing up the model of the serum he’d come up with for Pepper, and began explaining the main concepts of it, and all that he’d undone with it.

In the end, Loki looked a bit bemused. “That would not remove all traces of it.”

“I’m noticing that, yeah. Just small things. She used to come back from kidnapping attempts covered in bruises. Now it’s like they heal before she’s even halfway rescued. I haven’t said anything about it until recently, to her. She’s not seeing any flare-ups, or she’d have mentioned. Her body temperature
runs a little high, like she’s always got a low-grade fever, but she doesn’t even get seasonal allergies anymore, let alone actually sick. She also doesn’t notice how hot a room is until other people come in and start visibly sweating. That sort of thing.”

“Epigenetic changes triggered by Extremis, which set off chain reactions based not on changed DNA of hers, but older genetic sequences she’s always had, that hadn’t been activated in the right combinations before,” the trickster mused. “She is, perhaps, a little bit Jotunn-like by human standards, and touched by fire.”

“You think she’s... stable?”

“I would say so. It was the reactivity and volatile nature of Extremis, and the high energy expenditure of it, which led to instability. You were very thorough in your removal of that.”

“I also have it on good word that she now has a left hook that can floor trained S.H.I.E.L.D. agents,” Tony mused. “She took some self-defense lessons, and was as surprised as anyone just how much stronger she still is.”

“I sense she was already a formidable creature long before Extremis.”

“There’s a reason she never really uses brute strength, and it’s that she’s always been clever and sharp enough that she rarely ever needs to, and occasions she does are usually my fault.” He shrugged. “That said: this of any use to you?”

“Possibly. I will need to do further research, but it might allow me to formulate a means to suspend a fire-giant’s elemental abilities temporarily at the least—perhaps permanently. I can think of a few very good uses I might put that to,” Loki mused, smirking a little. “It occurs to me that you mentioned human DNA has a limited life-span built in, but you can preserve samples of it for quite some time, and perhaps find some ways to artificially rejuvenate them, correct?”

“Yeah, I can. Why?”

“It might give you more time to work with, if you have a reset point, combining cells collected from yourself a few years ago, if you could find a way for the serum to recognize the younger cells as being the age-template to propagate. Another alternative would be perhaps using a blood transfusion from the Captain, to have in your system before you apply Extremis. In applying it, the combination of DNA, and the relative ages of different cells, would roll back the dial on your cellular age, and possibly impart to you some other benefits. Allow it several days for epigenetic changes compatible with your system to take hold, then ‘cure’ yourself of Extremis safely to avoid side-effects. Repeat as needed,” Loki recommended.

Tony stared at him for a long moment. “You’re a fucking genius.”

Loki grinned a bit.

“Or you would be, if he and I had the same blood-type. As it is, that would possibly kill me.”

The god frowned slightly. “Disappointing.”

“JARVIS? Find a list of ageless human and only-mostly-human persons known to have my blood type. Bonus points if I don’t like them, but they have other genetic or inhuman quirks I might get a kick out of stealing,” Tony commanded.

“Right away, sir.”
The inventor grinned at the trickster’s curious, thoughtful look. “Thanks for the tip, though. I might give that a shot next time things go horribly wrong and it looks like I might die.” He stopped, seeming very conflicted for a moment, then pulled up a floor-plan of the lab on the display. He tapped a particular section, enlarged it, and turned to Loki. “By the way, if that happens at any point in the next few weeks, there’s a stash of Extremis here. You can access it. Got that, JARVIS?”

“I’m busy, not deaf, sir.”

“Thank you, dear,” Tony retorted, then turned his attention back to Loki. “It won’t be in that same location after the war, let’s say.”

“Duly noted,” the trickster conceded. “That might indeed prove useful, knowing you, Tony.”


Something shifted behind Loki’s expression from appreciatively appraising to a little more shrewd, just for a moment before he grinned in turn. He drew two fingers down the length of the inventor’s throat, tracing his jugular with immaculate precision, despite how his gaze continued to hold Tony’s unwaveringly. “I appreciate challenge, in my pleasures, yes.”

Tony hummed, thoughtful, tilting his chin up expectantly as the trickster leaned in closer, and letting himself be pulled forward by the hand on the side of his neck. “Good. I like challenging you.”

“Yes you do,” Loki murmured, and kissed him firmly. It started out biting and almost violent, but quickly turned smoother and more sultry— wickedly slow and deep. They knew how to madden each other, how to tease and how to earn every gasp and slowly dial up the desperation, and it was gorgeous.

As he pushed the trickster back to pin him against the nearest work table, Tony tried really hard not to think three weeks ahead to when he couldn’t reach out and have this again, and again, anytime the trickster was in reach. He managed to put it out of his mind once Loki’s hand was down his pants; although, if he maybe clung harder to the god of lies than usual, and bit harder, and put every bit of effort he could into drawing things out longer—well, then that was still nothing to do with it. Really. Nothing at all.

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Two weeks, six days...

Nick Fury had been trying to get S.H.I.E.L.D.’s premiere occult consultant to meet with the Avengers and Loki even since the trickster god’s announcement of an approximate time for Thanos’ arrival. For the first few weeks, Dr. Strange had been trapped in another dimension (though it had felt only like a couple days to the sorcerer himself) and had thus fallen off the map. After that, he was first dubious of meeting with the infamous Asgardian mage, and also had trouble finding an opening in their busy schedule of diplomacy both local and interplanetary.

Then the day he finally did make it to the tower, a swarm of robots and the kidnapping to two Avengers, Pepper Potts, and a high-ranking S.H.I.E.L.D. agent all put rather a damper on things.
Overall, Dr. Stephen Strange just wanted to get this over with. He had a feeling he’d be met with resistance, and wasn’t altogether inclined to play nice in order to get cooperation from the likes of the infamous Tony Stark and his dubious ally, the god of lies and mischief. If, as S.H.I.E.L.D. insisted, the whole planet was going to be at risk in just less than three weeks’ time, the Sorcerer Supreme planned to put his resources and capabilities forward for use.

Entering Avengers tower the second time, he was hit with a nauseating sensation upon stepping within arm’s reach of the door. It took a moment to shake off the feeling and realize it was from a very powerful, and quite fresh, series of protective wards. Apparently, the trickster had decided to add to the tower’s defenses after the recent attack on Manhattan. After a few seconds, the pressure on his skull released, as the spells assessed him and marked him as a ‘neutral’ magic user, rather than a hostile one. Exhaling heavily, the sorcerer made his way toward the elevator, not bothering to stop by any reception desks this time, since he was now quite certain he was expected.

The elevator opened for him as he approached, and began to rise without any buttons apparently selected.

“Hey, you’re just in time,” said a voice over the intercom. “We’ve got a few Aesir mages coming by within a few hours, you can be our warm-up tester for the systems Loki and I have worked out. Dr. Foster was going to be here, but Thor might have said a few things he didn’t mean to and there’s now a sort of emotionally unstable situation between them downstairs that they’re busy with.”

“You got it. We’re having luck so far. Also, Loki says the wards shouldn’t bother you next time you show up.”

“I had a feeling, yes. They’re quite powerful.”

“Yeah, and different enough from his usual repertoire that they fried a dozen robotic infiltrators from Doom before he resorted to some designs without magic-based power cells, but Loki worked out a way to detect them too, that is actually a little frightening. You’ll want to see it, I think.”

“If he’s amenable, I would, yes. It might be quite useful if I can apply it to my own home, after this, given it’s clear S.H.I.E.L.D. is being hacked with more frequency all of a sudden,” Strange mused.

The elevator halted with a soft chime, and the doors rolled open, revealing the main Avengers’ shared laboratory space. The inventor was perched on a stool adjusting a few components with very small tools, while the trickster god looming over him with his back toward the elevator—disconcertingly casual, to the sorcerer who had thus far only seen him in S.H.I.E.L.D. images wherein he wore only Asgardian armor, in a green button-down with the sleeves rolled up—traced certain parts of the internal workings of the machine with long fingers giving off dark green light. The device they worked on was without an exterior shell for the time being, all rough metal skeleton and glowing hints of electric light wrapped up in coils of wire that supported multiple mechanical components that Strange couldn’t even begin to recognize; although some of the sigils Loki traced on sections of metal plating, glowing long after the trickster’s fingers left them, looked a bit more familiar.

He approached them calmly, knowing there was no possible way they weren’t aware of his presence by now.

Loki was the first to look up from his work, turning to face the other magic-user with a hint of wary
curiosity in his expression even as he proffered a hand. “You’re the Sorcerer Supreme, then,” he greeted.

Accepting the handshake, Strange half-smiled. “Dr. Stephen Strange, yes. And you’re the god of chaos.”

“Loki Lie-smith, yes,” the trickster acknowledged. “Charming to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

A hum, low and high-energy, began to emerge from the device behind the god, who turned to glance back at it. Tony had, apparently, placed a small arc reactor in it, and looked quite pleased with himself at how easily accepted it was into the device. “Oh good. I’m in no shape yet to produce a such a power-source even for this.”

“Keep resting up, then. This I can handle fine,” Tony responded.

“I don’t suppose either of you might explain exactly what this device does?”

The inventor and the god offered disturbing grins in reply.

“It would be far easier to show you,” Loki offered, his long fingers trailing through the air above the machine as though playing over the strings of a silent, invisible harp.

Strange sensed a tugging pull from the trickster’s movements, at the corners of his own mind and awareness. “I’m going to regret it, if I accept, I think.”

The mad inventor and the mad god just kept smiling.

“A little explanation first? Maybe?”

“We only have a prototype of the spell-work aspect of it, monitoring a particular section of the stratosphere,” Tony offered. “It’s silent right now, without anyone up there relaying messages down, but there’s a handy sort of work-around for it.”

The sorcerer sighed. “Show me, then.” He let the mad scientist grab his wrist and guide his hand to rest over a particular panel and one of the intricate, glowing seals thereupon. As soon as his skin touched it, Stephen Strange felt lost.

He could see for miles in all directions—especially down. He could feel how cold the air around him was, hear the shifting of high-altitude winds. “Stark you flashy bastard.” He shut his eyes, focused, and pulled at a few threads of spell-weaving he could sense keeping him together and still. Then all of a sudden he was dragged back down to early, his whole body tingling, and jerked his hand back from the device.

“JARVIS?” Tony inquired lightly.

The AI rattled off some precise data about temperature, weather, visibility, and precisely what Strange had called a certain inventor.

“Yes I am,” Tony preened. “Fun, isn’t it?”

“Don’t do that again,” the sorcerer said flatly.

“Oh come, you know you’re impressed,” the inventor insisted.
“How did you translate that information?” Stephen asked, suddenly realizing just how inexplicable it was. “That... actually, that is impressive, you complete ass.”

Tony beamed, and elaborated not at all, so the sorcerer turned his incredulous stare toward the god of lies questioningly.

“He has made extensive study of my magics under variety of conditions, particularly those to do with my teleportations, which are often preceded by a spell I cast to assess the space I intend to arrive in, which detects a number of environmental factors, as well as the presence of anyone in the vicinity and whether or not they qualify as hostile. He had already reached a point that he could identify the data such a spell collected almost as quickly as myself, and including such information-gathering into the spells which will eventually be used to keep track of Asgard’s warriors as they protect the skies of Midgard, was fairly simple,” the trickster explained casually. “Once the ‘net’ is expanded, JARVIS will become more aware of the conditions of earth’s stratosphere occupied by it than any satellite network in human history, and whether Aesir mages and warriors care to tell us directly what is going on or not, he will be keeping track.”

“That... is frankly an astonishing achievement,” Strange said quietly.

Both Loki and the mad inventor grinned again, a bit more smugly.

“You aid in helping convince a few stuffy Aesir of that would not go unappreciated, if you might be so kind,” the god mused.

“First, explain a few things about your wards.”

Tony snorted, and started work on the exterior frame and body of the machine he and Loki had put together as he listened to the two mages go off, speaking in terms of interconnectedness and twists of logic that made the part of his brain that knew all about hard physics cringe outright, but it was all fascinating nevertheless.

They didn’t stop until more guests arrived: four solemn-looking Aesir, three women and one man. They were led by one who fixed her stare on Loki with an instant mixture of deep disapproval and weary fondness on her dark face. She was old, even for an Aesir, judging by the silver-and-white color of her hair, pulled back in two long, heavy plaits, but her face had few lines to show for all her years except a few around her dark eyes and the very corners of her mouth, and her warm brown skin fairly glowed with health.

“Lie-smith,” she greeted simply.

“I had hoped they would send you, Lady Hlín,” the trickster responded, bowing with a measure of amused respect; Tony noted that he bowed more deeply to her than he had to Odin on their visit to Asgard. “You look well.”

“And you look questionable, as always.” She eyed his companions and raised her eyebrows slightly. “You, Anthony Stark, I have heard much about. You, I have heard word of for entirely different reasons, Sorcerer Supreme, and I was not aware that you would be joining us.”

“This is my planet. I have an interest in protecting it,” Strange responded.

Hlín nodded, and gestured at her fellows. “With me are the noble Ladies Skadi—” A tall woman, with eyes like amethyst and light gold skin, her long blonde hair as pale as an avalanche naturally rather than with age. “—and Vár—” She seemed younger than the other two, with rich brown hair that fell in curls over her strong shoulders, and eyes of such dark blue they appeared, at first, almost black, until
they caught the light just so. “-as well as Lord Ullr of the Vanir.” The last mage among them was tall and dark with high cheekbones and narrow, clever brown eyes. Having been told by Loki that Hogun was also Vanir, Tony wondered idly about Vanir resemblance to certain peoples of earth in the general region of Mongolia, but dismissed it. He’d only seen two Vanir so far, in any case, and plenty of Aesir (he’d presumed them Aesir, since they’d been guards and passers-by in Asgard) had similar features. Overall, Asgard had more diversity in their general populace than the inventor had expected; although after he’d met Heimdall, Tony now couldn’t read that particular god’s wikipedia entry without cracking up. Because “the whitest of the gods” was so absurdly inaccurate it had to be due to someone in history being an incredible troll.

“Some of your finer students,” Loki mused. “Not so fine as I, but still quite impressive, I must admit.” He reserved a particular nod for Skadi, who shot him a deeply unimpressed look in return, as Hlín rolled her eyed at him with exasperation borne of long familiarity, and Vár looked almost mutinous. Ullr, for his part, seemed amused to see his teacher and his peers so thoroughly annoyed.

“On that note, I do believe we should get down to... business.” Hlín tilted her head to one side a little as she strode closer to her former pupil and looked at the strange machinery on the table behind him, and the hologram Tony was manipulating over it for its exterior casing. “By the Norns, what have you been up to?”

“Being absolutely brilliant,” Tony answered, grinning a little. “It’s a gift. Nice to meet you, by the way.” He stood up and proffered a hand, which the goddess shook after only a momentary pause, wherein she seemed to very distantly recall that this was some form of Midgardian greeting etiquette. “Let’s talk about the similarities between a complex satellite network and the sort of spells you’ll be casting to keep track of Aesir warriors and presumably making sure they can hang out usefully in the stratosphere for long periods of time, taking out spaceships.”

With a hint of knowing amusement, Hlín shot brief sidelong glances at Tony’s tech, and then the god of mischief, before smiling faintly and returning her full attention to the mad inventor. “Yes, that sounds like a good place to begin.”

The politeness was, of course, doomed to fall apart at some point, but it lasted rather longer than Tony had anticipated. Loki knew these people, and they knew him, or once thought that they had, but Hlín’s students were clearly very uncertain of him in the wake of all the events since Thor’s failed coronation and its fallout. They were jumpy around him, whenever he was close to any one of them, and whether it was because they thought him a traitor and a villain, or because they now knew him to be Jotunn of a certain icy sort, Tony couldn’t discern; most likely, he decided, it was both. Hlín, by contrast, was not afraid of her former student in the least, and kept the other mages in line, cutting off comments that toed the line of impropriety when they balked at some of Loki’s wilder theories and unconventional ideas. She quickly earned Tony’s respect as soon as she shot Loki a withering look when he snarled something particularly vicious about one of her student’s intellect and family history both, and the trickster actually had to look away quickly, his shoulders a bit too tense, like he was actually a little chagrined. Clearly, she was a no-bullshit sort of goddess.

Mostly, the other mages were a bit awed and disbelieving in the face of Loki’s plans for their spellwork, and the trickster in turn was exasperated with their lack of imagination and relied heavily on explaining things in excruciating detail primarily to Hlín and Stephen Strange, after which the pair of them—the fearless wise teacher they dared not question, and the young upstart sorcerer who challenged their pride by seeing possibilities and showing his own capabilities to do what was being asked and thus forcing them to adapt because if a mortal could do such a thing, surely the gods also had to be capable—put the abstract and highly complex into clearer and more solid terms. Tony, for his part, was mostly taking a lot of notes, and occasionally diffusing tense moments with wit or making clear some of Loki’s ideas from his own perspective when even the other mages seemed
more at a loss, usually because the trickster had gone and borrowed ideas directly from more Midgardian non-magical systems in ways that baffled the others, Strange included. Luckily, those were the parts Tony had personally had a lot of input on, and he had plenty of diagrams JARVIS could pull up as illustrative aids.

It was, all in all, a very long meeting. After the first three hours, Tony ordered an unholy amount of takeout from two different nearby restaurants—Aesir appetites, he was getting quite familiar with, and didn’t want to put that sort of burden on one unsuspecting restaurant alone—the arrival of which soothed some tensions over for a while. And Tony would never find the image of Loki arguing with his former sensei, each of them with cardboard cartons of Chinese food in hand, emphasizing their points with chopsticks, unhilarious.

When the actual spell-casting started, Tony became rather quiet, and so did even Stephen Strange. The engineer watched most of it by means of JARVIS’ sensors, while the sorcerer seemed able to follow it with his eyes and his own awareness. Both of them were quietly awed by the power and complexity of the test-runs and shared a few silent looks between themselves which acknowledged this while also agreeing to never ever admit it to anyone else in the room.

“You are not at your peak, today, Loki,” Hlín chided at one point. “What have you been up to, of recent, which has taxed you energies so?”

The trickster’s expression turned wry. “I am more than able to keep up with you and yours, dear Hlín.”

“That is not what I asked,” she shot back.

“A dragon, if you must know.”

“Did you slay it?”

Loki snorted, but his expression remained masked with wryness and sarcasm. “I did not. He survived the night.”

His former teacher seemed a little surprised by that: almost suspicious.

It made Tony wonder, in ways that were uncomfortable.

“A dragon?” Strange muttered.


“That’s a new one.”

“Oh yeah. Courtesy of the Ten Rings.”

Strange’s brow furrowed. “I thought them wiped out.”

“Not so much,” the inventor sighed.

The rest of the show lasted another few hours, and Loki even offered words of encouragement, almost compliment, to the other mages before they left. Hlín lingered, once her students were gone, and requested to speak with the trickster privately.

He shot a glance Tony’s way and half-smirked, then returned his attention to her and agreed. They both vanished.
“That... was educational,” Strange mused.

“Scotch?”

“Oh god yes, please,” the sorcerer sighed.

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Hlín was unimpressed by the trickster causing them to both to materialize on either side of a table on the balcony of an exclusive club, which Tony Stark was of course a member of. Casting a quick spell on the nearest wait-staff to give them the impression that he was there as a friend of Mr. Stark, awaiting the inventor’s arrival, was just as easy as the illusion which concealed an armored goddess from the sight of all mortals around them. No one batted an eye at Loki ordering two drinks.

“I do try so hard to forget your love of theatrics,” his former teacher sighed.

“I don’t know why you refuse to admit that you still find me entertaining,” Loki sighed, in a mockery of affectionate long-suffering tones.

“You’re too dangerous to be dismissed as merely entertaining, and you always have been. If I laugh, it gives you opportunity to hide from me, so I refrain, as I’m certain you well know,” Hlín countered.

“Of all those I know in Asgard, you are one of very few who has never lost my respect. Odin was wise to force you to attend the others here. How did he persuade you to leave your work for the first time in... how many centuries?”

“He advised that you would require my help, and I knew no one else would listen to you as I do,” she countered. “You look far better than you did when I last saw you, after your return to Asgard in chains.”

Loki frowned deeply. “I neither want nor need your pity.”

“It isn’t pity. I could never pity such a cruel soul as yours.”

The trickster winced only a little. “Cruelty has kept me alive where a kinder heart could have never seen me through.”

“I know.”

He held her gaze for a long few moments.

Their drinks—variations of the one Tony had recently invented on a whim some months back, with the bruised rosemary artfully tucked into a niche cut into a piece of cucumber—arrived after the silence had already stretched on for half a minute.

“All mages of great power and talent are monstrous, in our ways,” Hlín said, in light but sage tones. “It is greed and passionate desire which drives our need for more knowledge, more understanding, of all things we can possibly reach. We are obsession-driven, in our very natures, and Odin himself is a very rare case, in that he is able to be more than a mage to such a vast extent, and able to maintain balance within himself, between monstrous desire and such vast amounts of caution that he can seem almost stagnantly unchanging in his ways, even to those who have spent centuries watching him.
with wariness and distrust, as you and I have.”

“What reasons have you had to distrust him?” Loki inquired.

“I trust no leaders to be without too many motives, too many values outside themselves and thus beyond my ability to keep constant track of, for me to trust them entirely. You are one of few I have been similarly unable to trust in a similar fashion, and I once thought it was because you would one day have a throne—not Odin’s, but your own, somewhere beyond my ability to hypothesize. It took me a very long time to realize that you rule wherever you stand, by means that kings cannot, and that your kingdom is wherever your games are in play. I long ago gave up on keeping track of them all; I have my own studies and works to attend to, after all. You long ago surpassed me in power and continue to surpass me in insights and ingenuity, but to be your student would drive me to kill you out of sheer frustration within mere hours.” She smiled faintly, lips curving against the rim of her glass as she sipped her drink and admired the trickster’s poleaxed and slightly shattered expression. “Did you forget how well I know my pupils, Loki?”

“No. Do please forgive me, however, for having ever suspected you had stopped learning anew of me, as so many others have always done.” He offered a wan, strained half-smile. “I should have recalled you are never such a fool. My apologies.”

“I taught you to use your powers, when you were very young. I still maintain some responsibility whenever you use them, for the consequences. I keep track of my effects upon the universe large and small. It is important to do this, or have you forgotten those lessons?” Her voice turned sharp.

“I have not,” Loki assured.

“You have taught your mortal ally a very great deal.”

“I have.”

“You will have to keep track of what he does with the knowledge you have imparted to him. It is not only dangerous to you.”

“I am aware.”

“He has potential.”

That gave the trickster considerable pause. “Pardon?”

“As a mage.”

“He... does not use magic, though his science closely resembles it.”

“Well, of course not. His gift remains dormant.”

Mid-sip, Loki coughed, and narrowly avoided choking.

“You did not look?”

“Why would I? He is not my student and I have no intention to become a teacher. As you suggested, my games mean as much to me as a kingdom does to a king. I would not sacrifice them to...” He shook his head severely. “No. I have had one pupil in my time, and she was yours as well because while I am her father, I can acknowledge your skills as a teacher are unparalleled in all the nine realms and I would not deny her the chance to learn from you just as I did. I hardly need to take on another to whom I have no blood relation or other attachment.”
Hlín’s eyebrows raised slowly.

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t disappoint me, after such thorough reading of me so far, with sudden revelation that you’re woefully mistaken in your impression of this situation,” he snapped.

“I am impressed that he is so sharp that you cannot trust him, even knowing all of his weaknesses as well as you no doubt do, now,” the goddess mused. “He is only a mortal, albeit a brilliant one, and you do not trust that he is not manipulating you. That really is a marvel.”

The trickster’s scowl deepened, but he said nothing to that. He finished his drink.

“You still haven’t puzzled him out. How long have you been allies?"

“Stop,” Loki growled.

“No one else will call you on this. Not even Amora, for you must have already led her to believe you have him mapped as neatly as any other ‘ally’ of yours. You must know I will not let you get away with being free of doubts.”

“I’m hardly that,” the trickster admitted, through clenched teeth. “If I were, that would be the end of it.”

Hlín’s expression cleared a little, then grew slightly more concerned.

Loki inhaled slowly, deeply, and let the breath out, just as deliberate and controlled. “I am sincerely impressed by Tony Stark. He continues to surprise me, as no one has for a very long time, and certainly as no one mortal ever has, in the past. I am not so deluded as to believe that he trusts me, or that he might not still be using me for purposes aside from this upcoming war that my alliance with him hinges upon. He proved more than capable of playing my games, and winning at them, when he cornered me into alliance in the first place.”

“If he did trust you?”

“He would be more a fool than even Thor has ever been, for his greater intellect would make such a failure of logic and practicality even less forgivable.”

Hlín nodded, but still looked almost disconcerted. “You are fond of him.”

“I would hardly have been sharing his bed for the past several months if I were not,” Loki offered, with a shrug. “We appreciate one another, but fondness does not make trust, just as understanding someone does not mean one has to actually like them or even remotely sympathize with them, which is one of your lessons I took the very most from.”

“You had already learned it,” Hlín said.

“From my own perspective, yes. Young as I was, I had not learned to apply it fully to others. It was uncomfortable to realize that Odin knowing my mind and capabilities as well as he did was not truly out of affection as much as worry and a bit of fear, but necessary in the long run.”

The goddess appeared momentarily pained. “I had not intended.”

“Lessons often have unanticipated applications and those have myriad consequences. I would have worked that out without your guidance, given time, but as you like to keep track of these things, do consider yourself informed, that you hastened me along,” Loki countered.
Hlín sighed. “Do you consider the matters you’ve taught Stark in a similar manner? That he would have discovered these things anyway, given time?”

The trickster’s expression became stony, entirely closed off. He could see the bait there, too simple. Hastening mortals along is different, because their time is so much more limited. “I know precisely how responsible I am for the knowledge I’ve shared, but it matters little to me. I have no desire to reign him in, given he is hardly an apprentice of mine.”

“You’re curious what he will do with it.”

“I’m always curious.”

“But rarely fascinated.”

“You’re reaching,” Loki sneered.

“You’ve been learning from him almost as much as he’s learned from you,” she countered. “Otherwise he would not have been able to understand your ideas where even I could not, because the concepts you used were too foreign for me to parse with only a mage’s experience alone.”

The trickster rolled his eyes. “Do you want him for a pupil? Is that what this is?”

Hlín seemed contemplative. “I wouldn’t be at all averse, actually. It’s been a very long time since I’ve educated a mortal, and your words alone lead me to expect great things of him.”

Something about that seemed to strike and irate chord in the younger god, even as he bit hit tongue to prevent some instinctive lashing out, which would reveal too much. Far too much. He took another deep breath. “I leave that to you. I have no claim on him, beyond the current alliance. I ask...” He hesitated, seeming to curse himself for a moment for slipping even that far.

“Loki?”

“Nothing. I have no claim on him, as I said. It is nothing.” He waved a hand vaguely. It would affect his games not at all, if Tony Stark were away in Asgard for training after the war. Not at all. In fact, it would make a number of his plan potentially run much smoother, given how much less observant S.H.I.E.L.D. really tended to be without that particular mad inventor to tip them off, or keep their eyes sharper in certain places just because he might suspect mischief.

Tony Stark now knew mischief better than Loki should be comfortable with, but the trickster had already come to terms with that. Mostly.

“Do you wish to?” Hlín inquired lightly.

“It is not in my plans,” Loki said, his tone light.

“That is not what I asked.”

“It is not in his plans, nor does he seem to want more of myself than this alliance has given him the chance to sample,” the trickster added, his words now lacking inflection entirely. “I have no interest in what is not freely given.”

“You think he wouldn’t?”

“He knows better than to trust me not to take advantage.”

“Would you?”
Loki smiled thinly, coldly, and did not answer.

Hlíń sighed, shaking her head. “If he gave you his trust freely, you would think him a fool, and would be disappointed, but if he never trusts you, he can never show more interest in you than-”

“I’m aware.”

“You could offer him more.”

“I would be rejected, and told to take my manipulations elsewhere,” Loki purred, smiling wide and bitter and glacial. “Without trust, there is nothing. And I am not a creature he can possibly trust, precisely because of his intellect, which I’ve already complimented.”

“Everything you like about him makes him impossible for you to have, you’re saying,” Hlíń murmured softly.

“Yes,” Loki said. “Yes, exactly.”

“Which makes you want him more.”

“Again, you’re reaching.”

“I know you as a mage. You want more from him.”

“He makes a fine enemy. A remarkable challenge that I’m looking forward to combatting.” He met her stare levelly. “Beyond that, I have no plans for him.”

“If he defeats you? If he brings you low?”

Loki snorted. “Unlikely.”

“Is it?” She looked thoughtful. “You said yourself that you know all of his weaknesses very well. He would have good reason to hunt you down, and eliminate you as a threat.”

“There would be no quicker way to provoke me into destroying those close to him. He knows this. He even went so far as to advise Thor to let me go, when this alliance is at its end, rather than hunting me down when I will already be taxed and thus will be ruthless enough to use any and all available means to escape, death tolls be damned. He is practical.”

“So he truly understands you.” Hlíń sounded impressed.

“Yes.”

“And he likes you.”

“There is mutual appreciation, of a sort.”

His former teacher smiled sadly at him. “I wish, for your sake, that you could have him in your life as you do now, for a longer time. I think he would be good for you.”

The trickster frowned at her. “Don’t romanticize this.”

“I don’t think I have to.”

Loki snorted. “Now I’m disappointed in you.”
“Believe what you will,” she sighed. “You look more yourself now than you have in almost a
century. You look full of potential again, full of fierce energy, and your fearlessness is less
desperate—less defensive.”

“That is merely the effect of being less trapped under the Sisyphean task of pleasing enough people
in Asgard to put fort the image of the more disreputable and untrustworthy and un-golden, but still
respectable Aesir prince they once believed me to be,” Loki scathed. “It’s remarkably liberating.”

“I heard of your speeches before Odin of recent, yes. They were a good deal of the reason I agreed
to come to Midgard.”

“Aside from your aforementioned selfless concern for me?” Loki cut in, sounding droll and a little
disbelieving.

“I never said there was not a further, more selfish reason.”

The trickster appeared a little surprised.

“You mentioned... possible survivors. Under Jotunnheim’s ice.” Her expression cracked just for a
moment. “I... I need to know of this. Tell me if you were lying. Please.”

“I was not,” Loki said, his tone softer suddenly. “I only know that there are some. Not how many,
not where, not how. I know only that they are there, under the ice.”

Hlín inhaled sharply. “My mother was there, with my younger sister, visiting her kin when the...
when the freeze struck. She did not escape in time. All I know of her disappearance was that she was
not killed in battle. The city she was in was covered in a mile of ice almost instantly, and that was
before blizzards started. There were no battles there until the ice had been in place for some years.
The city had old protective magics, but I had never considered, until I heard of your words, that some
survivors might have been preserved by them.”

“I did not know.”

“I hardly tell many about it. I was distrusted enough, in the wake of it, given my mother was Jotunn.”

“But many-”

“She visited kin in Jotunnheim, but she herself was from Nifleheim,” Hlín interrupted sharply. “She
lived there a long time, until she met my father. She was one of few ice Jotunn to have resided in
Asgard for any length of time. I did not inherit her elemental nature, as your daughter inherited little
sign of yours, but that only helps so far to combat certain kinds of ignorance.”

“I knew that she was Jotunn. That was all. You have done very well hiding it with time, your own
achievements, and probably sheer bloody-minded determination,” Loki murmured, sounding
impressed and a little sympathetic.

“If I had been braver, I would have told you stories of her. You reminded me of her, in some ways.
Mostly your humor, and also your creativity.” She looked down at the table between them. “I do not
know what plans you have, but consider me willing to ally with you, in aid to Jotunnheim, should
you require any.”

“My plans are nothing honorable in their means,” he said softly.

“I do not care. She was my mother. And might still be,” Hlín whispered. “I am not incapable of
being as ruthless as you. I do not revel in it as you often do, and can’t approve of your ability to do
so, but if there is any chance I might... help those lost to the ice, even if she is not among them, I
want to do so. I will do so, if you might let me.”

Loki reached out, placing a hand over hers. “I have plans. I do not know if you may be able to help
with them, but after my war here... I will be able to discuss them more freely. For now, it is best they
remain in my thoughts alone.”

Hlín nodded. “I will seek you out, then.”

“I will let you find me.” He smiled a little. “You were often better at it than most.”

“And I will continue to be,” she shot back, almost warning. She rose to her feet, then. “And you’d
better survive your war.”

“I have every intention of doing so.”

“Good.” She touched his cheek briefly. “It would be a shame to lose my most impressive student to a
single act of revenge.” She smiled at him tightly once more, then vanished.

Loki sighed and leaned back in his seat, taking down the illusions and wards.

It took perhaps twenty minutes for the mad inventor to find him. “Okay, the fact I could track down
the place where a ‘guest’ was waiting for me, and then be here over ten minutes unable to find you
due to glamour magics, was a bit annoying.”

“Still not perfected detection for those yet, outside lab conditions?” the trickster sounded weary, but a
little amused.

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “You use different ones outside the lab. You bastard.”

“You can hardly blame me.”

The inventor sighed, sounding a bit weary himself. “Yeah, yeah. I can’t.”

“You’re worried about something.”

“A lot of things. There’s a war on in a couple weeks, you know.”

“I was entirely unaware,” Loki deadpanned.

Tony snorted. “What’d she want to talk about?”

“She is... a teacher, to the very core. The best teacher of mage-craft Asgard has ever seen. As a
former student, I am considered a concern of hers in some ways.”

“You’ve surpassed her, though?”

“Yes, long ago.”

“Huh. She likes you?”

“Hard to say. She is often exasperated with me, and disapproving, but from her...” He sighed. “She
is better at seeming affectionate despite offering a constant barrage of criticism than Odin ever was.”

“Ah. She’s like your Pepper, if Pepper had at some point been my sensei.”
Loki chuckled. “She has never been quite that close to me, as though almost family, but she does know me almost as well. Also, she rarely leaves her domain, and her work, for any length of time. This was the first time she’s left Asgard in centuries.”

“Huh. And out of concern?”

“A little. Mostly out of hope.”

“No... in you?”

“No, or I’d be much more embittered and still laughing about it, at the same time.”

Tony snorted. “Fair enough.”

“She... wants to aid Jotunnheim.” His brow furrowed. “Also, and this is unrelated: she may extend an offer to teach you mage-craft upon her next visit.”

The inventor nodded thoughtfully at the first statement, but almost fell out of his chair at the next one. “Woah, what?!”

“I daresay you heard me.”

“I don’t... I’m not magical. All of what I do is just... stuff you sort of don’t need to because you conveniently bypass a lot of hard physics.”

“She informed me that you have a dormant gift. I had not thought to look, but she did, after you so impressed her today.”

Tony gaped for a moment, then closed his mouth and ran a hand through his hair. “Magic.”

“Yes.”

“Magic like you do. Like Strange does.”

“Yes.”

“Me.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Are you alright?”

“I’m... not sure what to do with this information. I’m a little... I kind of can’t believe that you’re being even remotely serious about this. I... isn’t this wildly unconventional or something? Her offering to teach a mortal or whatever?”

“Unusual, but not unprecedented. She has taught some mortals before, though that was before she taught even myself, when your world was much younger.”

“Are they...”

“One of them is now Aesir. She later married one of Hlín’s sons.”

“But others didn’t get the immortality thing.”

“No, most did not.”

“Why?”
“Mages... are not generally good people, at heart. Nor are we known for our selfless acts of bravery and other such actions that Asgard so highly prizes, because what sets a mage apart from more casual magic users with gifts they either do not dedicate their lives to, or which they never fully embrace at all, is ambition. There are trials for any who would seek to become citizens of Asgard, and they are all tests of valor, righteousness, and goodness of heart.”

“Ah.” Tony snorted. “I’ve only really got one out of three there, most days. I see how that could be trouble.”

Loki’s brow furrowed briefly, but he only made a noncommittal noise.

“Jotunnheim, though?”

“Apparently, she lost kin under the ice when the freeze hit. My... recent public statements were the first suggestion she’s ever heard that there might be survivors.”

“Oh, wow.” Tony nodded, thoughtful. “You didn’t know she... ?”

“Before today? No.”

“You okay?”

The trickster shot him an incredulous look.

“You’re looking sort of melancholy and contemplative and almost worried.”

“Ah.”

“You’re touched on an emotional level by her appeal, and suddenly there’s more on the line than you thought and it’s harder to enjoy it properly when it suddenly means a lot to someone you actually respect?”

“Yes.” Loki looked sharply at the mortal, careful to keep his expression masked. Otherwise there might be something in it a bit too hungry. A bit too longing. “You begin to know me far too well,” he growled.

“Only fair. It’s not like I can’t say the same of you.”

The trickster made another noncommittal noise.

“What would... what does learning to be a mage entail, exactly?” Tony asked, sounding incredulous that the words were even coming out of his mouth.

“You would have to spend some time in Asgard with Hlín, to awaken your gift and learn the basics of control and containment of it. It is... “ Loki waved a hand vaguely. “I am a rarity. I cannot remember a time when I did not have my gift and it was not known to me, tangible as a part of myself. I was able to shape-change before I could walk, and had to have containment bands on my wrists for some years after I perfected bipedal locomotion, to prevent my magic causing problems given I was far too young to instruct. Frigga herself gave me my earliest lessons, mostly in control, and I was not given over to Hlín for more serious and rigorous instruction until I was in the early stages of adolescence. It will be very different for you, as an experience, getting to know your magic. It will be unpleasant, but very rewarding once you achieve enough control and balance to properly accept it and learn to move with it, as it moves through you.”

The inventor frowned a bit. “How does it usually go, for people who get it switched on later?”
“Usually, they are still younger than yourself. It often is awoken naturally during adolescence, or by some sort of near-death experience wherein the gift breaks free of dormancy to rescue the gifted person who possesses it. In some cases, it can be awoken by another mage, or by exposure to powerful magics be they spells cast against you, or simply interacting with a powerfully enchanted artifact or several, which the Sorcerer Supreme likely had his experiences with. How positive the experience is varies depending on the strength of your gift, and how violently it responds to being awoken, which at times can be severe even if done ‘gently’ by another mage.”

“If it happens to be violent?”

“You will want to be around a powerful, experienced mage able to heal any of your potential injuries, and bring you back to yourself. You would find no better than Hlín for those purposes.”

“What do you think of this?”

“Specify?”

“Me. Possibly learning magic.”

“You have incredible potential,” Loki admitted quietly. “The... core of magic is understanding the world around you, and manipulating it in different ways. All of the things I do which, to you, seem to ‘break physics’ are, in fact, hacking bits of reality, in various little ways. Seeing what you are capable of constructing within the limitations of physics and your ability to make those forces work to achieve your ends... you might become even more astonishing.” He glanced up at the inventor and blinked a few times in rapid succession. “Are you... are you blushing, Tony Stark?” The trickster suddenly sounded deeply amused, and was visibly struggling not to laugh.

“Stop, stop it, this is... this is you, and I know how much magic means to you and just—I’m allowed to feel flattered,” he growled. “Shut up.”

“It looks good on you,” Loki teased.

“Fucker,” Tony muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’m more than a little interested here, admittedly. I’ve been trying to decipher how the hell you do the things you do since I found out magic was even a real thing, and any sort of insight into it that I can get is already tempting as fuck, I’m just trying desperately to find a downside. There has to be one, or it cannot fucking be real.”

“The time it may take you just to learn control is uncertain. I’m not a reader of others’ gifts as Hlín is by the nature of her studies and occupations, so I have no ideas how strong yours may actually be. Even if I looked, the most I could probably discern is that it’s actually there, and how deeply it might be buried.”

“Weeks? Months?” Tony refused to consider more than that.

“Weeks, possibly. Up to a month. If you were any other mortal, given how long and under what duress your gift has remained dormant, there would be considerable risk that you might never gain that control at all, but I somehow doubt you would let that last long, and if nothing else you learn very, very quickly.”

The inventor whistled. “And, if I’m reading your suggestions right here, that’s just to get me to the point I’m not a walking hazard to myself and others. After that, presumably, I could go home and continue with my life, pursuing a lot of independent study with some guidance from Hlín?”

Loki nodded. “Depending on how quickly you might learn, and what pursuits you might take with it, you may require occasional trips back to Asgard for some of your lessons. Those arrangements, you
would need to make with Hlín herself.”

“You.. wouldn’t interfere or anything?”

The trickster shot him a disbelieving look. “Why would I?”

“The more I know about magic, the more of a hazard I am to you.”

“Any more than I am to you?” Loki’s eyes darkened. “You will hardly cease being who and what you are now.”

“Ah.” Tony’s own expression turned cold. “Yeah, don’t fucking go there.”

“I do like to believe you’re wise enough not to go after me yourself anytime soon,” Loki mused. “And should you pursue mage-craft in future, you would put yourself at a disadvantage by using most any of the magic-canceling technologies you’ve been implementing up to now.”

“Oh, point. You really didn’t like getting a zap from that.”

“It was a deeply unpleasant sensation. You’ll find out the moment you first accidentally hit yourself with a blast of it with your gift awoken.” Loki’s grin was unkind.

“You’re right, though. I know better than to make the first move and attack you for the sake of something like... catching you? What would I even do? Killing you isn’t likely and would be a shame, really, even if I could manage it. The style and panache points of the Avengers villain pool would drop by half, for one.”

Loki snorted. “I could say the same of your destruction.”

“You’d miss me.”

“I would.”

Tony blinked a bit at that, not actually sure how to respond, even as he smirked smugly. Well, he had an idea for how to respond, but a quick glance around the room made it seem less than feasible. Damn logistics.

“I should put up another illusion and a psychological deterrent ward, I think,” the trickster mused. “I wouldn’t bother, except this tablecloth isn’t long enough for you to otherwise go unnoticed if you were to, say, get under his table and apply your mouth to my cock with vigor.”

“Did you... just read my mind?”

“I saw you quickly evaluate the positions of other people in the room, the tablecloth, and the height of the table, with a slightly disappointed expression.”

“Fair. Do that magic, will you?”

Loki obliged, with a hand gesture, his fingers glowing briefly. He settled back in his seat comfortably and beamed. “Whenever you might feel so inclined.”

“You’re a smug bastard.”

“Only as much as you are, generally.”

“I should made you scream in public. Is your magic there good enough to keep anyone noticing even
“Yes,” Loki said as though resisting the urge to roll his eyes and add, of course, what kind of hedonistic god do you take me for? to the mad inventor’s ear.

“Good. You’ll need it.” Tony then slipped from his seat, under the table.

The trickster watched him go, curious, and waved a waiter over, ordering another round of drinks casually, as though he were entirely unaware of deft fingers unbuckling his belt and teeth pulling down his zipper, though he was glad the waiter was gone by the time he felt the warmth of the mad inventor’s breath against him, as he was pulled free from the confines of his trousers. He gripped the arm-rests of his chair firmly and tried to remain unaffected as Tony’s mouth wrapped around the head of his cock.

He was not even remotely prepared for Amora to appear opposite him at the table, looking around at his casual spell-casting and grinning. “Am I interrupting something important?” she asked lightly, ignoring how he greeted her with a deeply alarmed warning glare.

Loki felt the inventor go very still and thoughtful, then gripped the arm-rests tighter as Tony gave an amused huff more tangible than audible and sucked harder. “You’re interrupting. Yes,” the trickster said, as evenly as he could manage, trying his level best not to squirm in mixed arousal and something almost akin to embarrassment, which he’d never admit to; although it did intensify the sensations the mad mortal inflicted on him by virtue of Loki’s uncomfortably heightened, paranoid self-awareness.

“I thought you might need to complain a bit about the perfidy of Aesir mages, since I heard it was mostly Hlín’s students.”

“Also Hlín,” Loki said, his hips shifting forward a bit helplessly, if only by a minute degree, as the mad inventor sucked him down in one smooth movement, tongue teasing all the way. He sucked in a breath as quiet as he could when Tony then swallowed around him.

“Really?” Amora sounded thrilled. “They got her out of her caves?”

Loki nodded sharply.

“You’re looking a bit out of it,” she observed. “So stiff.”

“You have no idea,” the trickster responded in lascivious tones, unable to help himself. He was rewarded by the humming vibrations from Tony’s effort not to laugh or choke, and rolled his hips up slightly, until the mortal pinned them down with one arm. Loki stilled, and the arm retreated, but he felt leather, and raised his eyebrows, realizing Tony had wrapped a belt between the bases of the chairs two arms, buckling it so it limited the trickster’s ability to move. He’s thought this out.

The Enchantress’ brow furrowed. “I didn’t need to know that.”

“I think, actually you did, given that you still hadn’t worked out precisely—hnngh, dammit, Tony—the nature of what you’re interrupting.”

Amora made a face. “Seriously, Loki?”

“As serious as oral sex ever is, at least,” the trickster countered.

“You’re quite verbose, then, all things considered. Not much loss of eloquence so far,” she mused, a little louder, clearly meant for the inventor to hear.
Loki shot her an alarmed look. “Don’t” *Don’t challenge him*, he almost said, but stopped, knowing just saying that would only exacerbate the situation.

“I’m just saying.” She started to grin a little. “At least I don’t have to see anything, for once, as usually happens when I interrupt your *escapades* of this nature. This is actually quite amusing.”

The trickster swore a blue streak, only to cut off at some actions from under the table. “Oh, yes, do that again,” he groaned.

“And amusement is replaced by disgust again. Shut him up, if you would, please, Tony?” She glanced down at the table with a bemused expression as a very faint electric hum became audible. She didn’t ask, glancing back up at the god of lies.

A strangled sound escaped Loki’s throat shortly after and he gripped the edge of the table hard, panting heavily and trying to shift his hips forward or up, against the restraining leather. He shot the Enchantress a glare when she giggled at him. “Evil,” he growled out.

“He’s still able to form words,” Amora declared, sing-song.

Loki struggled for air then. He wasn’t at all certain what machinery Tony had brought along in his pocket with a vibrate function, as it certainly wasn’t a phone—too small, too *purposeful* in its design—but the things it was doing to his balls, while Tony had two fingers taunting his prostate and the inventor’s tongue was doing things impressive even by the standards of a man who had a literally mythic reputation for being silver-tongued, were utterly unfair. He planned to tell the inventor as much once he could breathe properly.

Amora seemed caught between morbid amusement and actual disgust. “Well, at least you found a talented one.”

Reluctantly, the trickster nodded, as his body began to shake. He tried again to roll his hips forward for more, just a bit more, causing the wooden arms of the chair to creak a little as the leather put a bit too much pressure on them. Tony gave a small warning sound, as well as a maddening hint of teeth: not painful, just enough for the trickster to feel them. It was still enough to almost make Loki’s eyes roll back in his head. He emitted a sound he wasn’t at all proud of.

“Wow, I’m impressed,” the Enchantress admitted. “Can I borrow him?”

Loki shot her a heated glare and might have actually growled.

“Okay, fair, fine,” Amora sighed. “I won’t steal him even, I promise.”

“Good f’r you,” the trickster hissed, and gave up just enough of his pride to rest his forehead on the table with a faint keen.

A waiter showed up, thankfully oblivious to the tricksters state by means of magic compelling the belief nothing to worry about was going on, and delivered two drinks. He left quickly and quietly, which they were all thankful for.

Presuming the trickster had actually noticed him, that is, which, given his state at the time, was questionable at best. The Enchantress had to look away from his face, blushing a bit herself, and looking like she direly wished she could unsee that expression of his as he let out another frankly indecent sound.

Loki gasped sharply as the inventor increased his pace a little, and found a particularly sensitive spot with that small, vibrating device, and also swallowed around him once, then twice more. The
trickster came hard with a low cry, barely muffling an actual scream as his orgasm left him ragged and breathless, his whole body shuddering. He gave a high-pitched noise of dismay when the infernal device was dragged up his length as Tony’s mouth retreated, setting a buzzing aftershock through his bones strong enough he saw stars. Then he felt the inventor tucking him back into his trousers and went boneless for a few seconds, content to ignore Amora laughing at him. He was comforted a little, that the inventor was audibly breathing hard himself, and his hands, while sure and competent, were not entirely steady.

From under the table Tony called, “Amora, get another chair, will you?”

She summoned one from another table, hands-free, earning a half-hearted glare from the trickster, who still hadn’t quite lifted his head off the table.

“Relax, that was in range of your ‘somebody else’s problem’* spell,” she mocked.

Tony slid up into the empty chair with ease, looking flushed and incredibly smug, even as he nicked a napkin from near Loki’s elbow and used it to wipe his own come off his hand and wristwatch. “That was fun, but I really didn’t actually need the commentary.” He shot Amora a disgruntled and slightly uneasy look. “You’re very weird, to have stuck around like that. Just saying. I know you didn’t get off on it; you’re looking almost green even now, and not with anything like envy.”

“I don’t get enough occasions to make Loki deeply uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed,” she offered, with a casual shrug.

“I hate you both,” the trickster muttered. “That said, Tony, I have to wonder how often it is that you carry small vibrating devices around in your pockets for sexual purposes and why has this not been applied to my person before?”

“I thought of it last night, and figured I’d make a point about the marvels of science and technology after a day spent mostly getting schooled in matters magical,” Tony explained, grinning. “You enjoyed it, I notice.”

Loki chuckled a bit despite himself, but pushed himself back into an upright position. “I’d not be averse to seeing what else you’ve got,” he encouraged, and his voice was pure, well-debauched sin.

“Ew,” Amora said, with feeling. “Just, getting that out there. Ew.”

“You stuck around, you suffer the consequences,” Tony chided. “I can give you a run-down on the exact techniques I used on his-”

“Please don’t,” she snapped, frowning deeply.

Loki laughed openly at her deeply appalled expression and Tony’s smugly shameless one. He was, if nothing else, in a much better mood, now.

“I dunno, I’d say turn-about is fair play,” the inventor continued.

“If it is, that would require me to tell you all about my recent games with dear Skurge, and sweet earth-boy, I don’t think you’re ready,” Amora shot back.

Tony made a face for a second. “Yeah, okay, fair.” He picked up one of the drinks and took a long sip of it. He made a thoughtful noise. “Loki, remind me to make this again back at the penthouse and spend some time licking it off you. It goes well with how you taste.”

The Enchantess grimaced and shot the drinks a deeply distrustful look.
The inventor chuckled.

“Take your spells down, Loki. I need a drink and not anything like what you ordered, please,” she sighed.

Deactivating both spells with a murmur and a flick of glowing fingers, Loki then proceeded to flag down a passing waitress.

“French seventy-five please,” Amora purred, making the girl blush a little.

Tony belatedly realized the Enchantress was in a little black dress and had a pretty emerald the size of a silver dollar right above her immaculately displayed cleavage. She knew she had incredibly soft-looking, creamy skin and used it shamelessly to her advantage. “Nice outfit.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling prettily as the waitress scurried away in a slight daze of sexual confusion.

“I think you just made that waitress question her heterosexuality,” the inventor added. “Recommended, by the way. She’s a former gymnast and very bendy.”

“Oh really?” Amora suddenly seemed more interested.

“Are most gods bisexual?” Tony asked the trickster. “I mean, I can’t get a read on Thor, really, but uh...”

“He prefers women rather exclusively. I will say Asgard is... very open-minded and has no taboos any longer concerning appreciation of the beauty of either gender and the various in-betweens. As a result, heterosexual relationships are more common, but most of the populace has sampled alternatives at one time or another without their reputations suffering for it.”

They briefly went quiet as the waitress returned with the Enchantress’ drink, and blushed furiously when the blonde thanked her and leaned forward a little, drawing the girl’s eyes down to her breasts. The waitress smiled kindly in response and sidled away with some visible reluctance.

“Admittedly, that sounds awesome,” Tony mused, concerning Aesir sexual attitudes overall.

“Alfheim is where most are omnisexual,” Amora added.

“That sounds almost even more awesome. You sure we don’t need any alliances there, maybe?”

“Sadly no,” Loki sighed. “It’s been some time since I’ve had a properly, hmm, appreciative stay in Alfheim.”

“No wonder you were such a mess the past century or so,” the Enchantress chided. “Even before the most recent events, I mean. You know what I mean.” She waved a hand dismissively.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Not all of us require bi-annual visits to the place, one of which must be during Beltane.”

“I strongly disagree. I think everyone does, but they’re too petulant and too foolish to admit it,” she shot back. “Everyone, at least, should attend Beltane every year. What isn’t to like about an almost planet-wide celebratory orgy, I ask you?”

Tony coughed, some of his drink going down the wrong pipe. “Wow, that’s... wow. So what favor do I have to promise to get tickets?” He looked between the both of them.
Amora grinned toothily. Loki looked merely incredulous.

“What?” Tony asked the trickster, almost offended. “Why wouldn’t I want to go?”

“Many kingdoms in Alfheim still have a tendency to steal mortals away for playthings,” Loki explained blithely.

“Shhh, don’t ruin the surprise!” Amora hissed.

“Ah, that would be a bit of a deal-breaker,” Tony agreed.

“Dammit, you ruin my fun,” the Enchantress pouted.

Loki grinned at her. “Your necklace is glowing.”

She glanced down at it. “Dammit. Something is tripping my wards back at my den, it seems. If it’s more Vanir raiders, I’m going to be most upset. Fare you both well.” She vanished immediately.

“That was uncomfortable,” Tony mused.

“You didn’t seem bothered.”

“Well, I was focused on getting you worked up, and how much her being there was making you squirm uncomfortably was pretty much worth it at the time, but seriously never again.”

“Agreed,” Loki responded emphatically. “Now let’s return to your tower, whereupon I will fuck you over your penthouse couch.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Tony left a few bills on the table just before the trickster vanished them both from the place.
When the Dreamscape Gives You a Riding Crop... Don't Over-Analyze

Chapter Summary

In which Jane chews out the mad inventor and his godly ally, and Thor gets further lessons in tact, and Loki has an extremely uncomfortable problem discussed in public, but thankfully not within hearing range of any Avenger aside from his brother.

Also: there is an imaginary riding crop, and it's all the fault of Tony's subconscious, but he'll determine how that should be interpreted thank you very much.

Two weeks, six days...

Unfortunately, events on the couch were delayed, because it was occupied, somewhat inexplicably, by one Dr. Jane Foster. Her eyes were red, but she looked determined, and a little annoyed. "You should've gotten me, before they arrived. I wasn't going to barge in after like I was late, you asshats."

"JARVIS informed me you were occupied?" Tony tried meekly.

Loki rolled his eyes. "I told you."

"You did," the inventor conceded. "I'm sorry. I just, uh, don't deal well with…" He gestured vaguely.

"He distracts easily when there is a situation he wants very badly to fix, but it isn’t his place to do so,” the trickster translated. “It was his pride alone, nothing to do with anything against you."

Tony looked between the two of them quickly, a little surprised by how mild the god’s tone was, without anything along the lines of sarcastic bite. "I also didn’t like how keen you were to play fetch, actually,” he added.

Loki shot him a deeply offended glare. "I heard what he said, and I would have informed him curtly that he is an incompetent ass whose lack of tact is an embarrassment to all who know him. Then I would have asked Dr. Foster to join more civilized company."

Both inventor and astrophysicist looked a bit stunned by that.

"Uh… thank you?" Dr. Foster said hesitantly. "I was under the impression you weren’t fond of me."

"Let me assure you that while I’m merely indifferent toward you, I’m much more deeply unfond of Odin these days, and the trials he presented you to judge your ‘worthiness’ are ones Thor would have failed a thousand times over before the poor oaf made your acquaintance. That’s just crassly distasteful, to be frank,” Loki sneered. “You yourself I have had little reason to despise, personally; I merely thought my brother a fool for becoming so attached to a mortal who would break his heart within less than a century. I thus had no arguments against your being made a citizen of Asgard, or you would have heard them before now. It seemed, to me, an acceptable solution, until the All-Father made such a mess of it. For Thor to try, so clumsily, to apologize for what you were put
through while still speaking of Odin’s judgement of your ‘unworthiness’ as sound... Well that effectively offended me more than you ever have, Dr. Foster.”

Tony gaped at him a bit.

Jane seemed a bit thrown off as well. “You… are a slightly screwed up person, you know. Also very rude to me up until now, so this is… a bit suspect?”

“I never claimed to be a kind person, and I’m usually insulting to everyone, as well as blunt in sharing my opinions. I do not care what you may think of me, Dr. Foster. I do not wish to be your ‘friend’ at all. I just wish my brother were less of an ass at times, and I’ll be making him regret his words later, regardless of what you may think of it.”

She nodded thoughtfully at that, seeming to understand it intellectually, while still not actually seeing it as reasonable. “I... guess that makes a twisted sort of sense.”

“You’re back to keeping him in line a bit, then?” Tony muttered.

“I’m fomenting distrust of the All-Father in his own son.”

“Uh-huh,” the inventor concurred, sounding a little less than wholly convinced.

“What did I miss, with the mages?” Jane sighed, rolling her eyes at them. “You’re both ridiculous assholes, by the way. And Tony, I’m pissed off at you.”

The inventor rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, looking genuinely sheepish. “I really am sorry, that was... Yeah, I fucked up. I should’ve given it more thought.”

She stared at him, full of displeasure and disapproval. “You will not pull that cowardly shit again with me.”

“I won’t even let them start talking until you’re in the room. Loki, back me up.”

“I’ll bring you myself, Dr. Foster. You have my word,” the trickster sighed, sounding put-upon.

Jane grinned, clearly very aware of how Loki wouldn’t be able to renege on that. “Good. Now I expect a summary from both of you before Loki goes to justifiably harass Thor.”

The god and the mad inventor exchanged glances communicating mutual mixed feelings of resignation and grudging respect for the woman in front of them.

“I had plans involving him on the couch you currently occupy, but given it’s his fault you’re on it right now in the first place, I’ll concede,” Loki said, matter-of-factly.

“Lay it on thicker why don’t you,” Tony muttered. “You could’ve gone to get her anyway. It’s not like I actually could’ve stopped you.”

The trickster fidgeted. “You distracted me,” he growled, like it was a sudden, and slightly disconcerting realization.

Grinning evilly, the inventor tilted his head a bit to one side. “I’d say that still counts as a lack of consideration on your part. Just because my science is brilliant shouldn’t have been enough to forget her over.”

Loki scowled outright at that. “Stark,” he growled, warning.
“Apologize like I did and move on, darling.”

“My god, I knew you two were at it like rabbits because Clint won’t shut up about it, but seriously, you two are arguing like an old married couple,” Jane interrupted, sounding almost as deeply disturbed as the two men looked upon hearing that accusation.

“We certainly are *not*,” Loki snapped.

“Constant sniping is actually how I converse with most people remotely able to keep up, including most of the Avengers and you,” Tony pointed out dryly.

“It’s not just the sniping, but I’m not going to argue, because I don’t need to traumatize myself or get thrown out of a window for someone blond to save. It’d only make him feel useful and like he did at least one thing right, and I’m not willing to give him that. Are you?” she asked of Loki.

The trickster narrowed his eyes at her, considering. “I should have been less dismissive of you on many occasions, I think. My apologies, Dr. Foster. I presumed that your attraction to my brother was an indicator of a less refined mind, and apparently I was mistaken.”

“Normally, I’d find that offensive enough to punch you in the face again, but just now, I understand a bit too well where you’re coming from,” she sighed heavily, rubbing at her eyes. “You’re still an annoying, destructive, carelessly insulting and infuriating egotistical fucker, though, and reminding me how dismissive you’ve been of me before now, and insulting both myself and my taste while doing so is a shitty way to lead up to an apology, you know.”

“If I were polite and likeable, you’d know it to be insincere. What would even be the point?” Loki drawled. “At least this way, you can’t say I’m trying to manipulate you into actual willingness to forgive me.”

She glared at him. “That... you... I hate you.”

“And I’ve earned that, I know. You’re quite justified.” His tone was blithe.

Jane made an utterly exasperated sound. “Do you regret earning it?”

“Actually, yes. Had I been a bit more amenable, and had less petulant fun at your expense, I might have been able to aid you at times which I now know, in hindsight, would have deeply disconcerted my brother and infuriated Odin to no end,” the trickster mused. “Also, you would be less angry with me now, but given that’s my fault—and, to some extent, Tony’s—quite fairly, I think attempts to soothe or dismiss would be only more insulting.”

Tony admired the look of nonplussed angry disconcertion on the astrophysicist’s face, and resisted the urge to applaud.

“Oh my god. I really wouldn’t believe you if you-” She cut herself off with a noise of muffled rage, covering her face with her hands. “Fuck you!”

“I have a strong policy of never involving myself as such with persons who have been romantically and/or sexually involved with my brother,” Loki responded, grinning like the obnoxious bastard he knew that he was being.

“Please stop. I’m still in range and she could possibly break my jaw,” Tony muttered, not-quite-quietly-enough.

“Why would she possibly want to strike you instead of me?” Loki mused.
“I’d hurt her hand less, and it’d annoy you to have to fix my jaw if you want me to blow you again anytime soon,” the inventor reminded him, low and droll.

“Oh, fair point.”

“Tony, it’s not you I’m angry with,” Jane sighed, sounding resigned. “As much.”

Loki shot the inventor an approving smirk for a moment. Nice deflection. Tony flashed one of his sharper too-bright smiles in acknowledgement. They were both back to expressions of cool, mild curiosity by the time the astrophysicist dropped her hands from her face and glared at them wearily.

“Fine. Fine! Loki, I hate you, but I’ll be damned if you get out of explaining everything I missed today with those mages. You too Tony; although while I hate you less, I’m still pissed at you enough it’s not what he did that made me seriously consider slapping you across the face.”

“Fair,” Tony concurred.

Loki looked irritated, but nodded his own acceptance.

The rest of the afternoon and the early evening was thus spent in the lab with Loki being alternately annoying and unusually patient as Jane caught up. If Tony wasn’t mistaken, the god almost wanted her to like him by the end of it, but knew he’d already sabotaged that for the foreseeable future, thus rendering him more cordial for the most part, except when Jane particularly impressed him and something pained-yet-petulant would draw casual insults from him. Tony started to get a read on Loki’s expression for when one of those little snaps neared the surface, and found ways to diffuse them, or get them redirected at himself. The fourth time he did it, the trickster shot him a distinctly uneasy look, like he wasn’t sure whether to be grateful or enraged, but while suspecting he should be the latter, still found himself leaning toward the former.

It made Tony’s chest feel tight, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief when Loki’s attention returned to Jane and the holograms they were manipulating.

By the time they finished and Jane finally let them off the hook, both men were a bit drained mentally and, though neither would ever admit it, emotionally.

“I’m torn between suggesting we get dinner, and insisting we get drunk,” Tony announced, not long after Jane left.

Loki looked like he was seriously torn too, but eventually hummed dismissively. “Food is necessary. It would only slow my recovery to skip another meal, and I am impatient with such things.”

“Nah, scotch is totally a food group.”

The trickster snorted. “It’s certainly not.”

Tony gave an exaggerated scoff, and tried to come up with another excuse to stay in the lab and drink himself into numbness for a while. He grinned upon finding it. “What you should do is make Thor take you to dinner so he’s trapped on the other side of a table in public while you berate him over the Odin and Jane thing.”

Loki made a thoroughly devious noise of approval. “That may work.” He shot Tony a sharp look. “I’m tempted to not fix your hangover in the morning.”

“Damn,” the inventor sighed, but it didn’t change his mind.
“And once you’re done attempting to pickle whatever matter is so bothering you, I plan to discuss it with you at length.” His expression was uncompromising and deadly serious. “I need you sharp, Tony. I cannot force you to remain clear-headed and sober in all the coming days to come before Thanos arrives, as you are not so beholden to the terms of our alliance as I, but I can still make your life very unpleasant if I believe you to be hiding something pertinent.”

“It’s my mother’s birthday,” Tony blurted sharply. “Drop it.”

Loki stilled, thoughtful and calculative, but his expression did smooth into something less threatening, almost soft. “My apologies.”

“I’ll be fine. I just need a while. This usually... after the sun goes down, I’m not exactly good company on days like this, is all. Can’t focus.” He shrugged, offering a bitter half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “See you in the morning.”

The trickster nodded, seeming unsure quite what to do for a moment. “I...”

Tony elbowed him lightly. “Wake me up creatively. Only if you decide to get rid of the hangover though; otherwise it’s just mean.”

“I’ll consider.” Loki faced him, then, and trailed a finger along his jaw with a smirk. “Do see if you can make it to the bed without too much mess.”

“No promises, but I’ll make an effort.” Before he could think about it, he pulled the god into a kiss, brief and teasing. When he pulled back, he wasn’t entirley surprised that Loki took that as his cue to disappear altogether.

He sighed heavily. “JARVIS? You know the drill.”

“Oh course, sir.”

The whirr of machinery, and the sound of locks snapping into place around the whole of the lab, followed.

Mourning days, he tried to be a little responsible. Well, for his mother’s. Howards, joyrides and bouts of reckless, usually very public self-endangerment? Seemed a fitting tribute to the old man, really, in being one part omage, one part giving him the finger, and one part pure abandonment of giving a shit in the least. Mom, though...

Well, she deserved a bit better, so keeping it out of the papers and not almost getting himself killed were goals he set.

Barriers went up, between himself and all of his armor, as he strode from the lab and headed for the elevator. Most of his tech would be on lockdown, accessible to Rhody and Pepper in case of emergency, but not to Tony. A couple suits, in case of actualy armageddon and/or an attack on the tower, were set to seek-and-protect him bodily, but they were the suits JARVIS was best at piloting without any input from the inventor, and would thus not really be obedient, as such, if Tony happened to be drunk.

He made it up to the penthouse in silence, and headed straight for the bar.

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Cornering Thor over dinner was more satisfying than Loki had initially anticipated. He’d allowed the thunderer to choose the venue, and with the right smiles and a quiet comment to the hostess, the trickster got them seated in an out-of-the-way booth near the corner, but notably not near to any exits. Thor, being Thor, was hindered by a number of things: politeness, propriety, and a deep-seated paranoia over Jane or any of this other friends and acquaintances on earth, giving him disapproving looks upon hearing he’d made a scene in public. Again. After they’d quietly explained so many ways to avoid it and not alarm people.

Loki was savoring it. Along with the thunder god’s obvious suspicion that this was a trap, which made him nervous and unable to sit still, even before his brother said a word. He just sat back and watched, calm and patient and just disapproving enough that it couldn’t possibly be missed, but not enough to provoke an instant response.

By the time their first course of food arrived, Thor looked like he wanted to either strangle his brother, or flee the building, but honestly couldn’t work out which was more appealing. All tinged with a sullen guilt that usually plagued him when he knew he’d done something wrong, but hadn’t quite worked out the full scope of what he’d done, or how to fix it, and suspected strongly that further offenses had been committed by himself that he couldn’t see either.

He knew that he’d angered Jane, enraged her even the likes of which he hadn’t before seen, and he knew that she was angry because she’d been hurt by his words, but he couldn’t work out how to fix it, and she had tried to explain, but he’d been to eager to fix, to find something he could do to remove the wrong, to quite listen as he should have, and he might have made it worse; and now Loki was sitting there like he knew all about that, and was also convinced Thor had made a grave mistake, but the trickster had made clear his callous indifference toward Jane so many times, so what was he missing? What else could be wrong?

Loki, being Loki, was enjoying letting Thor work himself up.

“I know not what your intentions are,” the thunderer muttered at last, finally breaking the very long, awkward silence.

“I intend to eat dinner. And I intend to hurt your feelings.”

Thor’s brow furrowed. That was a bit more direct than he was accustomed to, from the trickster.

“May I ask why?”

“I’m hungry, for one,” the Lie-smith explained in dry tones.

“That is not-”

“I know it isn’t. Patience, and let me finish. You need to listen, before you accuse, before you try to fix anything. Particularly when you do not even know how many things you have broken, in what ways, and how they might possibly be fixed,” Loki snapped.

Thor fell quiet.

They ate in silence for another few minutes. Loki ate faster than his brother, in no small part because he needed all of the fuel for his body that he could get. He ordered another few dishes, to the waiter’s faint disbelief, once halfway done with his first two. The portions were not small, which Loki appreciated.

“What cuisine is this again?”
“Persian,” Thor said tightly.

“Ah, I should have recalled. I like it.”

The thunderer exhaled a deep breath slowly.

Loki’s lips twitched with vicious humor. “Your careless words, today, as well as my own habit of ignoring her which I will have to work on, apparently, prevented Dr. Foster from meeting the Lady Hlín.”

Thor seemed at a loss. “I... your teacher?”

“Long ago, yes.”

“I doubt she has ever seen it as truly ceasing, so much as lessons becoming much fewer and farther between. It seems her way. Mother used to remind you of that, as I recall.”

“Whenever I tried to casually remind someone that I’d long ago surpassed her in power and capabilities, yes,” the trickster admitted. “She teaches wherever she goes and whoever she speaks to. It is in her nature. I am a mage, however, as she is, and the policy of a mage is to never cease learning, observing, and seeking new understanding even in places mastered long ago. She learns from me as much as I from her, these days. We are both mages, but she is no longer my instructor, and I am no apprentice.”

“That, I cannot argue.”

Loki resisted the urge to snarl at him for being so mild in response suddenly. It was so much easier to restrain that urge when the thunderer was off-balance. Anger was the easiest and most strangely comforting to provoke him into, but guilt was a very close runner-up. “You are an incompetent ass whose lack of tact is an embarrassment to all who know you,” he said flatly.

Thor appeared annoyed. “I am capable of tact!”

“I know you are, which is why she was so angry with you.”

“That is no business of yours-”

“You made it my business by so deeply offending a person my current position as Tony Stark’s ally requires me to work with peacefully as a colleague, while I am also, despite efforts to the contrary on my part and much of Asgard’s in recent years, considered your brother.” He stabbed at a bit of salad with delicate vehemence. “As such, I am also expected to have understanding of your ways and the ability to force you to listen and to see reason.”

The thunderer appeared to be barely resisting the impulse to grind his teeth. His jaw was very tightly clenched, as a result. “That does not explain why you are apparently taking pains to appear genuinely offended by my words, which did not apply to you, Loki.”

“Did they not?” the trickster sneered, his tone gone wrathful and poisonous. “Today you spoke to a mortal woman who struggled through all the trials Asgard laid before her, to achieve an abstract notion of worthiness defined by Odin’s whim as much as his honor—and don’t you dare doubt he is capable of letting honor bend to accommodate whim, especially when you speak to me knowing just how deeply I have suffered where his honor failed in favor of pride and convenience—in order to be by your side longer than her natural lifetime, to become a citizen of Asgard not for all Asgard’s riches, not for the sake of living a longer life without disease or the ravages of old age for centuries yet, not for the sake of living in the glorious realm eternal in all it’s splendor; but instead for you in
spite of all you still have to learn that she already has in her short life, it seems, about how deep the
shame goes, be it earned or no, to be told time and again that one is not worthy, cannot be worthy,
by nature of what one is to one’s very heart and soul, most of which cannot be altered nor should it
have to be.” Loki leaned a bit further over the table. “You spoke to her, Thor, and you expressed no
doubt that Odin’s declaration was not just. You were offended when she questioned it, when she
showed anger that you could not understand why she might want you to doubt him—because she
wants you to value her as much as she had been willing to value you. The damage you wrought was
upon her heart, but you invoke my wrath both by the inconvenience her heartbreak will cause me, to
a minor extent, but also your childish clinging to your father’s regard as something sacrosanct,
something above doubt and above being questioned or examined critically. That, Thor, is your
greatest sin to date, and do not think me the least bit unwilling to relish any opportunity to make you
hurt over it as much, or more than, you hurt Jane Foster’s heart this day.”

The thunder god was as far back in his seat as he could get, pressed against the back of his side of
the booth as though willing it to swallow him. He held his brother’s steady, steely stare for a long
few moments, feeling nothing, at first, but shock, as though bombs had just gone off on either side of
his head, leaving the phantom impression that his ears were ringing. He then realized, instead, that he
had stopped breathing and the noise of the room around him seemed very distant. The sensation was
smothering, and numbing.

“Thor, listen to me,” Loki said, his voice calm, soothing, but not quite warm. He looked intrigued,
but also a bit grudgingly concerned. “Thor?”

“I...”

“Take a breath,” the trickster sighed.

Thor inhaled sharply.

“And breathe out.”

He did so.

Loki regarded him as though he were a particularly interesting insect specimen someone had pinned
to the leather seat opposite him. “Keep doing that. Slow as you can without actually stopping.”

The thunderer did so, for a few minutes.

Loki ordered another few dishes, including a fairly mild soup for his brother.

One elbow on the table, Thor rested his face in his hand. “This is the same lesson I’ve been wrong
about with you, isn’t it?”

“Different angles, and not applied in particular to myself, but yes. You went and got yourself
involved with a woman who excels in a field primarily dominated by men, who grew up in a nation
obsessed with telling women all the things they must never be, a number of which she is, defiantly,
in spite of all that,” Loki mused. “She has learned many lessons similar to those that I have, just in
passionate pursuit of her academic career alone. You, however, don’t seem to be aware just how
exceptional she is, in this world. And she went to another one entirely, only to be told by the single
old male in charge, a benevolent dictator, that she still is not enough. Imagine that for a moment.”

Thor looked suddenly ill. “Oh,” he said quietly. “…I...” He looked up at his brother searchingly. “Am
I... so horrible?”

“As Odin?”
“I don’t know what I mean,” the thunderer said quietly. “You have the gift with words. I have only stubbornness and reckless bravery that forever gets me into trouble, particularly when I forget that others do not have such straightforward battles in their lives as most of mine have been.”

Loki swallowed tightly, looking away sharply, lest he do something embarrassing like reach out to offer comfort or any other such ridiculous thing. “The danger of living such long lives as we do, Thor, is in building habits so strongly, over so many centuries, that we simply become what we repeatedly do.”

“I do not wish to be this... clumsy. Not with those who deserve better from me, and for me to understand their greatness as they do, or as they should, when it is... based on things like this: things I do not even think to question.”

“Your habit, Thor, is to look for the good in all things,” the trickster said, smiling quite bitterly again. “It is, so some people have insisted on telling me, a positive attribute.” He shrugged casually. “I maintain that those people have never had to deal with the aftermath of an optimist armed with Mjolnir.”

Thor snorted a laugh, despite himself, but it sounded a bit cracked.

The rest of their food arrived.

“Eat,” Loki said simply. “Think. I am morbidly curious what you might make of this situation, now that your melancholy has forced your thoughts to be a bit more still, and cleared away some of the glare caused by too much glory in your mind’s eye.”

Thor snorted. “Like sunglasses?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“You’ve seen them, surely?”

“Yes,” the trickster admitted, still not quite catching on.

“You and I are not much affected by it, but too-bright sun limits human vision, causes details to be hidden in the glare, because it is simply too much light bouncing off the objects into their eyes, too much information. It’s apparently like a haze,” Thor described slowly. “In order to see things clearly, in detail, it helps to apply sunglasses, which block some of the light.” He chuckled a little. “Is that how you see things, brother? Through a dark veil of melancholy, allowing you to catch details that to me are obscured because I am too busy seeing so much good and light that things seem simpler?”

Loki set down his fork slowly. “I...” He cleared his throat quietly. “Something like that, yes. That’s actually quite an apt comparison.”

“Perhaps I know, then, how to embrace doubt,” Thor mused.

“How?”

“I imagine your voice in the back of my head complaining and criticizing. If I listen for that, it will make me look for the sort of things I know that you notice. A fair starting point, perhaps, until I can get in the habit of looking without having to rely on you as heavily to tell me when I’m privilege-blinded.”

The trickster inhaled sharply, and tried very hard to school his expression into something masked when Thor looked up at him with a tentative, slightly self-deprecating smile. It made his entire chest
ache.

“Are you alright, Loki?”

He nodded.

Thor smirked a little. “Breathe out.”

Loki glared at him, and held his breath for a few moments longer just to be contrary. “Not the same.”

“Oh no. You inflicted upon me shock and panic. I inflicted upon you something warmer and more uncomfortable for you, I think.”

The trickster snorted dismissively.

“It has not been so long, Loki, that I’ve forgotten how hope looks on you, though the fact you look so pained by it is new and reminds me again how much I have to learn before I make up for... how long it has taken me to question.”

“You regret being happy for so long?” Loki snapped, his voice cold.

“Given how unhappy I now know that you often were, where I could not see, did not understand, and was thus powerless to help or make you feel less alone?” the thunderer countered. “Yes. I regret it more than anything.”

The trickster recalled Jane Foster’s expression earlier in the day, just before she’d covered her face with her hands and lost some elegance to her swearing, and felt a moment of acute empathy, but it faded quickly. She’d had the comfort of knowing her anger was 100% justified. Loki wished he could still believe that his was, but however unfortunately, he knew himself too well, these days, to trust in that, where Thor was concerned. “Stop looking at me like that,” he growled finally, tired of the sad sincerity in those bright blue eyes. “We’re in public, for fuck’s sake.”

“You did not used to swear so often, until your recent alliance,” Thor observed lightly. “Given you otherwise still tend to be quite elegant with your words, I find it amusing.”

“It’s easier to rely on than swearing 'by Odin' or 'by Asgard' or to some extent 'by the Norns' even,” Loki said flatly. “Convenience.”

“Ah. I... hadn’t considered.”

“The phrases offend you less,” the trickster reminded.

“Of course.”

“Why, Thor, do you still balk at questioning him?” Loki sighed. “I heard you. She questioned his right to determine her worthiness, and you defended him.”

“I... hardly know. I was not as certain in my heart as I sounded.” He frowned. “Habits, as you say. I have been—I have been loyal and unquestioning for a very long time, especially of father.”

Droll, Loki muttered, “Trust me, I know.”

“You do, yes,” Thor agreed, but sounded uneasy. “It was almost reflexive. As though I couldn’t think, before I said those things. Even now, if someone said a word against his honor I... would be angry. With a total stranger.” His brow furrowed further. “How do I undo this?”
"Pain."

Thor blinked at him. "Pardon?"

"Remember the pain that I inflicted upon you with this. Remember the pain you’ve caused to those you love, with this habit. Picture yourself a thousand times, run through it in your mind over and over. This is what the rest of us do when we are told just how we’ve failed, again." He raised an eyebrow slowly. "You can intensify the ability of this usually unhealthy habit, to teach yourself to associate that behavior, with misery."

"You... do not do that deliberately, though." It both was, and was not a question.

"Funny enough, I never had to. It just happened anyway," Loki concurred, in deceptively light and airy tones.

Thor frowned. "For how long?"

"Most of my life, Thor. It’s what happens when every little thing about a person is subject to being called out as a flaw and sign of a too-jealous, too-devious, and too-strange nature. I became very observant to survive and keep those accusations and whispers as much at bay as possible. When that failed, I learned to make the whisperers afraid of my overhearing, and that was much more effective, but not when they thought it didn’t matter if I overheard because I would be unable to seek retribution, which happened any time I was punished or in a weakened state." Loki smiled very unpleasantly. "My ‘sunglasses’ are a shield against expecting people to be kind and helpful and trustworthy, because if I expected those things, I would live in a state of perpetual disappointment and injury. Being royalty meant that I had physical protection while in Asgard, for the most part, but if I was considered... to be on Odin’s bad side on a given day, there were places that would not hesitate to treat me with less than due respect, up to and including harm to my person if they thought they could get away with it, and that ‘no one would believe the word of a lie-smith’ let’s say."

Thor looked stricken again. "I... I should have-"

"I wander. I have always wandered. Had you tried to constantly follow me every time, I would have grown to resent you, and made you regret it. Painfully. Which would have gotten us both in trouble, of course, but primarily myself. And whether on Odin’s good side or not, if public opinion was that I had done you harm? Those times were still more dangerous for me, given they believed that I might not have your protection, which was usually more highly visible and immediate than the distant Odin’s, and fresher in their minds."

"Why would they-" Thor hesitated. "Why would I be..." He sighed.

"Why have there been men in Jane Foster’s life who found evidence of her femininity alone an offense to the field of science?" Loki mused. "That was a commentor on one of her articles published in an online newsletter. The comments are not fully open to the public, and usually only a few are even on display to most casual perusers once they have been approved by moderators; although my curiosity bid me find out what more there was to it. It seems they are limited to the newsletter’s content-contributors. The man who made that comment is a peer of hers, only a few years her senior, who declared that her appearance, in the ‘about the author’ section, distracted from her work. He suggested that the fact she’s a pretty female not wearing something drab under a lab coat, made her somehow impossible for him to take seriously."

"Did you find his address?" the thunderer asked seriously.

"Maybe." Loki grinned, all teeth.
“But that is-”

“Thor, do not pretend Asgard is without its own irrational prejudices, or I will make you regret trying to insist upon such a clumsy lie with one such as myself,” the trickster drawled. “I am Jotunn. I have always been Jotunn. Much that comes to me naturally as gifts from my heritage including the strength of my magic and my aptitude for shape-shifting, paired with other things about me more to do with my personality and attitudes—you know of what I speak—made people hostile toward me on a petty, habitually instinctive level. I could not combat it with reason, so I used more twisted means, and became very adept at winning fights without fighting at all. And that, somehow, only worsened my reputation because a real Aesir would solve conflicts with a straight-forward, honorable approach, like Thor.” His tone was fiercely mocking on the last sentence. He shot his brother a look.

“To be fair, whenever I overheard anyone utter such a thing, I made them sorely regret it,” Thor said.

“How honorable and straight-forward of you,” Loki shot back.

The thunderer winced. “Ah.” He frowned a little at the trickster’s wry expression, then. “Do you... find this world suiting you better?”

“Pardon?” Loki seemed sincerely baffled. “I did get the point across, surely, that trying to take over this world was not actually my intent? I’m not a fool, you know. Humans have a capacity for violent and bloody revolutions to overthrow monarchs or other dictatorial leaders unrivalled in all the nine realms, because they’re better at structuring governments that lasted multiple generations than Jotunns were before the ice, and better at explosive bursts into warfare amongst themselves than any bored and war-loving aristocrats of Alfhheim could ever dream. This is not an optimal place to try and institute a fear-based rule to which few humans would submit without threat and coercion. In all seriousness, if I had been looking to actually succeed at taking over this world, I’d have to admit Tony’s approach is far more effective than any full-on invasion.”

Thor started to interrupt, then stopped. “Wait... what?”

“Which part?”

“I was going to say that I didn’t mean to imply you would attempt global domination again, actually, but then got distracted,” the thunderer said slowly. “Did you just imply that Tony is taking over the world?”

“Well... more sort of that he doesn’t need to, because he already has sufficient run of the place for his needs, generally. They need him enough he’s free to do mostly as he pleases, international laws be damned, in more cases than not,” Loki mused. “If he were so inclined, however, he could easily rule this world as a sort of techno-mage Caesar with only a few weeks, perhaps a month of genuine effort.”

“Should I... be alarmed by this?”

“You haven’t before now. It’s not like this is new.”

Thor sighed. “You’re mocking me.”

“A little. None of what I said there is actually a lie, however.”

“Yes, just dramatic phrasing and a few omissions.”

Loki blinked a bit. “Has he been giving you lessons?” he asked suspiciously.
Thor burst out laughing in earnest at that. “No, no, brother.” His eyes were very bright. “Natasha might have, however.”

“Damn.”

“You seem fond of your ally.”

“He has a very clever mouth, he is handsome, and he has an admittedly brilliant mind. These are things I appreciate, yes,” Loki said, sounding almost bored. “Don’t tell me, please, that you’re about to read more into it than that just because I happen to share his bed?”

“I read more into it because you swear in English, these days, and you look at him as though you do not expect him to wither,” Thor countered.

“I swear in English because I find the phrases charming, and associate them with memories of some excellent sex,” Loki chided. “As for your other accusation, you’re seeing something which is not there.”

“I think, rather, that you are increasingly desperate to ignore it yourself, brother.”

“I believe you are biased by your desperate hope that something, anything, will make me appear less heartless and refreshingly alone than I am content to be at present,” the trickster riposted.

Thor’s jaw clenched. “I am not so desperate as to wish to see your heart broken when that man destroys himself before you can admit how much you want him to be a more permanent fixture in your life.”

Loki balked, looking at once shocked and a little horrified. “What?!”

“You heard me.”

“Thor-”

“Stop, Loki.”

“I will not, brother,” the trickster sneered. “How deluded are you? How thick do you have to be to think that I-”

“No. Stop.”

Reluctantly, the trickster quieted, glaring angrily even as he did.

“I know better than to believe you are in love with him. I think you are too afraid to let yourself,” the thunder god said slowly. “I have seen it before, on you. Not for a very long time, and I did not expect to ever see it again, because-” He hesitated, exhaling raggedly, then taking another breath. “I did not expect to see it again because of how unique your lovers were.”

“Don’t you dare-”

“I will, Loki, because you’ve forgotten, or you never saw yourself as you truly looked, then, before you quite trusted Angrboða, but as you began to desire more with her than you had. It took me days to realize where I’d seen the look on you before, that you now wear whenever you hear Tony Stark’s voice. It’s the exact same look that...” He rubbed at his eyes, clearly searching for the right words. “When you and Sigyn both were so afraid of possibly losing or hurting one another that you couldn’t trust her fully, for a long time, there was a look you both wore—you and Sigyn—whenever
Angrboða walked into the same room; That is where I’ve seen it before. That is exactly the look, and I can’t let you be unaware, as you seem so stubborn to remain, of how much you are coming to value him, which you must be doing, for you to look like that again solely because of him.”

Loki forced his breathing to remain calm. “You’re mistaken.”

“I’m not,” Thor said softly. He was gentle. “I would not lie to you about this. I would not dare even mention the thought if I were not certain, to my very bones. I do not know you as I once did, or as I once believed that I did, but I still know you very well, in some matters. You know this of me. And of you.”

Terrifyingly, the trickster did. Even more so, he could feel surety closing in suffocatingly as he realized he trusted his brother’s judgement in this. Not only because it was Thor, but because to his horror, he could believe it was true. He had suspected, but carefully avoided even thinking... How did it go this far without my awareness? How? His voice dripped vitriol as he hissed, staccato with stiff restraint, “Why. Could you not. Let me have. The lie?”

“The lie would have still done you harm. And I consider it a fair exchange for the lies you have helped me to realize for what they are, of recent.”

Loki folded his arms tightly across his chest and leaned back against his seat heavily, too tense to quite slump successfully. “I cannot begin to...” He tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling for a long moment. “I curse the day I encouraged enough observational capacity in yourself that you would become confident enough to do this.”

“I know.”

“Do you also know, Thor, just how impossible it is for me to have him, of his own will, after all of this?” Loki snapped.

“You do not think he returns your regard?”

The trickster made an embittered sound not quite like a laugh, so much as like the death of one. “Thor, you speak of fear for the safety of myself, at present, and of others, in the past with Sigyn, preventing the development of trust, and you wonder why I do not believe that Tony Stark has any reason to believe any potential pursuit from me to be genuine? Do you know how easily I could destroy all that he loves? Far easier than Angrboða could have ever harmed Sigyn and I, and I could be far more comprehensive in taking everything from him, if I so chose. Even you—especially you—know better than to consider me incapable of doing so.” He sneered derision. “I am a monster capable of coming and going as I please. All of the people I most care about are so distant he can’t reach them, or so powerful he could not hope to threaten them enough to have any impact upon me. My life expectancy is ‘until Ragnarok’ if such an event ever happens to occur. I am beyond his reach, whenever I might wish to be. Not only could I destroy him, but even if he did trust my intentions, by some head injury or other improvable justification, he would still have to cope with the fact that I might simply disappear as easily as any of my illusions, never to be heard from again. I cannot be trusted to act without malevolent intent, nor can I be relied upon should I be—needed, which I am not, in his life.”

Thor nodded, thoughtful. “You do not need him in yours, yet, either.”

The fact that Loki almost questioned that, even if only in his own head, was one of the most damning of the entire conversation so far. The trickster swallowed tightly. “We are both very independent creatures.”
“Why does that particularly frustrate you then? That you aren’t—”

“I am only desired by people who need something from me,” Loki snapped, then froze, examined the thought, and grimaced upon finding it more sincere and deeply rooted in a collection of deeply painful memories than he liked. Seeing Thor’s face after he said it, too, suggested the thunderer saw much of it too, which was worse. “Don’t—”

“I... never meant to leave you that impression. Or for anyone to—”

Loki waved it off sharply. “It matters not—”

“I severely doubt that,” Thor growled, but at his brother’s unrelenting glare, he reluctantly dropped it. His thoughts, after a long moment, caught on something else. “When you mentioned... all of the reasons Jane might have wished to become a citizen of Asgard other than... other than myself—”

The trickster thought back to that part of the conversation and exhaled through his teeth. “He mentioned, at one point, that he considered the pursuit of immortality a work in progress. It occurred to me that he might see me as a means to that end, but I was incorrect. He is seeking other means—his own. Designed by his own hands, but incomplete so far. It has promise, but there is a humanity-based limitation to it that I do not know of any way, without magic, to overcome.”

Thor nodded slowly. “That weighed on your mind.”

“In retrospect, because I...” He grimaced. “I’d thought he was trying deliberately to appeal to me as much as he does. Instead, I found that he is... simply himself. And it’s that self, and all that he is, which is so dangerously appealing, with no effort required on his part to ensnare me. In fact, he is as careful as I to give no impression at all that he expects more than what this alliance requires of us, and allows unique opportunities to indulge in, respectively, while it so lasts.”

“Hm.” The blond god sounded thoughtful, almost amused.

Shooting him a glare, Loki asked, “What?”

“There are so few occasions that anyone can refer to Tony Stark as being ‘careful’ in all seriousness,” he explained, half-smiling.

The trickster frowned, mostly to prevent a similar smile appearing instead, just at that thought. Suddenly I realize that I am doomed. He narrowly resisted the urge to teleport away to somewhere, anywhere else, but only with a herculean effort and more than one deep breath. “It’s even more unusual to cite an example of Tony Stark wanting something, and not getting it, nor making any attempts to get it, nor even showing any inclination toward getting it—”

“Yes, but if he does not trust you, he would have more reason to be careful not to let on that he might want more from you,” Thor suggested. “Given your track record of taking advantage of ‘sentiment’ after all.”

Loki shot his brother a disbelieving look.

His brother’s stare did not waver.

“Put your sunglasses back on,” the trickster snapped.

Thor smiled wanly. “It’s possible. As possible as a genuinely cautious Tony Stark, which I’ve seen before. Usually when Pepper Potts was placed in any danger—”
That forced Loki to consider. He... understood why the inventor valued her. The more he’d seen of her, and the way she looked at people, even trickster gods, was something as warming as kindness and approval from Thor, but also refreshingly perceptive, competent and... quieter, than the thunder god. “I may concede it to be a possibility, albeit not one I personally would wager on. Or over.”

“Damn. I’d find it a satisfying one to win against you.”

“You owe me how many favors again, now?”

“I retracted most of them after you made more than one attempt to kill me.”

Loki made a thoughtful noise. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“Will you pursue him? Beyond this alliance?”

“I... need to give it some thought,” the trickster said slowly. “I have many plans in place. This is not in any of them.”

“Could it be?”

“I take my time to think out my plots, Thor. They aren’t all wildly improvised.”

“Those are your more fun ones, however.”

“You only say that because of how often they’ve gotten me into trouble while saving your sorry hide.”

“Well, yes,” Thor said, echoing Loki’s inflection from a bit over three years ago.

The trickster shook his head at his brother. “You are a ridiculous creature.”

The thunderer only beamed, happier to be called that again than he could ever remember having been before.

Loki pulled Tony’s wallet from his pocket and pulled out an appropriate number of bills to qualify as leaving an embarrassingly large tip, and placed them on the table. “Let’s leave this place. I cannot weave plans here, now.”

“I’m sure there are no places in the universe you are actually incapable of weaving plans, so long as your occupation of those places isn’t instantly lethal somehow.”

“YES, but it’s far easier in some places than others, as you well should know by now. Come along, Thor.”

Smiling, the thunderer followed Loki out.

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Two weeks, five days...
Returning to the penthouse of Avengers tower in the small hours of the morning, the god of mischief found Tony Stark passed out on a couch in front of a projector, which was playing an unfamiliar sci-fi film. Loki quietly requested JARVIS stop the film, and the AI obliged. There was one Iron Man gauntlet, half-repaired, several tools, two different sized Stark tablets, scattered around the passed-out inventor, across all nearby horizontal surfaces. For a long moment, the trickster examined the tableau of technology and self-made technomage with a thoughtful expression.

One arm supporting his weight as he leaned over the couch, legs pressed against the back of it, Loki trailed the fingertips of his free hand along one cheekbone, down to the line of Tony’s jaw, and further to trace ghost-light over the healing bruises his own lips teeth had made on the inventor’s neck just over the past few days.

He didn’t say a word, didn’t even dare think any for a while, just enjoying the silence, and observing the impossible human being, the maddening and fascinating Tony Stark, so peacefully at rest. Well, not quite ‘peacefully’ so, but at rest anyway.

Loki’s fingertips lifted, resettling on the mortal’s brow, traveling along little paths made by tension, there: frustration and worry and the weight of a thousand complex problems ranging from the personal to the mathematical, not even quite eased by sleep, to judge by the fitful way Tony’s eyes moved behind his lids and a hint of a frown tugged at his lips; and yet, under the barely-there touches, the tension slowly drained away, and the inventor’s expression soothed back into calm.

It wasn’t often the trickster soothed anyone’s dreams without looking into them first, but his own thoughts were too tangled, too much scattered and chaotic, for dream-walking to be a good idea. He would stir all the wrong things in the astral plane, walking through it with such volatility in head and... elsewhere. He would need a few hours of proper rest himself before he could consider himself composed enough for dream-walking. There was time for that.

The quiet, out here, was for once much preferable to the inside of his own head. Far from boring and dull as it usually might have seemed, the peacefulness of the hours not long before dawn, and the sound of the sleeping mortal’s breaths, seemed a welcome respite from all the thinking Loki had done over the past few hours.

So many thoughts and ideas touched upon, and fewer decisions than there should have been for all that exertion, all those what-ifs he’d woven and followed to uncertain myriad ends, always all too aware that the more missing data he had in his equations, the more possibilities he couldn’t account for.

He needed more data, and usually finding out what people wanted, and what they expected, and how to make them reveal it and believe he could offer it—these were arts over which Loki had such mastery that they hardly required thought, any longer, in most cases.

Most cases were not the closely guarded, dangerous thoughts Tony Stark would spare all he loved from the knowledge of where possible, and not leave his enemies with even the faintest chance of discovering evidence of.

It was possible, Loki mused, that the man might have discussed these matters with one Pepper Potts, but if the trickster was right about the man’s paranoia being on par with his own, any and all traces of that data would have been erased thoroughly, and even the places he might look for hints that any such things had ever existed to be erased in the first place, would be treacherous places to tread.

And what if Tony knew of the trickster’s curiosity in that regard? Loki considered it with care. If the man was as afraid of discovery as true interest would make him, then he would try to downplay any reaction to it, and use it as opportunity to dismiss any such thing. Same as if he truly weren’t
interested, leaving the trickster to trust in his own abilities to detect falseness in such a reaction.

It was an unnerving thought, deeply so, for Loki to realize he couldn’t trust his instincts alone in such a case. Not with this one, who had been watching him closely, astutely, and learning how to dance around his games. Th tricketer would have to resort to a few spells, which would doubtlessly be picked up by some of Tony’s technology. The inventor might even go so far as to shield himself against such a thing, somehow: a field generator up his sleeve. Loki wasn’t entirely sure, either, if the deflection of his magic would be merely casual paranoid precautions, or indications that Tony might know that a lie-detection spell would reveal too much. Both were equally likely, with this man, when he might feel threatened.

And he was perfectly within his rights to prevent Loki prying into all sorts of data JARVIS might be protecting for him at all times: selective erasures, just for the god of lies, who would in less than three weeks’ time be his sworn ally no more. There would be no way of telling, seeking to reconstruct erased data, which clues were omitted for purely strategic reasons, more mundane than... the sort of thing Loki was contemplating now: things useful in revealing what the inventor thought of him, and could tell others, but never utter within hearing range of the god of mischief himself. Secrets, the trickster sighed silently, running his fingers idly through the inventor’s hair. *I hate not knowing all of them all of the time.*

Faintly, he recalled a fond memory Tony’s own voice echoing a similar sentiment: some idle conversation, theorizing about the Ten Rings, if Loki recalled correctly.

*Too alike, we are, Mr. Stark,* he thought to himself. *And too well have we learned to guard against each other in our time as allies, while revealing other things that most more mundane people would censure us for, both to distract and amuse ourselves... and to see what reactions we get from one another.* It had been thrilling, in fact, just how little Loki felt any need to hold back with this man, compared to anyone else. The mortal balked at almost nothing, and did not even flinch in the face of Loki’s genuine rage.

On the occasions they’d truly fought, few and far between as they’d been over the months they’d been working together—usually over Loki’s family connections and his unwillingness to deal with how unstable his rage and only half-rational impulsive urges to lash out at them made him to work with, or Tony’s drinking and doing stupid things when certain triggers hit him too hard—both god and mortal had lashed out with pure poison, holding nothing back: sinking metaphorical claws in as far they could go and then pulling them down to rip open deep gouges.

Loki had been the more physically violent on an instinctive level, but his binding word made his own blood burn agonizingly before he could quite do more than get a hand around Tony’s neck and squeeze, preventing him having the strength to strangle the man, or the ability to fling him out any nearby windows. Attempts to strike any faster resulted in his muscles spasming before he could quite lash out. Similarly, his more violent magics refused to obey.

By comparison, the inventor had possessed fewer hindrances, and had damaged walls and furniture by sending an enraged god crashing into them violently at least twice, but Loki’s defensive capabilities were not restrained as his offensive ones were, and the other few occasions that Tony had lashed out, the trickster had simply vanished before any blow could land, reappeared behind the mad inventor, and tripped him up to send him sprawling to the ground. Those had been very productive conversations all, aside from the violence, which itself had added to their cathartic quality.

On the other hand, with Tony now having technology capable of incapacitating much of his magic (*Not quite all,* he reassured himself, but a cynical voice further toward the back of his mind sneered, *For now; but not for too much longer, knowing him.*) and also knowing for a fact that the inventor
would not hesitate to use it once all the guarantees of their alliance were no more, Loki admitted to himself that any future confrontations between them, despite his own freedom to attack to the full extent of his capabilities, would be almost as dangerous for himself as the inventor, at close range.

As anticipated, the idea that he could not, and should not, do something, made Loki only more interested in finding possibilities. The more doors seemed slammed in his face, the more determined he felt to find his way to the places they led by more and more creative means, but even in hypothetical terms, Tony Stark was too... too...

The phrase ‘evenly matched with me’ crossed the trickster’s mind and his hand jerked back from where his fingers had been in the inventor’s hair.

Tony made a sound in his sleep, slightly petulant even when deeply unconscious, at the absence of the petting.

Pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, Loki took a very deep breath and reminded himself that he was a fool. Any trickster, by nature, was just a very, very well-informed and clever fool, who cheated better than the more honest variety, and thus had a greater tendency to come out on top. Fools of Thor’s caliber believed that they could win the game if they played according to the rules. Tricksters knew better that to assume that the rules meant anything, compared to the importance of other players and how to play them according to their expectations and their natures. Playing fair is for those who have natural advantages that the rules favor. Loki rarely fit into that category, in his life. Especially due to certain... patriarchal influences, and the culturally stagnant realm eternal’s ideas of what a proper prince should be like.

Perhaps that was what made it so easy for the likes of Tony Stark to play alongside him, by Loki’s rules and his own with equal ease: all those ways he’d had to play the games others laid out enough to pass for cordial at first glance, without ever actually committing to them—without getting caught by all those who had wished to merely use him for what they thought they might get out of it...

Too much of this thinking like that, the god knew, would not make his life any easier; however, knowing that about any endeavor had not once been able to stop his mind from chasing knowledge and understanding, in over two thousand years of life, and he doubted this case would be any different. He had to concede that there was not enough before him without more information, more time to consider his new goals and observe his opponent/ally with new eyes, now that some of his priorities might have... ‘shifted’ is the wrong word, Loki mused. There is simply new space made, for weaving in other plans, if they seem feasible.

For not the first, and certainly not the last time, the trickster asked himself what he wanted, and again found that he could not answer, but looking down at the mad inventor on the couch he had... an inkling. Nothing more. Too hesitant, too new and reluctant and full of doubt was the sensation, to be any more than just that: an inkling.

There were few things in the universe Loki hated more than the occasions Thor was proven right. For the damned heroic golden-hearted fool to be correct in assuming Loki’s own sight and self-knowledge in this matter to be lacking was enough a blow to the trickster’s pride to set his teeth on edge and make him exhale a slow, hissing breath through clenched teeth.

So it wasn’t only Tony Stark he needed to observe.

He needed to observe himself, and find out just how deep this... damage ran. This loss of sight. He needed to diagnose it; cause and possible cures alike. That had to take precedent over any potential plans or even theoretical maps of possible future gambits concerning the likes of Tony Stark. First he had to know just how compromised he might actually be, and if it wasn’t too late to... cauterize the
affliction.

Surely, he was not too far gone. Surely escaping unscathed was still an option.

It wasn’t like either party involved in this hedonistic indulgence—merely a fringe benefit of an alliance required for vengeance achieved by one party, and protection of home and hearth by the other—happened to be in love or anything serious.

It was simply... an inopportune degree of infatuation, to an extent. Inconvenient, of course, and potentially very dangerous if allowed to grow unchecked. (He pointedly ignored the whisper at the back of his mind, and just what do you think it’s been doing all this time you’ve been so thoroughly ignoring it that the likes of Thor had to point it out to you before you could even see it?) But Loki was more than adept at applying poisons to himself and others, to wither harmful connections and leave the gardens of his own mind and heart from sprawling beyond his ability to maintain proper control of. It was one of the key advantages of being naturally talented at unpleasantness and bitterness.

It deterred those who had neither the acquired taste necessary to appreciate him, or the patience and understanding to understand the game of it.

The thought, Tony Stark is a bitterness connoisseur and is so good at offending people that he makes crowds fall in love with him even as he scandalizes and appalls his chosen targets, was worrisome, and Loki made note of it with a clinical eye, trying to decipher how much of that thought’s appeal was the affliction of infatuation, and how much was... well, simple fact. It was surprisingly difficult to delineate.

Once exasperated by that particular puzzle, the trickster felt tiredness pull at him more insistently. He desired sleep, suddenly. He needed time with his own dreams—no wandering, not now, he sincerely wouldn’t dare that until at least a bit past dawn—to work through some of the quiet tempest he could feel putting pressure on his temples.

He reached out and lightly touched Tony’s shoulder, before transporting them both to the bedroom: sans armor, sans clothing, sans all but the closeness of fine linen where they settled between the sheets. Tony mumbled a bit at the change in position, and how it caused his body to slump back a bit, where it had formerly rested against the back of the couch, until he made contact with the hard lines of the god settling in behind him, and he relaxed a little, not even seemingly aware of the arm settling about his waist.

Loki breathed him in for a little while, letting the sounds of the mad inventor’s soft, deep breaths lull him into his own slumber.

Tony Stark didn’t actually have many sex dreams, just day to day. Not very vivid or not-nonsensical ones that tended to stick around in his memory, in any case. He liked to attribute it to how much sex he had outside dreams, in his life, and how his subconscious got enough of that to the point it didn’t want to get repetitive, and so generally pulled out all the stops on the crazy and lack-of-sense-making, and occasionally outright questionable physics.

That a norse trickster god in nothing but leather pants and a studded collar was involved this time
around wasn’t even a little odd. Nor was the riding crop he was now trailing under Tony’s jaw. The fact that the inventor was dressed in a full tuxedo standing at the open bar of a formal party on a very Tony Stark scale, and suddenly all the guests weren’t looking his way and the bartender was gone—well, Tony had long ago stopped trying to work out some of the more surreal and jarring narrative-transitions in his dreams. He wasn’t even quite sure when Loki had shown up, or how the riding crop came into play, or even if Loki had strode through the crowd looking like...

Tony glanced down and found himself very distracted by that collar around the god’s slender neck, and the thin leather cord that dangled from the front of it decoratively, down, down, to a few inches above his navel. At the end of the cord was a gold medallion sort of piece, with detailed engraving Tony couldn’t quite make out. It cast a shadow, luring the inventor’s stare down further to appreciate the criminally low waistband of those pants, showing off the lines of Loki’s hipbones and that tantalizing ‘v’ of just...

He had a sudden urge to lick just everything there.

“Enjoying the view, Tony?” the trickster teased.

“Fishing for compliments? I think it’s obvious I am.” He gestured down at himself, unabashedly hard in his pants just from staring, and the promise whispered by the teasing stoke of that leather crop down the column of his throat. “I’m surprised you got in with such an... unconventional take on ‘black-tie’. I don’t even begin to know how you thought this was anything like what they meant, unless it’s some scandalous thing from another world,” Tony teased.

“I didn’t let them bother me. I’m not here for their worship.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “Whose are you here for then?”

“Kneel.”

Okay that... this was... Tony wasn’t sure how to feel about how much Loki’s commanding and shamelessly expectant tone (like he had no doubt in his mind that the inventor would obey) along with an utterly wicked grin that promised the inventor multiple mind-melting orgasms within the hour if he played his cards right, affected him. It’s one thing to sleep with the enemy. It’s a whole other thing to play games like this with him... ones that required trust. “Do I get a safe-word?” he sounded not at all flippant.

Loki appeared annoyed for a moment, but also mildly bemused, until he clearly understood and his eyes widened slightly. “Ah. A stop-phrase. You expect me to push you far enough that you might fight me... but not actually wish to stop me.”

“Well... to be fair, you’re petting me with a riding crop.”

“Your mind offered it, upon my arrival. Interesting,” Loki mused.

Tony felt like cold water had been slashed down his back. He cleared his throat softly. “You’re here.”

Loki appeared annoyed for a moment, but also mildly bemused, until he clearly understood and his eyes widened slightly. “Ah. A stop-phrase. You expect me to push you far enough that you might fight me... but not actually wish to stop me.”

“Your mind offered it, upon my arrival. Interesting,” Loki mused.

Tony felt like cold water had been slashed down his back. He cleared his throat softly. “You’re here.”

The trickster shot him an innocent look.

“My subconscious handing you a riding crop aside—”

“I’m flattered, actually.”

“Not sure you should be. So far, we already have a safe-word and it’s ‘alliance’. It stops you when I
can’t. You want to analyze this, keep that in mind.”

“So what does the whipping implement, being in my hand, suggest?”

“That there’s a reason I’ve told you both where I’ve got an emergency dose of Extremis in the lab, and that it won’t be there anymore mere seconds after you stop Thanos being all sorts of living and breathing,” Tony shot back.

“Ah. You know I may harm you, but only within the parameters of our game, which you trust more than you could ever trust me personally, of course,” Loki mused.

“Why are you here? I’ve known the dream-walking thing was possible, but really now, what-” He stopped when the crop snapped against the middle of his chest, dead-center right over where the arc reactor used to be. The layers of fabric inherent to being in a full tux diffused the sting, but didn’t muffle the sound much: a warning. Tony’s eyes narrowed. “I only asked about the safe-word to be sure you’d be listening and this would still be more of a dance between us both than a one-man show with audience participation and thus only the illusion of give-and-take. That was one of the quickest ways to work out whether this would be a regular dream or a nightmare I’d really hope to avoid with you.”

The irritation in the trickster’s expression faded into something a bit more thoughtful, then shifted fully into a mischievous smirk. “Well, Tony dear, you asked me to wake you creatively. Have you ever been in the middle of a really fantastic dream with some particularly excellent sex involved, only for climax, or close to it but not close enough, to wake you and end it too soon?” Loki purred, leaning in closer. “Now, imagine that it didn’t end.”

The inventor stared, too turned on to quite respond immediately beyond that. This, in fact, totally made it into at least his top ten ranking, more likely top five, ‘most turned on Tony Stark has ever been’ moments. “You’re brilliant and fucked up in the head and it’s so fantastic, you utter bastard,” he said, with feeling, and slowly knelt.

Loki appeared surprised and pleased by the development, to go by both his fiercely thrilled grin and how his already tight leather pants seemed to be getting tighter. “Why thank you.” He hissed a little when the inventor nuzzled at his crotch. “These trousers your imagination provided are very uncomfortably restricting,” he said, a bit strained. He let out a sigh of deep relief when Tony unzipped them and began to peel them down. “Oh yesss.” He arched forward a little, not enough to force so much as to plead silently, as the inventor’s mouth began to slide down his length.

Shooting him a devilishly amused glance, Tony let the god push further, then bobbed down to engulf the rest himself, making Loki groan softly, fingers trailing through the inventor’s hair and gripping it not-unkindly at the back of his head. He didn’t guide, didn’t steer, just watched heatedly, full of desire and approval and letting the mortal worship as he pleased.

“You have such a wonderful mouth,” Loki panted.

Tony hummed approval, enjoying how it made the god shiver a little and grip tighter at his hair. He pulled back slowly, cheeks hollowing until Loki’s cock slipped free with an obscene pop. With an idle lick under the head to sooth the grunt of loss from the trickster, Tony responded, “Did you really think it’d take me long to figure out my own spin on some of your tricks?”

Green eyes blazed at that and Loki licked his lips, tugging the mortal away gently by his hair. “Lean back on your elbows, but stay on your knees,” he demanded.

Tony smirked, bright and cocky, content to play along, because he’d known from the start that this
one was quite possibly the best there was at coming up with wicked games. Loki: god of mischief, lies, chaos, and under all those categories ‘mind-fucks’ could be listed.

The inventor chuckled a little.

“What’s funny?”

“You’re a mind-fuck more literally than usual, is all.”

The trickster gave an amused snort at that. “Undress.”

Without much thought, Tony’s clothes vanished. He’d allied himself with a dream-walker, and as such he’d worked on some lucid dreaming techniques, off and on. Consciously removing his clothing while unconscious had been one of the first things he’d felt a need to learn, because Pepper had been in his dreams a lot while they were together, and it was dreams, and there was Pepper, clothes should go away. Perfectly reasonable and valid logic. He smirked a bit to notice the riding crop gone too, and Loki seemingly unaware of it, too absorbed in taking in the view with open appreciation. “Mood change?” he asked idly, noting something more than lust in that stare, and a different sort of tension in the trickster’s body.

“Only a little,” Loki said, the tension melting away as he stepped closer, his feet coming to rest on either side of Tony’s waist for only a moment before the god knelt over him, straddling him, leaning in very close, his arms pressing along the outside of Tony’s as he leaned some of his weight on his hands. “I merely think you are already a mage, in your ways.”

Genuinely caught off-guard a bit by that flattery, the inventor felt himself arching up for more contact, and felt a shiver roll down his body a the feel of Loki’s length very deliberately sliding alongside his own between them. His breath caught when the trickster ground their hips together. “All ambition and thirst for knowledge?”

“Thirst for understanding. You seek, and you find, and you never tire of the endlessness, of how much there is to learn and how much of it there is to carry, especially when what you really desire from understanding is to know things so completely that the knowledge is a part of your very self. You cannot imagine a world without it any longer, once it’s yours,” Loki extrapolated further. “Your knowledge of the universe, your understanding of its forces, these shape you, and in turn you are perfectly crafted by yourself and your own mind to bend those forces you understand to your will, and make them work for you like an extension of yourself. That’s mage-craft, Tony Stark, and you have it. You exemplify it.” The trickster settled over him comfortably, close and languid, leaving no gaps between their bodies, as he stared into the mortal’s big dark eyes. “I knew this, of course, but there is a difference between knowing and seeing. My apologies.”

Tony stared up at him, wary and hungry and turned on and almost embarrassed because that was fucking poetry describing him. Loki describing Tony Stark’s passions into poetry, effortless because he might as well have been describing himself, which it was that too. Poetry for the both of them, and Tony felt something disconcertingly like fucking butterflies or some bullshit in the region of his stomach and if he tried to respond verbally he’d say some really dangerous, terrible things, so instead he leaned up desperately to catch the lie-smith’s mouth, as though trying to chase the taste of those words, by stealing any traces of them that might be lingering on that silver tongue. Loki was already loose as a relaxed feline atop him, but tucked his arms in tighter, and his thighs on either side of the inventor’s body, at the heat and ravenous want of Tony’s mouth seeking to devour his own.

Giving himself over to it completely, letting it clear his mind of all thoughts save heat and closeness and slippery, pleasant and fricative things, Loki groaned so low it was more felt that heard and rolled his hips up, reaching back with one hand, which was all the warning the inventor got before he was
being sheathed to the hilt and whether magic or dreamland convenience, holy fuck yes. Loki was so ready, and tight and talented at making every roll of his hips impossibly good, and his inner muscles seemed to have a ridiculous amount of fine control, to the point Tony was half-sure he must be imagining it.

And Loki was still kissing the inventor like it was better than air could ever dream of being, like he’d genuinely lost track of the world outside the dueling of their tongues and fucking himself on the inventor’s cock as Tony tried not to shatter into a thousand satisfied, horrified and doomed little pieces. When the inventor tried to move, his hands itching to touch, and feel the ripple of muscle he could see with every roll of Loki’s hips, the trickster’s hands gripped both of his forearms, holding him pinned down hard.

Tony emitted a noise far too much like a whine, to his own ears, at the restraint, followed by a growl as he rocked his hips up hard to meet Loki’s next down-stroke and made the mad god gasp raggedly, breaking the kiss for a moment as his rhythm was thrown off, so of course Tony did it again. And again, and again, making the god moan beautifully each time, their lips still brushing so Tony could taste each breath and every sound. “God, yeah, you’re so good, Loki, so good, fucking perfect, holy god.”

“Unholy,” Loki corrected, grinning crooked and breathless, eyes half-lidded. “Harder, Tony, please,” he hissed, speeding up the pace. “So close, I want to taste you while you come.” He caught the inventor’s mouth again, only partially muffling helpless noises and rough moans as Tony obligingly held nothing back. It wasn’t much longer before the god came with a harsh, shuddering cry, and Tony was poised to fall over the edge with him, but it was too intense, too sharp, too-

Don’t wake up don’t wake-

Oh FFF-

“FFFFUCK!?” Tony gasped, waking as he helplessly thrust in an echo of what he’d just been doing in a dream, except there was a hand around his cock this time, caught between his belly and the sheets, and Loki was pounding into him hard and fast and how hadn’t he woken up when all that glorious lube was applied and the god pushed into him with that even more glorious cock?! “Loki you fucking—” was all he managed before he came, shuddering hard through it. The logistics of it, when the haze cleared a little as the trickster stroked his sides soothingly and slowed a bit, made Tony even dizzier than he already was from the sudden waking and the incredible orgasm and just––Loki in the dream had just come, and—yes, there’s that edge of ‘just came and still sensitive, but fuck if I’m going to stop fucking you long enough for that to stop’ to the breathy sounds Loki was still making—but how had he—when—just—how-

Tony’s dazed thoughts were thrown off when the brief lull Loki had allowed them, in the wake of the inventor’s climax, was cast aside in favor of more, and harder, and Tony choked and made a pained sound. Too much too sensitive need- The sound he made at the crackling flare of Loki’s magic along his skin was part-sob, part-curse, and part-euphoria. Words and coherency were not forthcoming after that, by a long shot, and Tony was fine with it. Very fine. Making-helpless-noises-of-aggressive-rapture-while-Loki’s-cock-dragged-over-his-prostate-like-a-bow-along-violin-strings-producing-a-masterpiece fine, which, actually, was way more than just fine.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” Loki panted in his ear. “Like you desire nothing more, when that would be such an utter lie, we both know. It’s delicious, being able to do this to you, unmake you for a little while and see you just as brilliant and beautiful even when you can’t think, and can only writhe and take what I give you.”

That shouldn’t be so hot, Tony tried to tell himself. Add it to the list of things I find ridiculously hot
Despite their inappropriateness because oh fuck yes, this, the other part of his mind, far louder and more used to getting his way, responded. Without input from either party, Tony’s mouth rasped out, “And look at you so focused on me and unmade yourself that you shatter same as me, losing track of everything because of how good this is.” Then he cried out as Loki’s fingers wrapped around his cock again, squeezing tight enough to almost hurt—but only almost—and stroking slowly even as the trickster’s hips moved faster, thrusting deeper.

“Yesss.” Loki nipped at his neck sharply and hissed, “You are more than enough to unmake me.”

And that—oh fuck—that just shattered him. Tony came so hard he saw stars, fireworks, and lost all control of his body, going limp even as he heard and felt Loki come shortly after, hissing with it as they both rode out their pleasure, stopping only once it stung.

Then they lay there, Loki barely moving enough to pull out and settle against Tony’s side instead of sprawling on his back and crushing the mortal under his weight. It was several long moments of heavy breathing before he mustered enough presence of mind to also apply the usual clean-up.

Tony gave a broken groan, soft and pleasantly ruined, into the sheets. “Fuck, you’re good.”

Loki gave a muffled, amused-sounding noise in response, but didn’t move.

“Time, J’rvis?”

“Eight thirty, sir.”

Tony swore.

“I had a feeling you’d need time to recover,” Loki teased, still not lifting his face from the pillow, but Tony still got the gist.

The inventor considered. “Wake us in an hour.”

“Of course, sirs,” the AI chimed.

Tony tugged at Loki’s pillow, which was the only one left on the bed apparently, earning a bit of a growl until he huffed and just pressed closer, burying his face in Loki’s hair and settling against him, and incidentally sharing the pillow. He fell into dreamless sleep not long after, which would’ve been disappointing only if he hadn’t needed it so badly.

There was a bleary moment, just before he sunk back into unconsciousness, wherein he grinned silently to himself upon realizing Loki had cured his hangover before waking him. Excellent.

That would make it much easier and more enjoyable when he made the trickster god scream his name in exactly one hour.
Well, So Much for Protection Via Omission; That Clearly Failed

Two weeks, two days...

Three days after the Dreamland Poetry Incident (as the mad inventor had dubbed it in his own mind after the first day of trying not to think about it on an hourly basis) and Tony was starting to just get annoyed with himself.

It was nothing. A bit of the more usual mind-fuckery games they both tended to tread fine lines with (hard not to, with the deadline of renewed enmity getting steadily closer, and each of them increasingly uneasy with just how far the other had gotten into his head by now) while more unusually getting mind-fucked in a very literal sense by the dream-walking god of lies and mischief. So really. Nothing. Flattery. Really, really good flattery, from a bastard called Silver-tongue, for fuck’s sake.

That was Tony’s opinion and he was sticking to it.

No matter how much he was all too aware of how disappointing it was, compared to the alternative. Because the alternative was pretty much ludicrous. Loki only wooed and flirted and flattered when he was being manipulative. Except... there wasn’t a leverage-point there. Not any that Tony was going to acknowledge, and—to judge by how Loki hadn’t pressed further, hadn’t gone off like that again, and had in fact gotten a bit quieter lately—the trickster was most likely unaware of it; the idea that Loki would ignore such a thing, despite knowing it existed, was about as absurd as the idea of Tony wanting something and not finding a way to get it.

The inventor winced at that thought. Bad example. Bad subconscious. Stop that.

So no new poetry. As all parties focused on their own parts of the greater machinations for the upcoming war, things were quiet and fiercely focused for a while, even on earth. Tony had been working on armor capable of some prolonged space-travel. It required a few ‘drone’ units that would detach in favor of combat capabilities and maneuverability once at a destination, and those units might or might not be heavily altered versions of engines and propulsion systems from Titan that Tony had surreptitiously perused and persuaded Loki to steal some blueprints of while he was already deep into their systems building new programs and functions anyway. Between those plans, knowledge he’d gotten from studying Mar-Vell’s personal ship, and occasional critiques from Loki, the end result was a combination of some of Tony Stark’s greatest loves: features no one else on earth had or had even dreamed possible yet, methods of transport capable of moving so fast it shouldn’t be possible, and the Iron Man armor. It was a work of goddamned art, and meticulously refining every inch of it became, as so often happened, a Tony Stark obsession.

The long-distance-travel portions consisted of three near-identical sections which would cocoon the armor proper, but upon separating, each drone folded up tidily into a compact stealth-bomber sort of shape, which JARVIS could control. They could stay out of harm’s way, find new and hard-for-a-human-shaped-thing-to-reach places to sabotage or access new parts of a ship’s systems to hack into, or they could wreak bloody havoc like gleaming metal sharks. They were speed demons, each one of them, in their own right, with as much mass as some of the larger suits of armor Tony had made and surprisingly flexible/adaptable. They moved fluidly, could even bend and writhe into contortions not wholly unlike those of sting-rays, especially with how they could hover in the air as though swimming through water, using the same technology that allowed Tony’s suits to break apart into pieces, rush through the air and land in precisely the right position to join with other pieces to re-form
into a whole.

Once expanded a bit and engulfing the armor Tony had designed to work along with them, they streamlined into a single torpedo-like shape, interlocking, unfolding their life-support interior sides (their dorsal sides having more offensive tools under their surfaces) to provide whatever repairs, life-support functions, and other useful protocols Tony might need in just over two weeks, while he’d be traveling faster than light between the remains of Thanos’ fleet, and the earth.

Just in case the ‘steal an escape pod’ plan didn’t work out, it was good to have a back-up plan, after all. Also bodyguards like the drones to keep him covered while he was doing things like hacking into alien computer systems and needed more Tony Stark than Iron Man to do it, which meant being a little less indestructible and a lot more distracted. The usual. Loki had acknowledged both advantages with approval, even from the earliest design stages.

Loki was... a bit quiet, lately. He spent most of his time in the lab, whether Tony was there or not, often cross-legged atop the work-table he’d months ago claimed as his own (thus had it become scarred with elegantly carved or burnt-in seals and runes and inexplicable geometric webs interconnecting all of the above) and doing... things. Inconspicuous things (at first-glance) usually. Sometimes it was casual, with him just watching Tony work silently, except for occasional questions or snarky criticism. Other times it was rather stranger, with the trickster, eyes aglow with power that looked like flame coming off of burning copper salts, as he staring unseeingly into the middle-distance. Those times, Tony knew Loki was weaving complex spells, but they were subtle despite how much impressive power they clearly used, and far-reaching enough even JARVIS couldn’t see what was at the other ends of the strings Loki was pulling. When asked about it the day after the dream-walking incident, the trickster had responded that he was communicating with distant persons. Sometimes Asgard. Often not. The days following that, he would only smirk wanly and say not to worry about it.

After getting that answer two days in a row, Tony finally shot him a glare and decided to put his foot down. “I’m worrying regardless because I’m not just an audience here, if you’ll recall.”

“Aren’t you? As much as I am yours,” Loki mused, light and thoughtful.

“We’re in the same show, right now. That’s the deal. Mutual audience we’re moving as we will, and all. So what are you doing?”

“Nothing to do with our show,” the trickster murmured.

Tony stilled at that. The idea that the mad god was cooking up new plans, over new or unknown other fires wasn’t itself surprising; the fact he was doing it here, almost mocking Tony and JARVIS’ inability to keep track of his doings, which inherently gave them a chance to improve and start learning how to do so, was the more disconcerting part. It was a blatant challenge. “Why here?”

“This is currently the most secure location for me to do this. I have shaped this particular spot over months of concentrated effort, and it now fits myself and my powers like a well-fitted, well-broken-in glove,” Loki explained slowly, his focus barely there. Tony could see a nearby display indicating a series of energy spikes a mile or so away, matching smaller ones dripping from the trickster’s fingertips and into the table; however, whatever it was that such magic was actually affecting, JARVIS still couldn’t determine. The larger energy spikes didn’t fizzle out: they sunk into the earth, almost as though burrowing into it. Then suddenly there were many more of them: twenty-one different points all equidistant from Avengers tower, surrounding it.

Tony knew better than to think them harmless, but he didn’t comment.
Loki continued, “The degree of concentration required for what I am doing also leaves me vulnerable physically. I require stillness. The wards I have placed around this tower are powerful enough that I may rest easy, especially knowing what havoc may be wrought by the likes of my ally and his Avengers, upon any threat that might still breach them.” He half-smirked for a moment, and his hands lifted, fingers splayed wide as they could go, as he let his palms hover a few inches above the work table on either side of himself. A rattling hum buzzed down through it, through the floor, and all subsequent floors between the two liars and the earth far below them.

JARVIS registered a few seismic activity anomalies not a minute later—far from New York, but one after another: clearly a wave of something rippling outward from whatever Loki had just done. It wasn’t enough to cause any earthquakes—maybe a negligible tremor as far out as California, but that might be coincidence, given how common such things really were out there—or any catastrophic events on the surface, but the detected anomalies were very deep underground, each one deeper than the last. Tony didn’t trust that in the least.

“Why are you fucking with the earth’s crust?” Tony asked lightly.

“I am not harming any—” the trickster cut off, shuddering slightly, eyes narrowed. He offered a faint grimace, like something had deeply annoyed him. It was a look of annoyance that usually led to snarled death threats at the least, and actual lashing out at worst; although this time Loki schooled it back into calmness quite quickly. “A greater question, perhaps, might be the locations I just found which knew to expect the likes of that. What must they imagine the likes of myself to be looking for? There should be nothing like those barriers lacking the tell-tale structure of Odin’s work, let alone such mobile and variable ones. Oh, where are you?”

“Loki?”

“I will let you know what I find of them. They are not my concern alone beyond their knowledge of how to block certain sorts of mage-craft, and the fact their infrastructure may not be wholly Midgardian in origin,” the god assured, the glow leaving his eyes for a moment so that he could meet Tony’s gaze and hold it. “Though they might be of interest to us both, my dear ally.”

“What sort of mage-craft?” the inventor asked lightly.

Loki frowned, not liking that question. “The sort meant to detect and weaken barriers containing particularly powerful beings. I used a very low pulse, which travels further with less loss of cohesiveness, but having more interference—more qualifying structures struck between myself and my target—weakened it sooner than anticipated and the inexplicably non-stationary nature of them threw up interference, making feedback far less precise for more distant objects.”

Tony considered that. “You’re looking for someone.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I do not need tell you that, but I may have accidentally discovered why it is that I’ve previously had such trouble locating the Beyonder,” Loki mused. “They are containing him far better than they have any right to, and I’m personally quite curious where they got such technology. They may have him locked in a prison that resides in too many places at once, which for a Beyonder is ideal. It would keep him further disconnected and disoriented, unable to get a lock on which universe he’s landed in, or any other key details.”

“Who has that sort of tech?” Tony asked.
“Svartalfheim,” he said slowly. “Asgard and Nornheim, though I would have recognized it if it had been Aesir in style which it was not; Olympians, though I’m familiar with their works too and this was not among them; and... Thanos.”

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“That’s not good.”
“No, it is not.”

“Svartalfheim was where you engineered your whole escape from imprisonment...”

“There is little left of it to speak of,” Loki said.

“So that would rule them out?”

“Their technology outlasted their people more than once before.”

“Ah,” Tony stepped closer. “That’s a problem.”

“It usually is; I’m sure you’ve given that problem a great deal of consideration,” the trickster mused, glancing down at where the arc reactor used to be pointedly.

“So it’s either something bartered or stolen or looted from them, or it’s Thanos.”

“The only other option would suggest more than one Beyonder on earth, entrapping one of his fellows for the sake of revenge, but having made my case to prevent them inconveniently wiping out this whole planet before I’m finished with my plans for it, I ascertained that all other Beyonders are currently present and accounted for, wherever they are,” Loki added.

“No possible inconvenient offspring born on earth anytime in the past century or two?” Tony prompted, casting a wide net.

The trickster hummed. “A good question, but no. They would have been taken from earth by their kin not long after birth. They are... innately aware of one another’s existences on a level I find personally disconcerting to contemplate. They cannot always locate one another without effort, especially at a distance and if they are not close to one another personally, but enough that hiding one of them for so long as the captured one on Earth has been hidden is an impressive feat indeed.”

A few things clicked rapidly together in Tony’s head. “The Hand was stealing artifacts a while back that made Doc Strange think someone was working on bringing someone or something to earth ‘from Beyond’ which set you off on the Beyonder thought-tangent in the first place. You were keeping track of the Hand’s activities too, which is how you ran into that Doom-bot, but Doom had only been working with the Hand about a month by that point.”

“He too was curious as to what sort of things they were stealing, for what purposes,” Loki added. “He paid double what their previous employer had, to have them work with him to steal something that their previous employer had been trying to transport to one of their compounds. Where they were taking it, I did not have a chance to find out before it the Hand and Doom interrupted and destroyed too much of the evidence. There was far more than one doom-bot and I had to focus on taking down as many as possible without registering any alarm to the ones closest to the artifacts being stolen, lest they grab them and escape with them. It was a more delicate endeavor than it might have seemed from the footage.”

“What were they again?”
“Pieces of failed attempts to create something. Sloppy, haphazard, dangerous shards chock full of potential energy and power only a little different from the core pieces of most Hydra machinery while they did wield the tesseract.”

Tony’s blood ran cold. “Shit. I forgot about that. I thought, after the swarm—”

“As intriguing as some of the more improbable effects in the early processing stages can be, I do think they know there is more to be had from completing the process—and I believe they know precisely what they’re after.”

“They know about the tesseract, and want to make their own entirely. Despite how obvious it is that one of those on this planet is a bad idea and makes us bait for scavengers from elsewhere in the galaxy. No offense.”

“None taken. Most powerful criminals and villains of this world did not see the Chitauri forces up close as you did. The danger is not as real to them.”

“I hate it when brilliant enemies do stupid self-destructive things that endanger my entire planet. Promise to never disappoint me this way, darling, please?” He paused. “Not again, anyway?”

In his driest tones, the trickster replied, “I will do my level best.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Nor do I. It would be catastrophic for any and all of my plans for such a thing to reappear on earth.”

His eyes narrowed suddenly, staring hard into the middle distance. “No,” he whispered suddenly. “No, it couldn’t possibly…” He pressed two fingers against his own lips for a moment, then swore.

“Loki, talk to me.”

“Consider the possibility that it was not only I and the Chitauri who came to earth via the tesseract a few years ago.”

Tony didn’t like considering that at all. “The Other?”

“No, Thanos could not spare one of his highest ranking generals, even in the wake of such a catastrophic and humiliating defeat of most of the Other’s forces,” Loki murmured. “It would have to be someone far subtler, more intelligent, and familiar with staying unnoticed even in environments she might otherwise starkly stand out…”

“You have someone in mind.”

“I do.” Loki swallowed tightly. “She is called Gamora. She is Thanos’ personal assassin and spy. He raised her from infancy, and she is quite powerful.”

“You met her a few times.”

“I know her very well,” the trickster admitted. “She was one of few tolerable people in that accursed place, and seemed sharper and less unquestioningly loyal than she quite let on to those above her in rank, but if she is here, and aiding in any such construction as the sort containing the Beyonder... I know not what to think of her actions. By rights, as a loyal subject, she should have hunted me long before now. Why this instead?”

“Maybe for herself?”
Loki shook his head slowly. “I know not how creating another cosmic cube might aid her toward that end. It would allow her to bring his fleet here, but it’s taken her so long already that she must have some idea that he is already on his way by now... Though I can’t fathom why all this would have taken her so very long.” At Tony’s uncertain look, he added absently, “Also, before you concern yourself with it: she has no desire to rule over people; she is a warrior akin to Sif in that regard. Why, then, would she aid in the capture and containment of a Beyonder?”

“Well, throw loyalty out of the equation, then. Maybe she wanted to use the cube to destroy Thanos?”

The trickster considered. “Ah... I begin to understand. I had presumed he would wipe her memories before she got any chance to actually betray him.” His eyes began to glow again, flame falling from his fingertips again. “I think you’re right, but I also think that she was betrayed by those who had other plans here on earth. Otherwise, there would be another cosmic cube in this world again already, but there notably is not. Gamora is not so inefficient, but mortals working with second-hand information and a reluctant Beyonder? That’s quite different.”

“What are you doing?”

“Another test. The mobile prison was not the only anomaly I found. Another was smaller, closer. Almost negligible, for while powerful, it was not too powerful by the standards of earth...” He tilted his head back and fell silent.

Tony watched him closely, unsure what to think of this development. He watched the same results as before appear from JARVIS’ scans, no new data, most of the data seemingly nonsensical: connected only by how close strange events happened to one another chronologically. What caused those effects to appear in the first place, how they connected to each other, remained a mystery that threatened to give the inventor a headache, just trying to think about.

“There,” Loki hissed.

“Don’t vanish,” Tony snapped instantly. “Where is she? How?”

“Underground over a mile, somewhere otherwise not full of much human activity of recent,” Loki said slowly. “I think... I think she has been left there to die.” His voice took on shades of unexpectedly shaken rage. He swore in a language the inventor had never heard before and vanished with a sound like a small thunderclap.

The inventor was left blinking a bit.

Then, slowly, he realized how he might feel if someone, anyone, found news that Yinsen had secretly been alive somewhere in the world.

He cringed, and his heart ached. “JARVIS, where’s Bruce?”

“He’s having lunch with the others, sir.”

Heading for the elevator, Tony said, “Tell him to expect a medical emergency soon.” He stepped in before the doors were fully open, and was grateful JARVIS sensed his urgency enough that the elevator doors began to shut the instant he was inside.

He was halfway to the main Avengers rooms before Bruce’s voice over the intercom started berating him with questions. He cut off most of them, “I’m expecting delivery of an extraterrestrial torture victim, possibly near death, within the hour.”

A hesitant pause followed. It was long enough for the elevator to reach its destination and Tony to
escape, heading right for the kitchen.

The others were all staring at him with concern.

“Loki found someone unexpected. If she’s still alive, I think it’s best we try to keep her that way once she’s here,” he said simply.

“Who?” Thor demanded.

“Gamora ring any bells?” the inventor inquired.

“She is one of Thanos’,,” the thunder god said slowly.

“She was also around Loki before his return to the nine realms, and they bickered a lot, or something,” Tony responded, his tone carefully calm. He looked at Thor at first, but then held Natasha’s gaze the whole time as he continued, “He seemed really pissed off at the idea someone from earth seems to have locked her away in a dungeon somewhere and abandoned her there to die. She might have been trying to sabotage Thanos, but gotten betrayed. Or she might have been trying to bring him here faster or make a present for him as a genocide-warming gift when he arrived on earth. I don’t know. But she’s... I’m guessing she was the only one from Thanos’ region of space Loki doesn’t deeply, deeply hate with every fiber of his being, and that’s probably important to consider.”

The red-haired spy looked thoughtful, calculative, and wary, but nodded.

Bruce looked uneasy, but concerned as he rose to his feet. “What sort of alien are we dealing with?”

He shot Thor a pointed look.

“She is not Aesir,” the thunderer said firmly. “She is thought to be a Zen Whoberi, from an alternate future. She has been greatly enhanced by Thanos, by cybernetic and other means, to be his personal assassin. He skin and hair are green in coloration, and much of her internal anatomy, while once roughly analogous to mammalian earth creatures, most likely closer resembles those possessed by Titans who have been injured in battle, and had to have various things replaced. She self-repairs very quickly, according to rumor, all of her does, and she is very difficult to destroy. No matter how injured she may seem, do not underestimate her. She may require little more than temperature regulation, organic nutrients, and hydration, just as any Aesir.”

“Let’s go, then.” Bruce said, and gestured for Tony to follow him as he left, exuding competence and cool, manic calm as he only ever did when someone would be in need of healing, and he was concerned but determined to be professional. And he always was, and always did right by them.

The inventor couldn’t say how much he’d appreciated that, over the past three years he’d known the biochemist.

Hopefully it would be enough this time, too.

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Loki arrived some distance from the prison itself, a sweeping dark green cloud of smoke rolling out from him as soon as he did, followed by frost creeping along every surface after it: magic and ice both seeking out wards and security measures and silently destroying every last one.
There weren’t many, in this chamber: an abandoned laboratory. It smelled of over a year, perhaps two, of disuse. The trickster looked around slowly, summoning a torch of green flame, to better make out the details.

The lab was not in the greatest condition. The whole chamber seemed scorched. In fact, as Loki looked at the walls more closely... those scorch-marks were shaped like human shadows. Several of them. Nothing electronic had survived the heat. Suspicions hissed in Loki’s ear, and he gave them serious consideration.

_This is where it began_, he thought, turning, breaking down the remains of a solid door (obviously replaced after the fire) and striding into the hall beyond it. It had once led to an industrial elevator, but the elevator car was long gone. Something, however, hummed with power barely tangible even to the likes of Loki, from the bottom of the elevator shaft. No active power lines from the former lab still went down there, which led the trickster to wonder.

He changed shape, into a whole flock of sharp-eyed ravens, and flew down, down into the dark.

It did not stay dark for long. A faint blue light bled in, humming with something unfamiliar and yet familiar. The ravens followed it out of the elevator shaft to a small landing, where Loki regained his natural shape. The landing was lobby-ish, leading to a tall doorway into a larger chamber: a natural cavern, cleared out by human engineers to make a large enough space to store something vast.

Part of its ceiling had caved in, just left of center, dropping boulders...

No. That wasn’t it.

A chunk of the rock ceiling, and some of the crater around the pile of stone, had been _used_, repurposed by means Loki could not discern. There were no small stones, but sections looked like smaller ones had come together to form something heavier and more immobile. Around the resulting dome of stone was the source of the glow: a thick energy shield, enforced by wards carved around it, at first glance. The simple shield spell was one that should have fizzled out some time ago. Over a year ago, if Loki’s increasingly furious estimates were accurate, as he wished he didn’t think they were. The barrier was powerful, but should not by its nature have lasted so very long. Circling it slowly, Loki found the cause, and all the confirmation he felt need for.

Makluan technology between basic magic and a stolen arc reactor: manipulating the energy produced by the arc reactor into a form the shield could feed off of. Loki wondered when they managed to take it. Its shape, to the trickster’s memory, resembled the one Tony had worn during the battle of New York.

He distantly remembered hearing mention that Tony had thrown one into the sea. Barton had been making fun of him a little, something about a ‘Titanic’ boat or something. Loki had only been half-listening.

The reactor was inside the barrier, safely out of the way of most meddling.

Something in the stones shifted, and the barrier shifted with it: expanded a little, then forcefully contracted, until it met the stone everywhere save a safe patch where the reactor was, compressing it further.

“ENOUGH!” Loki snarled, and lashed out with a flash of green energy, burning up the wards with enough heat to leave those sections of stone looking momentarily molten in his wake. Then he reached out and rested both hands on the shield barrier, hissing as his magic crackled through it, loosening the shoddy construction of such casual and amateur spell-work, until it shattered into
nothing.

The stones did not move again, and for a moment, the trickster despaired. Then he rested his hands on them more gently than he had the barrier, and closed his eyes, concentrating on every crack, crevice and gap, slowly pulling the stone apart. His eyes remained shut even as the boulder under his touch lifted, slipping up and away from him, until every single rock was in the air, seeming to orbit not Loki, but a single piece of the puzzle not made of stone, an who now lay face-down in a heap on the floor.

When the trickster’s eyes snapped open and he saw her, the stones fell with a cacophonous series of sounds, and it was only with an effort that he kept enough control for none of them to block the exit behind him. “Gamora,” he said softly, and stepped toward her.

Her armor had not remained fully intact. Some of its plates pierced her, where stone had forced it to break and then pushed further, on occasions she must have struggled. She was covered in old, dry blood and looked far too thin, too drained of life, breathing shallowly. Her long green hair was a tangled, matted mess obscuring her face. “I’ll kill you,” she hissed.

“Gamora, you’re free of the stone,” he said gently.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know why you’re stupid enough to let me out.”

“The same reason, I suspect, that you were foolish enough to let me show you what the Other had really been up to over the years, which you’d never known about,” Loki said, stepping closer still, putting himself within her reach.

Predictably, she lashed out, and might have taken him down with the sweep of her legs had the trickster not been prepared for it, and simply stood firm, knowing her too weak to move him, just now, braced as he was.

She glared up at him in momentary panic, then recognition. “You.”

“Me.”

“Y-you!” She growled, pushing herself further upright even as her arms shook. One of her legs appeared broken, and the remains of armor around her arms suggested they had been, a few times, in past.

Slowly, Loki knelt in front of her, his expression carefully masked. He summoned a small canteen with enough water to prevent her sickening herself if she drank all of it at once, and twisted off the cap. “Me.” He held it to her lips.

She jerked back for a moment, then hesitantly, reluctantly accepted, and let herself drink. When she started to shake harder, and Loki gripped her shoulder to keep her upright, she coughed, but didn’t struggle. Her eyes, green-gold and wary, met his through a haze of pain. “Why are you even here?”

“I could ask the same of you, but I suspect that I understand enough already, to get the general gist.” He looked slowly around the large chamber. “I am mostly surprised that you are even remotely conscious, right now.”

“Never lasts long, but I can...wake up for minutes at a time.” She slumped a bit, one arm curling around her lower abdomen as she hissed. “Until the blood loss gets too bad again.”

“Let me see.”
She glared at him.

“If I meant you harm, I could have removed far less stone, and still had means to make you talk,” Loki drawled, matter-of-fact and a little exasperated. “Can you roll onto your back?”

With a huff, she shook her head. “You want a show, start there,” she growled.

Loki stood again, stepped around to her back and took in a sharp breath. Most of her armor along her back had been crushed, dragged along her skin sharp edges and all, and that last contraction of stone must have pushed some of it down afresh, to judge by the blood leaking from a gap in it at her lower back.

“If you move that massacred shoulder-piece from my upper back, I guarantee you’ll see a few inches of my spine, the bone a bit scratched,” she commented cheerfully. “Isn’t that -” She coughed, and it sounded of both wet and dry blood. “-fun?”

“Most of this should be removed.”

“Down, boy,” Gamora rasped, her attempt at humor just a little too hysterical.

“I would take you a place you might heal,” Loki said. “If you will let me.”

“Why?” she snarled. “It’s not like we’re fucking friends, trickster.”

“Consider it a favor returned.”

“Do you have any idea how much shit I got into for that fight with the Other?” she snapped. “Do you even know what it did to me to learn all about what your showed me he’d done—and Thanos had fucking done—to me, when they’d been making me their weapon?”

“I can make an inspired guess,” Loki responded, “but it would be inadequate, I’m quite aware.”

She slumped slowly, though every movement clearly pained her, to rest her face between both of her forearms on the ground. She inhaled sharply, then let it out, her jaw clenched as even that brought more discomfort, but not as much as an actual sob would have, which she was content to have avoided.

“You know what was done to me by the Other,” the trickster said slowly. “You even have some idea of the things he and Thanos dragged out of my mind, the pains they had me relive, along with the very worst acts I’ve committed and just how much I enjoyed them at the time, in their efforts to twist me into loyalty out of fear. I do not regret showing you the monstrousness of the madman who raised you. Breaking your disillusionment, destroying your complete trust and loyalty to him through doubt and rage and horror, was the only positive experience I had during my time there.” He reached out and rested a hand on a piece of her armor, light as he could, just letting his fingers gently grip it.

“And you did not tell them I had any part in it. You could have. Furthermore you defended me, a complete stranger to you, and spoke out against what they had done where no one else there would have even thought to do so.”

She tried and failed to lift her head, and made a frustrated sound as a result. “You’re a sick, horrible creature—but you were already—I couldn’t bring them down on you again. Not when you were still... not when I’d just seen what they-” She swallowed tightly. “Pull out that metal you’re fondling, will you? It’s forced apart two broken ribs and dislocated another, and is generally a real bitch every time I breathe too deep.”

“You will be subject to a lot of blood loss, if I remove all of these.”
“Where you’re taking me, are there other people?”

“Yes.”

She gave a small, barely-perceptible nod. “I’ve seen you worse, but I... don’t need anyone else seeing me this bad. You’d better magic up some clothes before you take me anywhere, though, or I’ll slit your throat first chance I get, Loki.”

Loki murmured a spell to numb the pain as much as he could, but knew it couldn’t help all of it. He then traced the lines of the metal in his head to find the most efficient angle, and pulled it up and away with an unpleasant tearing sound.

Gamora didn’t scream, but her whole body jerked and she bit one forearm hard enough that her teeth almost met bone. She took a deep breath, which sounded a bit too wet with blood, feeling her healing factor, far too sluggish after so much time without food or water, begin slowly knitting her tissues together again. “The rest,” she groaned.

Slowly, Loki obliged, hands removing all armor he could reach where it had been crushed against her, warped and battered until it made her bleed. He was aware of her sitting up far enough to remove the armor on her front and down each arm herself, fast and clumsy, until she was swaying, barely aware. He rolled her over onto a hastily-summoned cloth, and summoned also a lightweight linen tunic about her exposed upper body before she could even muster energy to glare at him. By the time the last bits of shattered metal armor was removed with another bit of spell-work, she’d fallen unconscious. Loki summoned a light linen skirt for her as well, wrapped her in the larger cloth very loosely, and picked her up, heedless of how much of hers blood was on his hands, arms, and now the rest of his armor.

He had found the place that the Ten Rings had first sunk their claws into AIM, and he almost regretted that he wouldn’t be able to bring it to Tony’s attention yet. Not when he now knew precisely who and what his plans after the war would have to focus upon, to achieve many of his ends.

As an after-thought, he waved a hand and brought the arc-reactor along with him, up one of his sleeves with numerous other little, shiny, powerful things that might prove potentially useful to him one day.

Then he vanished himself and Gamora from the place.

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Bruce didn’t even jump when Loki appeared, in full armor and covered in blood that wasn’t the usual human-red. Tony did, a bit, but calmed quickly, even as something in Loki’s expression turned a bit shocked and bemused. “You’re... well-prepared.”

“How...how could you possibly-” Loki almost whispered, his brow furrowed.

“I got out of the caves alone, but that wasn’t the original plan,” Tony said. “You don’t hate her. I added a few things up.”
“She’s alive?” Bruce asked calmly, snapping the trickster out of his daze.

“Yes, but she needs life-support. I suspect she’s had nothing more than what water I gave her before she passed out, for sustenance, in at least a year.”

“Jesus,” Tony muttered.

“Thor mentioned something about nutrients and hydration being key, but he didn’t suggest she might be bleeding really profusely,” Bruce said. “Tony, move the IV drips to the surgical table. Loki, bring the patient. Are stitches a good idea or a bad one?”

“Pressure, or adhesive-based methods for wound closing will interfere less with her recuperative powers,” the trickster said, as he obeyed the doctor’s orders without question. “She was under a few tons of stone, held in place by an energy field, which compressed the stone around her further any time she struggled. Metal armor did not aid matters.”

“You removed the metal?” Bruce asked.

“At her request, yes.”

“That’s not healthy. You could have-“

“I’ve treated many injured warriors in my time, Dr. Banner. I am not a healer by profession, but I’ve learned from them, and from necessity throughout my very long life,” Loki snapped curtly. “I know what I do.”

“Fair,” the doctor admitted, reluctantly. “She passed out from the blood loss?”

“Yes.”

“With her current blood pressure, the amount of blood she’s lost, and all of the rest, are these solutions safe to apply to her intravenously?” Bruce asked, pulling up a tablet with information Tony had insisted the trickster would understand sufficiently to answer the question.

Loki looked over the information closely, pressed two fingers to the pulse at Gamora’s neck and, a little disconcertingly, licked a bit of her blood off of one hand, seeming to find out something from the flavor of it that made him frown slightly. “Yes. You might actually increase the amount of potassium. She’ll need it.

Bruce gave a sharp nod, and reached for two IV drips.

The trickster watched them applied. “Sturdy needles.”

“We’ve needed them sturdy enough for even your sort, in the past,” Bruce said.

Loki nodded, watching the doctor work for a long few moments.

“Is she an ally?” Bruce asked.

“She is not even a ‘friendly’ acquaintance, technically,” Loki admitted. “I owed her a favor.” He shot the mad inventor an uneasy glance, and found Tony’s calmly shrewd expression—more curious and thoughtful than doubting his answer, or his actions—made him feel strangely exposed, like the inventor saw something more here than the trickster himself. Returning his attention to Gamora and Bruce Banner, the trickster added, “She is not at all fond of the Other, and she made mention that actions I took before they sent me to earth had—caused problems, between herself and Thanos.”
“What actions?” Bruce was very focused on what he was doing—carefully cleaning out wounds and closing smaller ones with liquid stitches, while reluctantly applying no more than pressure-bandages to others too large or deep for such measures. He seemed a bit disconcerted by the IVs draining faster than usual.

“I revealed some uncomfortable truths about how the Other operates, including certain experimental liberties taken upon her, for new cybernetic implants he later used for the Chitauri. He kept her under chemical conditions during such trials, to prevent her forming memories of the events. It occurred several times, after she returned heavily injured from her earliest missions, as well as one or two later ones. I also revealed the extent Thanos was aware of such things, and his own designer modifications and rebuilding of her over time... including careless alterations made to her memories on a few key occasions.”

“She uh... the IVs shouldn’t be empty already.”

“She naturally absorbs what she needs, if it is at hand,” Loki added, watching the doctor renew each drip afresh. “She... will need to be warmed. Her body temperature is usually rather higher than a human’s, and presently she’s lower than you or Tony.”

“Is that a higher priority than stopping the bleeding?”

“More a warning that you shouldn’t be alarmed.”

Bruce froze only for a moment when a Gamora seemed enveloped in thin green smoke, quick-evaporating, and the air around himself and his patient suddenly increased almost to an uncomfortable degree. “Oh.” He then kept working, unfazed. He noted that the closer his hands were to Gamora, the warmer the air felt, and offered a faint half-smile of approval. “That’s very useful.”

Loki merely nodded, continuing to watch, with hands now folded behind his back. He didn’t look concerned, merely focused and thoughtful, as though all of his focus were divided between the scene before him, and something else far back in his own mind.

“Where was she?” Tony asked, after several minutes.

The trickster remained quiet.

“Loki?”

“An abandoned facility. I believe that it once belonged to Hydra,” Loki lied softly. “Though not for several years. Whoever left her there knew of it, but had not used it for quite some time, if at all.”

“Not Hydra, then.”

“No.”

“Do you know who put her there?”

“Yes,” Loki said quietly.

“You plan to tell me?”

“I would prefer not to. I have my own plans for them.” He shot the inventor a wary look, daring him to press further, but there was a flicker of something genuinely reluctant, almost hopeful, that he wouldn’t.
Tony hummed. “You have questions for me, anyway. Once you get those out of the way, I’ll know how important it really is for me to know.”

Loki appeared mildly incredulous, and even Bruce shot him a brief look that suggested he was calling the inventor’s sanity into question.

“Wouldn’t that also depend a bit on where her loyalties lie when she wakes up?” Loki suggested lightly.

“You think that’s still a question?” Tony asked.

Loki looked back at Gamora’s face, his own expression a mask. “I believe that he betrayed her more deeply than Odin ever did me. I respect her more that to believe she could have remained loyal to that. I think there was a reason she came to earth, and it was not for him.”

Bruce finished his work on most of her wounds, then hesitated. “Her back?”

The trickster nodded. “There, too. Many of her deeper wounds are there.”

“Can you...”

With a gesture and a murmur, Loki aided. The table lowered slightly, adjustable sections moving seemingly of their own accord, but Gamora hovered in the same position for a few moments. Then, slowly the rotated so that she faced down, every movement careful so as not to dislodge the IV drips, for which gravity seemed temporarily suspended as much it was for Gamora herself, keeping them from falling.

Hands still in the air, glowing faintly, the trickster said, “I will hold. You do as you need, Dr. Banner.”

“This clothing is in the way. Also soaked in blood. And already cut up a bit where I needed it out of the way already...”

The bloodied cloth Loki had wrapped her in earlier hovered, and wrapped its lower half loosely about her hips, the upper covering her front but leaving her so-far untreated back and shoulders exposed.


The trickster merely nodded.

Cutting Gamora’s bloodied linen tunic down the middle, along her spine, Bruce pulled both halves open and felt his breath catch for a moment. “My god.”

“I understand the damage appears severe,” Loki said. “But she still lives. And believe it or not, the wounds are already better than they were just before my arrival.”

“I shouldn’t be so shocked. We’ve worked with the X-men, after all, and seeing their Wolverine in action is enough to make any medico disconcerted,” Bruce murmured. “This was still just from her armor?”

“And stone. And over a year struggling to be free.”

“Over a year?” He shot the trickster a look.

“Just so. I believe it took her former allies time to gather as much information as they felt that they
might need, in order to create a cosmic cube themselves. They have been without her guidance in that project for at least nine months, but more likely a bit longer.”

“A what?”

“The tesseract is an example of one,” Loki said.

Bruce froze just for a second again, taking a deep breath before continuing his work. “And someone is trying to make one? Another one?”

“Yeah, he’s been hunting for them,” Tony added. “One of those on earth before Thanos’ arrival is a bad thing.”

“One on earth in general is a bad thing,” Bruce corrected, not looking up from where he was delicately cleaning out the worst of the wounds.

“I do not wish one to reside here anymore than you do,” Loki said simply. “It would ruin most of my plans in one fell swoop for these people to succeed, but their only remaining information source, captured as he was by technology stolen from the woman before you, is a clever and unwilling captive with great powers. Their progress has not been great so far. Gamora herself may be able to aid me in finding him, once she is recovered, and if she is remotely willing.”


He worked in silence for almost half an hour, then, watched by the inventor and the mad god, before he applied the last bandage and declared his work complete. Finding the IV drips empty again, he removed them for the moment.

The cloth Gamora wore shimmered, along with her clothing, and became a slightly less flimsy ensemble akin to a bodysuit, still loose enough not to hinder the bandages, as Loki’s magic returned her to a face-up position.

“I presume there is a less uncomfortable option than a bloodied metal table available?” the trickster inquired.

Tony nodded. “Down this way.”

Loki stepped forward, his glowing hands coming to rest under Gamora’s shoulders and hips as though carrying her on an invisible cushion, but it seemed easier for him to guide her through the air less slowly than when she’d been further away. Thus, he kept pace with the inventor easily, after nodding and offering Bruce quiet thanks. The distance to the recovery rooms wasn’t far, but the awkward silence, to Tony, made it seem further than usual.

It remained awkwardly silent until Gamora was lowered into a hospital bed, and Bruce, freshly scrubbed free of alien blood, arrived with new IV drips. “Little more potassium, right?”

Loki nodded. “Yes.” He was aware of Tony standing next to him, reading his expression closely as the doctor went about his work, muttered something about scans JARVIS had run and blood coloration and a few further tests he needed to run, and exited the room as soon as he’d made one last assessment of his patient.

After having stared after him for a long moment, the trickster said solemnly, without looking at Tony, “She was never an ally. We never trusted one another.”

“I got that, yeah.”
“We didn’t even really get along at all.”

“She trusted you to bring her here.”

“She had little choice.”

“You removed her armor. Before you brought her here.”

Loki remained silent.

“Look... I was lucky. I was trapped where I was with people so inclined to keep me alive, they also locked up a highly trained doctor they’d kidnapped along with me, but I didn’t exactly trust him too much either. Except that he needed to keep me alive, but—I still wanted to get him out. When he said he had a family, I wanted to get him out even more than I wanted to get myself out, because I was under the mistaken impression he still had hope.”

The trickster shot him a sharp look.

“His name was Yinsen. He died. Intentionally. To get me out,” Tony sounded unhappy about every part of that except the name. “He’d lied. His family was dead. My weapons killed them.”

“This provided you insight how?”

“I didn’t trust him. We got along but he didn’t like me. He needed me. We might’ve been friends, if he’d lived, but only if I’d really tried, which I could have. I would have, even, given who I was then. I’m not like that as much now, for a lot of reasons; some to do with him, a lot to do with Obadiah and other sundry betrayals you already know more about than I’m comfortable with.” He shrugged.

“If it had happened differently, and I were more like I am now when it was over and he’d survived... I’d send him on his way, and maybe make sure his career from then on out prospered.” Tony gestured vaguely to indicate prosperity somewhere out of his sight. “But later down the line... If someone else high-powered ever caught him, or tried kill him and betray him, I’d burn them to the ground, because they shouldn’t even fucking dare. And I’m not even sure what reason I have to think that, or feel that way about it, but I think you get it.” He shot Loki a look, and swallowed tightly because the trickster god was looking at him with something like hesitant amazement, pain and sadness. That expression was stripped of all masks, just for those few seconds, as Loki reached out and trailed his fingers down the side of the mad inventor’s face.

“I do,” Loki said, with a hint of a rasp. “And you must be all the madder than I ever anticipated to have spotted it, and explained it so aptly.” There was a hint of spite to his words, but not enough to cover the pain and tiredness in them. The god took a deep breath and started to pull his composure together, only to be startled out of it when Tony pulled him down sharply for a kiss that was all heat and teeth and desperation, heedless of pain or the faint taste of blood, just the both of them pulling together hard and shaking and hurt for a while, drowning in it with the novel, heart-stopping feeling of being known and understood down even this far, this dark and this shattered.

It wasn’t even sexual, quite; it just made them both feel less cold in places they’d forgotten were frozen, and the thaw ached and stung and needed all the more heat it could get. They broke apart to breathe, and Tony realized he was pinned up against the wall, and he and Loki were both shaking and that mouth was still brushing his.

“Bad idea,” the inventor rasped.

“You like bad ideas.”

“I mean she could wake up.”
Loki made a faint noise akin to a snarl, then turned his head almost blearily, as though only then recalling that was a valid point as he looked back at Gamora. “Right. JARVIS, monitor her vitals and keep me appraised when she seems to be entering what should appear to be a REM cycle.” He cast a spell over his shoulder and vanished them from the room.

“What did—”

“Dreamless sleep, she needs it anyway,” Loki growled, and bit at his mouth. “She was already beginning to experience a nightmare, which would’ve been far less healthy in her current state.”

“Is that true?”

“Actually yes. Thankfully convenient.” He peeled Tony’s t-shirt up and off of him entirely, tossing it aside. “I would have you here.”

“You’re covered in blood and armor.”

Loki snapped his fingers, removing both bloodied armor, and remaining traces of bloodstains everywhere else. “Better?”

In response, Tony caught his mouth again, arms winding around the trickster’s neck, and let himself be pushed up along the slightly chill flat surface behind him, until he could comfortably wrap his legs tightly around Loki’s waist. When his pants vanished soon after, he was neither surprised nor disappointed in the least. The almost frantic, bone-achingly needy quality hadn’t been banished by their momentary lapse into practicality, and the inventor could not be more thankful for it; not when it was so good his throat and the corners of his eyes burned with a prickling heat that seemed to run down from his mouth to his stomach and out through the rest of his body.

It shouldn’t feel so good, so goddamned necessary, just to know he was wanted this badly by someone who knew just how broken he was, and who was as broken, maybe more so, in turn. But oh fuck it was good. An intellectual and sensual high in a league all its own and Loki tasted just incredible like this.

“Should I engage privacy mode this time, sir?” JARVIS asked drolly form overhead, causing Tony to realize, belatedly, he was again being pushed against the picture window through which the god of lies had once defenestrated him. He gave a thumb’s up, not willing to give Loki any reason to stop doing what he was doing with that wonderful, wonderful tongue. And despite all the available taunting, snarky comments he might have then made, the trickster seemed equally disinclined to stop for anything. His hands were everywhere, cool and trembling a little, but no less strong, no less skilled, pulling the inventor close as he could get him, even as they both gasped from the friction between them where their hips met, sliding with each undulation as they developed a rhythm almost unintentionally, if only at first.

Tony was caught off guard by the sudden rush of arousal kicked off by it, sexual need feeding into this slightly different variety of desperation and taking to it like wildfire to kindling. His hands shook less, but only because of how hard his fingers clung to Loki when one of the trickster’s clever hands slid between their bodies to wrap around their cocks and begin stroking, slow and unhurried and almost too tight. The result hovered on the edge between tortuous and reverent, and the inventor arched into the contact and moaned, his short nails sinking in to the god’s skin and dragging hard down his back, causing Loki to emit a sharp sound like a gasp and almost break away from the kiss. Feeling the threat of distance, Tony’s hands flew up to the god’s face and neck, holding him there, savoring him like this. No please I need this, I didn’t even know how badly, don’t you dare don’t you dare stop.
Loki whimpered, leaning heavily against him, and the glass behind him, like he couldn’t hold himself up without supports, or like he was letting himself give over, and give in, and let go. He shuddered and shook and felt raw in the mad mortal’s grasp, over-sensitized, heavy-hearted and yet accepted, and wanted, even though it was clear just how deeply Tony Stark knew the turns of this thoughts, and the twists of his humor and just how broken he was. In turn, he knew Tony Stark, and nothing he knew displeased him or offended him, not truly. The inventor was brilliant and fascinating, and also broken in such beautiful ways, with a heart almost as corrupt and callous, but still warm, still capable of love, and so much of it. And is Loki?

The thought was jarring. Again almost pulling back, breaking away, he heard a sound somewhere between growl and moan from the inventor, who only tightened his hold, one arm sliding under Loki’s shoulder and back up to his neck to anchor him there more strongly and the god of lies gasped, stifled the need to sob, only for it to vanish entirely as the inventor went boneless against him—though his grip never loosened—and came between them with a soft, sweet sound. One of Tony’s hands, the one on the god’s face, trailed down slowly, tracing the lines of Loki’s throat, clavicles, chest, and belly, and down further until his hand joined the trickster’s and sped up the pace, just enough to pull Loki over the edge with him as he rode out his own orgasm and coaxed the trickster also through his.

Helplessly, Loki shuddered, feeling almost dizzy, barely managing to keep his legs under him just sufficiently that they slid slowly to the floor instead of collapsing in an ungraceful heap. Only once the settled there did Tony’s hold on him ease, arms settling loosely about the trickster’s waist as he shifted a bit to remain comfortable where he rested on Loki’s lap. Even with their mouths parted, he didn’t move far, seemed to relax further instead of panicking or pulling away when the god’s arms wrapped around him and held him closer still, their breaths still coming raggedly between them.

Neither of them spoke, even after several long minutes, once Loki had cleaned them up with a hint of magic, and they both were breathing normally.

Tony didn’t want to move. If he moved, letting go would happen. That was... a disconcerting thought just at the moment. Maybe I should’ve gotten therapy at some point. Not sure it would’ve prevented this but... maybe. Even in his head that sounded half-hearted, because he’d really needed that, for he didn’t even know how long, and didn’t regret it in the least.

It was the prospect of this strange, brief peace ending that was uncomfortable.

Loki hid his face in the inventor’s neck and sighed. “Bad idea.”

Helplessly, Tony chuckled. “You like bad ideas, too.”

He could feel the god’s faint smile against his neck, and it warmed him all the way through like nothing else.

Dammit, Tony thought, a bit helplessly. I want to keep him.

“Sirs, Dr. Banner is requesting that you both meet him in the med-bay, to answer a series of questions about Gamora. He is accompanied by Ms. Romanoff.”

Resisting the urge to glare at the ceiling for an excuse to have at least something to glare at with all the resentment and irritation he currently felt, Tony gave a deeply exasperated sigh. “Did you tell them we’re busy?”

“I was advised specifically not to ask until you were both marginally sated and capable of coherent sentences before asking.”
“Goddammit, Natasha.”

Loki hummed, nuzzling lazily for a moment, as though he were little more than an enormous feline, with all of the illusion of dignity that seemed to entail. Then he lifted his head at met Tony’s gaze, thoughtful and calm and curious, but not quite so open as before: preemptively guard ed for the sake of meeting the others, Tony knew, but it was a bit of a loss nevertheless. “I suppose we should go.”

“And give them the satisfaction?”

“I promise to satisfy you very thoroughly before the night is done, Tony. Rest assured,” Loki purred, and kissed his mouth briefly, with just a teasing flick of tongue, before redressing them (himself in Midgard casual this time) with a snap of his fingers, and transporting them down.

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The fact he hadn’t unwrapped Tony’s legs from his waist made reactions to their entrance only a little more entertaining. Loki was standing, but the inventor was still wrapped around him, looking at the trickster suddenly like he was considering causing him grievous bodily harm. Natasha only rolled her eyes and looked resigned. Bruce grimaced and shook his head. “Dammit, stop that.”

Tony was only a little flushed as he gripped the god’s shoulders, lowered his feet to the floor and stepped back, folding his arms across his chest. “You’re an ass, do you know that?”

“I’ve been informed.”

The inventor wasn’t entirely sure how his legs managed to support him. Perhaps it was years of having to recover from deeply emotional moments for the sake of being functional for emotionless public performances. It helped that Loki seemed fully composed, albeit (to Tony’s eye at least) deeply relaxed, with all tension drained out of the lines of his shoulders and the usual shrewd malice at the edges of his masked-but-not-enough-to-conceal-annoyance expression notably absent. No nervousness, no signs of sudden acute regret or dawning vengefulness over being rather emotionally exposed, which... Tony was sort of stunned by.

Either that or the trickster had gotten better at hiding that. Also likely.

Clearing his throat, Tony turned to face the other Avengers. “You rang?”

JARVIS interrupted, “Mr. Lie-smith, Gamora has entered what appears to be a REM-cycle, based on movement behind her eyelids and her breathing rate.”

“Thank you, JARVIS. Do let me know if she shows any signs of waking soon.”

“Do we need to apply restraints?” Natasha asked.

“I already did, at the same time that I applied a spell to ensure her some dreamless sleep, if only for so long as her usual resistance to spells affecting her consciousness was still low. I did not expect it wear off quite that quickly.” He arched an eyebrow.

“How strong is she, more usually?” Bruce asked.

“Stronger than Steve Rogers, and faster, but not a match for myself, Thor, or your greener self, Dr. Banner,” Loki responded. “She has vast endurance and recuperative powers faster than an Aesir’s,
“She’s taking in IV fluids at a normal rate now,” Bruce reported. “And I checked a few of her shallower wounds: they’re healing.”

“Whose side is she on, Loki?” Natasha inquired.

“For the moment? Her own. With some persuasion, I believe she might be amenable to joining mine, which for now is still shared as well.” He gestured toward Tony. “Beyond that, she may seek revenge against those who more recently betrayed and imprisoned her.”

“The patient seems to have awoken violently from a nightmare,” JARVIS announced. “She is currently cursing you at length, Mr. Lie-smith.”

“I should speak with her,” the trickster said casually. “I recommend you watch from a distance for now, if you insist on monitoring the conversation. It will be better, for the moment, and safer for all concerned, if I meet her alone.”

“Fair enough,” Tony said. “She’ll need food?”

“Yes. I recommend something which might arrive quickly, and in vast quantities.”

“JARVIS, hit up the usual emergency pizza places.”

With a half-smile of approval, Loki nodded to him, and the others, and strode out.

The inventor slowly exhaled a breath he hadn’t quite realized he’d been holding.

“You alright, Tony?” Natasha asked.

He offered them a more sincere smile than he could usually muster, still feeling far too relaxed and shagged out to worry as much as he probably should. “Yeah, I’m good. Surprisingly good. Also doomed, but good.”

They shot him odd, slightly suspicious looks.

Tony shrugged helplessly, and waved off their unspoken inquiries. “JARVIS, project footage and audio of Gamora please.”

An image of the green lady, still too thin and with eyes slightly sunken, struggling against invisible binds holding her flat to the bed from the shoulders down, appeared on the nearest display.

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She was indeed swearing almost continuously in a language they couldn’t catch, the only identifiable syllables being ‘Loki’ every now and then. She didn’t stop when he appeared in the doorway and shot her a bored look.

“I don’t know what you were expecting,” he greeted.

She paused in her rant and grimaced at him, then said something in the same language as before, sounding openly insulting.
Loki strode over and touched her forehead for a moment. She asked him something that doubtlessly might have translated to *What the fuck are you doing* when it suddenly changed, “-you son of a leviathan-offal-eating rat!”

“I was adding a new language or several dozen to your repertoire by allowing some of your cybernetic implants to sample the wonder known as *Allspeak*. You’re welcome.”

“I’m speaking your weird Yggdrasil thing now?” she sighed. “Great. Why?”

“So that my ally and his companions will hear both sides of our conversation.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “*You* have an ally? On-” She looked around the room quickly. “-earth?”

“I’m a god, and a son of Asgard, adopted or otherwise. I am unable to break certain oaths I make, without considerable pain and other inconvenience inflicted upon myself,” Loki explained. “I have sworn to be his ally until I have achieved my current primary goal.”

“Which is?”

“To murder Thanos in a painful manner.”

She snorted. “Get in line.”

His smile was open and very kind; although also disconcertingly shark-like. “The difference here, Gamora, is that I’m more than capable of *achieving* my goal. I have been putting plans into place for three years, and with or without your involvement, they will come to fruition within sixteen days.”

“Who is your ‘ally’ exactly?” she asked, openly suspicious.

“An impressive mortal by the name of Tony Stark. He was the one who delivered the weapon which destroyed all of the Chitauri fleet.”

Gamora nodded lightly. “The armored one. I did see that, before I went into hiding. Your sabotage of the invasion was a bit too artistic for my taste. There were more practical options.”

“I acted within the best interests of keeping my psyche to myself as much as possible, and not arousing undue suspicion,” He countered.

She shrugged. “Whatever. You’re dramatic. I get it.”

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Back in the observation room, Natasha muttered, “I think I like her.”

Tony snorted. “Of course you do.”

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Loki didn’t deign to respond to that accusation. “I had not anticipated your presence here on earth.”

“Well, no one was meant to, sweetie; that was sort of the whole point.”

“And look where it got you.”

She snarled at him.

He raised both hands, palms forward, as though to soothe her ire. He switched very deliberately to the language she’d been speaking earlier, and said, “I have not told them who your former allies were—not the ones who locked you down there, specifically, though they know of your allegiances before arrival on this planet. My ally is the long-term nemesis of your earthly prison-builders, but if they have the Beyonder I do not wish to risk him getting distracted by them with a mere two weeks to go before Thanos’ arrival in this solar system.”

Her snarl smoothing into something more thoughtful, Gamora let her head fall back against her pillow and considered. With an effort, she overrode the still-new Allspeak programming and responded in the same language, “You know of the Ten Rings, then.”

Loki nodded.

“I have nothing left by which to track them. They will have altered the security. I know their leader capable of that now, from experience.” She winced a little. “Had I known earlier that they possessed Makluan technology, I would not have involved myself with them at all.”

“Yes, I’ve met the source of it.”

Her eyebrows raised.

“I suspect a ship from Kakaranathara crashed here long ago. That would be where the leader of the Ten Rings acquired the technology and knowledge he possesses. There is at least one survivor, and he is also under that man’s control.”

Gamora nodded, looking thoughtful. “Did you kill it?”

“He is alive. I have plans for him.”

“Not for the war?”

Loki shook his head slowly. “I have plans beyond the war.”

“Lucky you.” She let her eyes fall shut. “You wish me not to mention who imprisoned me, where they might hear and understand?”

“If you would be so kind.”

She switched back to All-speak. “What have you to offer me?”

“I cannot trust you at my back in a firefight, or I might offer you a chance to get your knife into Thanos,” he mused, also dropping the linguistic pretense. “Instead, I offer you a chance to take down, or steal, the fleet ship of your choice, so long as all loyal supporters of Thanos thereupon are handed over as prisoners of war, or executed outright. You would be accompanied by one or more of the Avengers, or an ally of their choice. Formal handing over of the ship to you, legally sound, I think I might be more than capable of negotiating with the Kree and the leaders of Titan.”

Gamora’s eyes widened. “You are working with them both?”
Loki’s smile was again equal parts sugar and arsenic. “I do love it when I am underestimated. Yes, my plans have been negotiated with, and accepted by: Titan, the Kree, Asgard, and Earth. When Thanos arrives, his army will be torn apart by the two former, as well as an old friend of mine and her willing servant the Executioner, any who escape and aim for the earth will be cut down by the forces of Asgard, and their wrecked remains cleared up by the S.H.I.E.L.D. organization, the Avengers, and other heroes of Midgard.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said. “You’re you. I read up on you, you know. It’s not just around ‘Yggdrasil’ you’re known for being a sneaky and cutthroat little bastard with a bit of an ego.”

“I’m flattered.”

“How could all of those people possibly trust you?”

“I would hardly be a very good liar and con-artist if I couldn’t inspire people to believe me when I need them to, now would I?” he countered. “Also, they trust my ally, and my vengeful rage, and my sworn word to my ally makes me reliable in just the right ways to suit my purposes, and theirs, for the duration of this war.”

She whistled, impressed. “How many flagships?”

“Thirteen.”

“Oh, wow, you really must’ve taken out all of the Chitauri they promised would aid you in the whole takeover,” Gamora mused.

“I merely aimed this world’s heroes at them. Nothing more.”

“That was all of them, you know. They never meant to hand the world back over to you, so they sent all they would need to keep them breeding, and make the Earth their new home-world, so they even sent all the Other’s lab resources in the heart of the armada...” Her eyes narrowed shrewdly as his smile only widened further. “Yeah, you knew all of that.”

Loki nodded. “I planned on it.”

“I knew you were a sneaky bastard, but I have to admit, I’m a bit impressed.”

“Impressed enough to earn yourself a ship, and all the resources to make a life for yourself with it and those among the crew sensible enough to obey your orders?”

Gamora’s eyes widened a little. “Oh.”

“Yes, that’s the standing offer.”

“I have no plans to-”

“In two weeks time, might you?”

She fell silent. “I might.”

“If you swear your binding word to me, you will not be as bound as I, but you will not be able to directly betray your oath either, without some myriad inconvenient agonies, albeit milder than those I would suffer by far,” Loki explained. “If you will swear to me that you are no longer loyal to Thanos, that you will aid me in arranging for his death, that you will keep the single secret I have asked of you to keep, and that you will leave this solar system behind once you have your ship as I
have outlined for you here, then I will give you my vow to treat you as my ally, until Thanos is dead by my hand.”

Gamora considered. “You have my word. I swear to it.”

Loki gestured as though cutting through invisible rope with his fingertips, which glowed briefly green, releasing her bonds. He then extended that hand to her. “And you have my promise in turn, Gamora.”

She reached up slowly to grasp it, pulling herself upright with his grip as leverage, before shaking his hand more formally. “I need food. A lot of food.”

“I’m sure it can be arranged. JARVIS?”
“Thank you, JARVIS. Please inform the others we will join them shortly.”

“Of course, sir.”

Gamora blinked. “Built-in?”

“He is sentient despite being inorganic and human-engineered, but yes, he is generally built into most technologies throughout this tower,” Loki explained.

“I was led to believe humans were rather less advanced than this.”

“Let us say that I did not choose my alliances carelessly.” He reached for the cup and pitcher on the side table, filling the cup with water and handing it to her.

“Thanks,” she muttered, and drained it slowly. “Everything still hurts.”

“You were not in the best of shape.”

She cleared her throat. “Thank you. For getting me out,” she said quietly.

“Consider it a favor returned.”

Gamora shot him a slightly bemused look as she continued to sip her water. “I didn’t save you from anything.”

“I took away the life you knew, and you defended me despite that.”

“You showed me truth I would’ve otherwise been ignorant of, which has got to be against the ‘god of lies’ rules somewhere, shouldn’t it?”

Loki waved her off. “You would have found out eventually.”

“After I’d committed how many more atrocities in his name, believing that making him proud was good enough reason to do so?” she asked lightly. “You did it to suit your own purposes, so damn well I won’t say I owe you for that, because you’re an asshole and I know that you deliberately made sure that it would hurt as much as possible when I was hit with the truth. If anything... defending you, and calling them out over how they treated you, was my way of repaying that, though. You didn’t owe me this.”

The trickster glanced at the ceiling pointedly, reaching out to refill her cup when she held it out.
“I don’t care if they hear it. I don’t play this close to the vest as you do, and I have nothing to lose with them. They know next to nothing about me, and I’ve already agreed to ditch this solar system as soon as your war is over, so you can suck it up and deal with the consequences of me shooting my mouth off, Loki.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“How did you find me?”

“I was... looking for something else entirely, which I wanted to run a few tests upon. The prison of the Beyonder threw off my spell-work considerably. You were the only one I could presume capable of obtaining and making use of the technology required for that sort of prison. Your own prison was slightly closer to the center of the spell than any of the points of the wave-form it was occupying and while not too-advanced technologically, by humanity’s standards, it was suspicious enough in the wake of finding out about the Beyonder’s containment to merit a closer look. A few follow-up spells confirmed the exact location, and that no living creature had been anywhere near the prison in... a long while. Yet, the prisoner was alive. I knew then that it had to be you.”

“You didn’t think I might still be loyal to-”

“I was uncertain.”

She shot him an incredulous look.

“I didn’t care.”

“You know how to sweet talk a girl.”

“I’m not attempting to win you over any further. I already have your alliance.”

“And you’re not after any pleasure with your business?”

“Not with you.”

“With who, then? The human?”

“He really is exceptional.”

Gamora almost choked on her last sip of water and coughed.

Loki proffered the pitcher casually.

Glaring at him, she held out the cup and let him refill it. “For the record, I’m really glad you’re not looking for that from me.”

“And I’m happy to tell you that the feeling is mutual.”

She half-smirked. “Still doesn’t explain why you got me out of there.”

“I’ve been left to die before. A few times. I’m not fond of the practice.”

Gamora winced a little. “Oh.”

“While I would not say you and I have ever been friends, and I still trust you as little as you trust myself, you were the only person I met in Thanos’ region of space to speak to me as neither a mindless beast, nor a hollow pawn,” Loki added slowly. “I was thus disinclined to treat you as either
by leaving you where you were. I had to go to the place whether or not I planned to bring you back, to find out more about those who have captured the Beyonder. Given that it wasn’t the most difficult prison to break into, either, it would have been a deeper insult to you than I am inclined to give, because I know you enough to be aware of your value, and prefer you involved in my revenge than abandoned to the fate inflicted upon you by earthly betrayers. That is all.”

“So I don’t owe you?”

“No. You do not.”

“You did that deliberately, with the promise. Making it fit so we’re even?”

Loki nodded.

“You’re an underhanded little bastard even when you’re almost being nice. Why am I not even a little bit surprised?”

“Because you’ve met me.”

She laughed a little at that despite herself. “Yes, I guess that’d do it. When do I get to meet your other allies, then?”

“Tony will either wander in whenever he sees fit, or will be with the others when the food arrives.”

“Others?”

“He’s one of the Avengers, as you may recall. This is their tower.”

“They still have that cute redhead and the gorgeous blonds?”

Loki snorted.

“Oh, right, one of those is your brother.”

“Yes.”

“The one with the hammer, right?”

He nodded, rolling his eyes.

“Is the hammer kind of meant-”

“Please do not ask me this question.”

Gamora laughed more sincerely at that.

“Mr. Lie-smith, Miss...”

“Just ‘Gamora’ is fine,” she offered.

“Thank you, Gamora. Food has arrived in the dining room.”

“Yes!” Gamora pulled herself out of bed and nearly hit the floor, barely caught about her upper arms by Loki’s quick intervention. “Dammit, legs!”

“Can you stand?”
“Trying. Maybe a... little help?”

Obligingly, the trickster helped pull her upright. With her legs fully under her she managed to shake off dizziness and mostly support her own weight. “Better?”

“Yeah. Just a year without food and water in a bone-and-armor-crushing boulder cocoon to get over, is all,” she groaned. “Still better than most of the stuff the Universal Church of Truth’s Grand Inquisitors liked to inflict on dissenters on a good day.”

“At least you killed all of them.”

“Eventually, yeah. The first two took a few tries, though, which was messy. Remind me to tell you about it if you ever get me blind drunk.”

“Can you walk?”

“Uh... No?” She looked down at herself for a moment. “Why in the name of all hells am I wearing white?”

“It was easier to keep track of where you were still bleeding most profusely. What would you prefer?”

She shot him a look.

Loki snapped his fingers and her ensemble was replaced with a fitted bodysuit in black and grey, with decorative touches of green several shades darker than her pale sage skin. “Better?”

“Much.”

“Good.” He then teleported them to the dining room.

Their sudden appearance beside the table startled no one except Clint, who nearly jumped out of his skin because they appeared only four inches behind him.

“Jesus fuck!” He leapt away unsteadily. “Warn people!”

“No,” Loki said, smiling. Seeing the rest of the Avengers also present, he pulled out a chair, which Gamora immediately collapsed into, and began his introductions. “Gamora, this skittish human is the archer Clint Barton; you seem to recall Natasha Romanov, who is in the same line of work as yourself; Dr. Bruce Banner there is responsible for how well your wounds are healing despite your usual recuperative powers being so diminished; and Captain Steve Rogers is the super-soldier, usually a bit more star-spangled than at present. You also know of my brother Thor.” He beckoned the mad inventor closer with his hand, and added, “And finally, this is the inventor Tony Stark. You’re now allies through me.”

“Good to see you conscious,” Tony said, proffering a hand.

She shook it. “Nice to meet the man who almost single-handedly wiped out the Chitauri fleet. Excellent work.”

“Thank you. I hope I never have to throw a nuke through an interplanetary transport portal ever again.”

She grinned at him. “Fair enough. I believe I smell the ‘earthly wonder’ known as pizza? I require one and a half metric tons of it. I don’t care what’s on it as long as it isn’t fish or anything.”
Tony tugged a box over and opened it. “Sufficient?”

“Yes. Now, just a friendly warning: you way want to look away,” she warned, and began eating with some haste.

The rest of the Avengers, each with their own slices to work on anyway (or, in Steve and Thor’s cases, their own boxes) gave the table a somewhat wide berth, knowing from experience as they did what sort of appetite and possessive instincts tended to hit super-healers in desperate need of refueling.

Loki merely stole a slice off of Tony’s plate after retreating to the far end of the table with him.

“Nice work,” Tony complimented.

“Thank you.”

“I want Allspeak.”

“She has a few cybernetic implants that made that possible. You do not.”

“So how else might I acquire it?”

“Time spent in Asgard, acting as a conduit for some of the magic which hums through it,” Loki offered with a shrug.

Tony muttered about hardware upgrades, then paused, thoughtful. “So that might be a side-effect of, say, being taught by Hlíð?”

The trickster nodded. “Most likely.”

“What are the odds of whoever locked her up finding out you let her out?”

Loki admitted, with some reluctance, “Oh, sixty to eighty percent, roughly.”

“I think I should know who else is now gunning for you.”

“I promise I will tell you before the war is done.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Nor do I, in truth.”

“That’s not encouraging.”

“I know.”

Shaking his head, the inventor sighed. “It has to do with post-war plans of yours though, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“We need to find that Beyonder kid before the war starts.”

“I now have that in hand. I know who they are; I know the outer boundaries within which the wave-function of temporal-spatial residency for the Beyonder’s prison are limited to appearing within; I know what laboratories to seek out entrances to the place from within. They cannot keep me at bay any longer, not given the location they’ve chosen and how far it is from the only forces in their
possession which might give me pause,” Loki assured. “I plan to begin hunting in the morning, once I’m certain you can all survive her presence well enough.” He nodded toward Gamora.

“Generous terms, by the way. I take it there will be political maneuvering to get a price off of her head, and all?”

“Oh yes. Particularly on Titan, but I’m nothing if not persuasive. Care to join?”

“Yeah.” Ton grinned. “Absolutely. After the hunting.”

Loki nodded. “After the hunting.”

“Supplies are getting low, Tony,” Steve called.

“Right, right.” He elbowed Loki’s arm lightly as he stood. “I promised a public appearance at one of the places. They don’t usually deliver, and need the publicity anyway, so I made deal with ‘em. I’ll be back in thirty or so, more deliveries should keep coming before I get back.”

“Enjoy your adoring public,” the trickster drawled.

“I always do.” He grinned and headed for the elevator.

Loki was moderately surprised when Gamora sidled into the nearest seat, opposite the one Tony had just occupied, bringing her last two remaining pizza boxes with her. She already looked a bit less skeletal and ashen. “How’d that go?”

“As well as might be expected.”

“I heard something about hunting?”

“Thanks to you, and what I’ve learned from your prison, I think I might be able to find the Beyonder, and send him back to his people.”

“You don’t want a cosmic cube of your very own?” she teased lightly, but her expression was shrewd and serious.

“I certainly do not. I had one already, hidden up my sleeve in a form Thanos could not recognize, and I sent it back to its creators before the invasion farce here had run its course.”

Gamora’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“It’s only useable by my kind.”

“Aesir?”

He snorted. “Please, do try harder.”

“Jotunn. Right. Icy kind?”

Loki rolled his eyes and nodded. “I’m suddenly realizing that I never want to experience what it’s like to be within a mile radius of you should you ever meet Wade Wilson,” he muttered.

“I met him while I was still making the contacts I needed to get the Beyonder-capture project going on an unfamiliar planet. Fun guy to go drinking with. You gave your cube-equivalent away, though?” She took another bite of pizza.

“I did. Games are no fun at all when they’re that easy to cheat at.”
“Spoken truly like a spoiled prince.”

“Recover your strength, and I’ll consider bringing you with me to wreak havoc on those who imprisoned you.”

Gamora’s eyes lit up. “You’d fucking better.”

He grinned at her benignly, as she finished her current slice in two more bites. “You eat like my brother.”

“I’ve been compared to space-vikings before.”

“Oh course.”

“Why do you really want to leave the humans out of the hunt?”

He shot her an irritated glare. “I’ve told you.”

“You mentioned something about them being his nemesis. He has claim.”

“He would burn them to the ground in their entirety, but I’m not finished with them quite yet,” Loki admitted quietly, in the language she’d spoken earlier. “I need resources of theirs, after this war.”

“Ah. Right. Manipulative bastard, I almost forgot.”

The trickster merely beamed.

“You like him, though. I never expected I’d see you seriously listen to someone arguing with you. You’re not really the type. He’s not either, from what I’ve heard: genius, bleeding-edge tech, doesn’t bother with other people’s ideas because he’s always ten miles ahead of their imagination’s limits. Oh, hey, that’s you too!”

“Is there a point to this?”

“You’re protecting him and it’s adorable?”

“Keep eating. I prefer you when you aren’t speaking.”

She snorted at him. “You say you’re gonna hunt them... you sure they won’t get the jump on you first?”

“No. Not as certain as I would prefer.”

“At least you’re prepared. Right?”

“Rarely, but I improvise astonishingly well.”

“I hate people who say that,” Gamora sighed. “Here’s hoping that’s good enough.”

“Is it usually not?”

“It is, actually. That’s the most infuriating thing about you bastards.”

Loki chuckled at that.
The restaurant had been fifteen minutes away. The crowd that materialized once Tony Stark got there had required only five minutes to become a genuine mob, but the inventor handled it gracefully as could be expected. He signed autographs for about ten minutes while Happy supervised two and a half dozen large pizza boxes being loaded into the car. Paparazzi showed up somewhere along the line.

Someone was asking questions about an AIM-related scandal of all things.

Tony waved it off, said he knew nothing about AIM these days.

Casual lies for the press were practically reflexive for him, after all.

He was making his way back toward the car when something went wrong. The whole crowd went silent, and all of them had slightly-surprised-looking blank expressions on their faces. They were all still as statues around him.

“Uh... did I miss a memo, folks?” Tony started to turn, then stopped as something caught his eye.

At the edge of the crowd was a man wearing a double-breasted black jacket of a slightly antiquated style—somewhere between victorian military doublet and an understated modern Tangzhuang—and carrying a long black coat over his shoulder. He was olive-skinned, with features that would not have been out of place anywhere in the globe, which had the odd quality of making him hopelessly nondescript. The circular lenses of his sunglasses were more distinct than any one of his facial features. He had a long cane, too, and every one of his fingers, those hanging loosely about the top of his cane as well as those holding his coat in its place, wore large rings that should, by rights, have seemed gaudy, but they suited the man.

One of them, on the man’s left ring-finger, was glowing orange-amber.

“Oh shit,” Tony said, feeling eloquent. “You must be M.”

“It’s a privilege to meet you at last, Mr. Stark,” M said calmly. “It’s a pity I think we need to be rid of you for good this time. Unless you have some information you might like to share about the god of lies who almost poisoned my dragon, has stolen a valuable captive of mine, and seems intent to do further damage unless he can be stopped, or his plans be ruined.”

“It’s not like he and I are exactly friends, but—”

“No. You’re his ally, according to his oath, which I now know all about.”

Tony glared at him. “You have quite possibly the weirdest accent I’ve ever fucking heard, you know.”

M smiled unkindly. “I would prefer not to kill you. You have been so useful.”

The inventor was deeply disconcerted by the hum under his feet, and the sight of lines drawing themselves on the concrete around him in a very narrow radius, then spiraling out to weave about M’s feet as well. “Your lot have tortured me before. Will you ever learn, I wonder?”

“Oh yes. I’ve learned not to leave you in incompetent hands. Rest assured that I have the most competent hands available for the purpose of opening your skull so all of the secrets I might want or
need from you begin to fall out.”

“You’re not my type, and I’m taken,” Tony said quickly, then nearly kicked himself for how reflexive the second part of that admission had been. *Wrong. Incorrect. Bad.*

“Mm, perhaps it would have been easier to have caught your significant other, then. You give up so much more easily when it’s not only yourself.”

“Oh, Slenderman, I’d love to see you try.”

“Interesting. Perhaps he might attempt to come to your rescue?”

Tony’s stomach turned to lead. “Unfortunately, maybe, probably. I’m important.”

“We shall see then.”

The world around them, of the dazed crowd and the restaurant, vanished.
Love is a Fool's Game, I Told Myself, As I Asked Danger "Hey, You Wanna Fool Around?"

Chapter Summary

Extremis. Magic. Explosions. Mayhem. Long stairwells. Hlín won't bother pitying the fools; they brought this on themselves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two weeks, two days...

“Mr. Lie-smith?” JARVIS inquired, calm as usual, but with a hint of concern.

Still at the table with Gamora halfway through the third delivery’s stack of pizzas, Loki looked ceiling-ward, noticing the rest of the Avengers looking suddenly wary. JARVIS sounding concerned in that manner was, admittedly, novel. The trickster braced himself for unpleasant news. “Yes, JARVIS?”

“I would like to request that you please remain calm.”

“I will do my level best,” Loki said, raising an eyebrow.

“Mr. Hogan has just called and informed me that the Ten Rings have taken Mr. Stark.”

Gamora nearly choked, and coughed twice. It was the only sound in the otherwise deathly quiet room.

“I see,” Loki said, very calmly, though his expression was a study in fury that might be sufficient to engulf whole worlds in its fire, if they offended him even half as much as this news clearly did.

“While Mr. Hogan was uncertain of their identity, I found evidence of seals burnt into the ground where he was abducted, in photos uploaded to social media within sixty seconds of the event. The makeup of the seals included more than a dozen Makluan symbols in their design.”

The trickster’s lips twitched.

“Loki,” Thor said very quietly.

“Well so much for that,” Gamora muttered under her breath, but then shot the trickster a questioning look.

He held her gaze steadily, though she seemed discomfited by it. “Only stop burning when you cannot find them anymore. Their leader will escape, as will his family. Sate your rage upon all the rest as freely as you will.”

She half-smirked at him.
“Loki,” Thor called, more warningly this time. “Many of them are merely mortals—”

“They are on the wrong side. Gamora’s mercy will be kinder to them than mine. She still has some left in her, and showed it even to the likes of myself at my most wretched,” Loki responded sharply. “You may trust her, brother, moreso than you can myself. Fight alongside her if you wish; although, you will not be fit for combat for another twelve, fourteen hours?” he asked her.

“About twelve. Ten if it’s a long trip to their nearest respectable base.”

“Ten hours then, and use the less respectable bases to get warmed up.”

Gamora grinned. “I like this plan.”

“I don’t,” Steve said loudly. “You’re endangering far too many civilians and people who could otherwise just be incarcerated—”

“Your opinion matters little, Steve Rogers. I need you but little,” said Loki.

“Let us and S.H.I.E.L.D. handle any and all smaller outposts you can point out on a map for us that we might not know about,” Natasha cut in. “I won’t inform them until after Gamora, Thor, and Bruce’s other guy, have hit two larger bases. By then, those escaping the larger bases will run to wherever they think is still safe. We let them come to us, and capture more higher-ups for information.”

Loki nodded. “Now that is an acceptable alternative plan. Thank you, Natasha.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“I need weapons. I have a cache here in Manhattan that the Ten Rings were unaware of,” Gamora added. “Ms. Romanov, would you like to see my armory?” She grinned sweetly.

The assassin smiled back. “I think we’ll get along fine.”

“Can I go too?” Clint asked.

Gamora looked him up and down appraisingly. “Maybe. I might have some alien archery tech, now I think about it.”

The archer suddenly looked unbearably excited.

“I’m uncomfortable with all of this,” Steve grit out.

“What are your plans, brother?” Thor demanded.

“Until Gamora is prepared to join the destruction, I was hoping to deliver you, Dr. Banner, and the Captain to the first base I’d like to destroy in its entirety. When you are done, reach me and I will take you to the next. In the interim, Gamora and I need to discuss the mechanics of a certain cage in the Ten Rings’ possession, which they stole from her.” Loki rose to his feet slowly. “If you’re amenable, Dr. Banner?”

“I am.”

“And do we have an understanding, Captain Rogers?”

The super-soldier frowned. “I don’t like it.”
“You have a better plan to offer?”

“Better than Natasha’s, no. I just don’t know if I trust you at all.”

“You should never trust me. I make special efforts to keep you a non-vital component in all of my plans, Rogers. You’re far too earnest and good for any of my sort to rely upon as anything but a potential loose canon.”

“And Thor isn’t?”

“You are hardly my brother.”

Steve considered that, and nodded reluctantly. “Time to suit up, then.”

~

Two weeks...

Hallucinations, Tony knew well. None quite like this.

He was in the cave again. This time, no one was listening to him. No one wanted him to build anything. He was just being shown, again and again, all the things he never wanted to see: Yinsen, Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, even the Avengers, each of them brought low and hurt and torn apart slowly, while Tony could do nothing to stop it.

Lucid dreaming practice, and his own tendency to have panic-inducing nightmares with some frequency, had taught him a lot, though, and that—that was the only thing keeping him remotely sane right now, for a couple of reasons. One: if he could find the right clue to fixate on, the right glitch in the illusion, then he could remain convinced, despite the influence from M’s psychic power ring (seriously? His arch-nemesis’ weapons of mass destruction are fucking costume jewelry?!?) that all of the horrible shit going on in front of him wasn’t real. It was his only leg to stand on, trapped in nightmare hallucinations that felt otherwise more utterly real and convincing than any not-dream-walker-enhanced dream he’d ever had. No matter how much he struggled, fought, or was put through pain himself, he never woke up. It never stopped. So he clung to doubt, which was aided by sanity-maintaining factor number two: Loki was an impressively paranoid brilliant mad genius with no sense of appropriate boundaries when it comes to branding a spell into the brain of his ally without ever bothering to mention he’d done it.

That was the only explanation Tony had for the four Norse runes that remained in his vision at all times. Always, they hovered just above anything Tony looked directly at, changing to suit whatever form the hallucinatory torment took: one moment carved into the wall over Pepper’s shoulder. The next, embroidered into the jacket of a thug who stood in front of that same patch of wall. On a few memorable occasions, different parties in the illusion wore it in the form of an ugly scar carved into their skin.

Tony was both disturbed and irritated, as well as extremely grateful. The visions in front of him were convincing. The pain inflicted on himself was too, when he struggled and fought, which he did helplessly, because he was still only human. There was only so much emotionally and psychologically horrifying stimuli he could take before tears ran down his face. All of your friends.
The lover you couldn’t keep. Your allies. Yourself. You have nothing, was being drilled into his head over and over again for what felt like hours, until the inventor all but shutdown. He stared fixedly at Loki’s mark with all of his focus, trying to figure out how it worked. Trying to ignore everything around it, with an effort, because the mark assured him that those horrors weren’t real.

He could’ve sworn he saw flickering iridescent threads whenever the scene or the surface the mark resided upon changed: weaving and unweaving and re-weaving. Resisting the force of M’s ring was only a bit more difficult, and a bit more painful, than struggling to change his own dreams when they were at their worst. He started to wonder if he could affect other things here. It was still his own head, right?

“You’ve gone very quiet.”

And then suddenly Loki’s mark was gone for the first time in what felt like weeks.

Tony was in a barren room, strapped to a table. M, now watching him from just behind and to the left of the nearest lamp aimed at the mad inventor’s face, so that the criminal mastermind’s face was still mostly obscured.

The only sound in the room seemed to be Tony’s heavy breathing, and instinctive tugging at the steel manacles at wrists and ankles, and the thick leather straps holding him down across his forehead shoulders, chest, stomach, hips, thighs, and shins. Tony started to slowly steady his breathing with an effort.

“You really shouldn’t be such a bastard to a guy with PTSD you know,” the inventor rasped. His throat was raw and sore, presumably from screaming, which wasn’t surprising given how much of it he’d been doing with the illusions going.

“No one lasts more than a day without either natural psychic gifts, or some other source of aid.” He stepped closer, into the light. His eyes were pale brown-grey, like slate flecked with heather.

“You’ve lasted into your second day without signs of actually cracking, Stark.”

Tony realized then that Loki had been right about one thing. He remembered seeing eyes like that before, in the fine-featured face of Sasha Ling, who otherwise took more after her mother in looks, though the look on M’s face—reserved and unreadable and almost unearthly patient—as well as his piercing stare, reminded Tony of the few times he’d seen the young CEO at parties.

“Well, I’m gifted in many ways, but psychically would be new.”

“I’m aware. Therefore, what is it?” Long fingers reached out and dragged across Tony’s brow slowly.

The inventor jerked in surprise at how uncomfortably insidious that touch felt, like he could feel M’s gaze, his awareness, scanning the inside of his skull. He was going to complain loudly about it until his nemesis’ hand withdrew and Tony saw those threads again—fleeting, glittering iridescence, not so complex as Loki’s and yet...

Months of scanning the trickster’s magic and learning to differentiate between the signatures of different spells, how they moved based on their purposes, what sort of inexplicable constellations of improbable changes they made to the behavior of matter between spell-caster and spell-target...

Tony could see the constellation of a very basic scan-and-discovery spell in the structure those threads wove into, as M moved. Magic. I’m seeing magic now. His head spun a bit. Loki usually referred to magic in terms of weaving, architecture, and the pulling of strings. Maybe the
Hallucinations were tipping him over into outright insanity where he actually believed the god of lies’ assertion that he had dormant magic.

“No ideas?” M inquired.

“Several.”

“It will only do you more harm to withhold your theories from me.”

“Well. I’m more inclined to make things difficult for you than easier, all things considered, you repulsively sadistic little fucker.”

M smiled almost kindly at that. “Let us try in combination then.” A different one of his rings began to glow this time.

Tony felt the table under him ripple as though it were alive. No sign of Loki’s runes. Not even as the previously smooth metal at his back shifted, becoming first a bed of nails, then of thick and barbed hooks digging into his flesh, scraping across rib bones as they curved. The inventor did scream then, as much in shock as pain. He proceeded to swear a great deal.

“Physical pain, with a bit of rearranged matter. And...”

Then he saw a flicker. Apparently, Loki’s runes were even visible on the inside of his eyelids as illusions closed back in. Focusing on them again, Tony could see the threads a little clearer. Less fleetingly.

You need to open your eyes. He could hear sounds around him, screaming.

“Fuck you, this is fake.”

How do you know for certain?

Tony gave a half-hysterical laugh, and didn't say.

Again, it felt like something running fingers through his brain and he could see a flicker of the threads even through close eyes and whatever illusion M had him trapped in. Open your eyes.

“Nope. My head, my fucking rules. You’ve had enough playtime.”

“Interesting.” M’s voice sounded both close and distant, like there might be two of him: once watching from the other end of a large room, the other still standing beside him, both of them speaking chorus. “I think I see it, now. Very clever.”

Tony felt a yank that seemed to make every blood vessel in his head burn and ache for a moment, and he shouted. Loki’s runes brightened, then faded back to their previous, less obtrusive presence.

“An anchor-point, an impossibility installed within your subconscious, activated by psychically applied illusions and other mental meddling,” M mused. “The trickster god must really like you, to give you such a thoughtful gift, and one so artfully constructed.”

Another tug. Another noise of pain from the inventor. This time there was an after-image of threads trying to tug at Loki’s marks and the strings they were made of, and rooted into, but Loki had made the construction very tight and sleek, no thread loose, nor wasted, nor exposed in its entirety to be traced from end to end.

Tony realized his head was starting to ache very sharply, and that the pain seemed to be creeping
through his entire skull and down through the rest of his bones. It wasn’t part of the illusion, because M was still busy trying to pull at Loki’s runes, and there were no other threads happening. Forcing himself to remain focused, Tony tried to recall the names of the runes. He’d been learning them, since many of Loki’s books were in a slightly alien version of the Elder Futhark alphabet, and understanding the alphabet, followed by learning Icelandic and Swedish, had gotten him to the point he could almost read Asgardian texts. So he focused. *Laguz, Oþila, Kaun, Isaz.*

The trickster had left *his own name* as an anchor point for Tony to enforce his own distrust of any and all sensations he was experiencing. There was something funny about that. If only Tony could remember it.

There was such a loud buzzing in his head, suddenly. Like static. Like his bones were turning into live-wires.

“How long have you been a mage?” Tony heard himself asking, in warm conversational tones. “I mean, you’re spell-work is all pretty minor, except for bigger tricks like that teleportation you used to bring me here, and that was feeding off your rings with some modification. Is it because they make a really nice crutch or are you powers really that limited?”

Sometimes, the mad inventor hated it when too many of his trains of thought would get ahead of the others, and he was left scrambling, trying to figure out why exactly the particular insane words coming out of his mouth were secretly all according to plan, somehow.

M’s focus on Loki’s runes waned just enough for him to shoot Tony a brief glare. “I am no Sorcerer Supreme, perhaps, but I have been a mage for longer than earth’s current one, and I am not to be underestimated.”

“Since you were a kid or something?”

“Why do you wish to know?”

“Well... just want to know what it was like for you when your knack for it *woke up*. If it was when you were young, it would’ve been sort of a natural unfurling, unless it was from some traumatic event or-”

“Silence would be appreciated.”

“Then you’ve got the wrong man for that, Professor.” Tony offered a grin with no mirth in it: only teeth. “So traumatic, when you were younger, maybe early twenties tops?”

“Is there a point to this?”

“Volatility,” Tony said, and suddenly his grin had a bit of humor, then: vicious and horrible and hostile, but oh so *very* amused. In fact, he almost cracked up entirely, almost burst into hysterical laughter, because all of the breakout plans he’d come up with since the hallucinations first waned, just got a new resource added, and were coalescing into new and more violent shapes.

“Excuse me?”

“Volatility. Your gift woke up with a traumatic event, probably a near-death experience or two. Maybe you lost someone. I’m guessing it wasn’t pretty? Was it a little explosive, and how crazy was it, getting that under control?”

“I was prepared.”
“Family history?”

“I still see no point to this discussion.”

This time, Tony did give in to the amusement a little. He giggled. Bitter and vindictive and helpless, he giggled.

“What is it?”

“You’re born with it, or it wakes up when you’re young, or something traumatic happens, or it’s woken up deliberately by another mage, or you’re exposed to powerful magics and/or artifacts for a while. Those are the ways it wakes up, right?”

“Who told you this?”

“The same god who has been using magic on me for months now, mostly minor spells, but also a few more powerful ones, including that anchor,” Tony said lightly, as he eyed M’s rings. Powerful artifacts. Powerful magic. Oh, you poor bastard, you don’t know, and you especially don’t know how well-informed I am concerning how this is gonna go. Tony thought back to the strings, and all the spells of Loki’s he’d mapped to date. He felt like his bones would rattle out of him of their own accord as he mapped out the strings he’d need to pull in the too-quiet room he’d awoken in before, with where M had been standing, with intent to create a burst of flame fit to engulf M’s suit. Everything seemed startlingly crystalline, the illusions a half-transparent overlay as he did it, feeling like his thoughts were gripping the sharper, heavier angles and lines of reality behind it, pulling him back into that room.

Then the constellation of fire burst to life and M emitted an enraged cry, shocked and appalled as his jacket caught fire. The illusion shattered altogether.

Tony’s skull seemed to be buzzing louder now, like it should be vibrating under his skin, as he looked down at all of his restraints, his focus divided between them, and keeping the fire lit even as M employed ice from another of his rings to try and smother it. Before the flames died, Tony had come up with a few hasty, clumsy string-pulling arrangements to free himself of manacles and straps, but then the metal table enveloped him like a cocoon.

“How?” M snarled.

Tony offered him an incandescent grin, sharp as broken glass. “It’s been a long time dormant, let’s say, but not unexpected.” It hurt, and his vision kept blurring from the effort to not burst out of his own skin for all the energy pouring through him, but he managed to steer it clumsily, closing his eyes to focus on twisting the constellations of pulled strings around himself, and another place he could almost see, but not quite, in his mind’s eye. He hesitated only a moment before snapping the last metaphorical domino into place and flicking it.

Oh shit fuck shit ow bad idea.

He reappeared outside the room he’d been trapped in with M, and collapsed to the ground, choking and gasping and curling in on himself.

Apparently, clear-headedness was key, here. And so were certain calculations in how Loki’s spells actually worked. He hadn’t been aiming to land here, and he had no idea why he suddenly had tunnel-vision full of flickering lights akin to the ones that lingered in his vision for up to an half an hour after red-carpet events.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. That hadn’t gone well and why did everything have to keep
spinning? Why did his insides feel disconcertingly like they’d been turned into live snakes?

Maybe teleporting shouldn’t be re-attempted anytime soon, Tony thought, as he slowly pushed himself into some semblance of an upright position again and realized that the increased painfulness of the pounding in his head was because of all the alarms suddenly going off.

Right. Escape. Important. He pulled himself back to his feet.

That was when an armed guard rounded the corner and took aim as soon as they caught sight of him.

Tony considered his options.

While he considered, one of them fired.

A lot of profuse swearing, from the soldier’s commanding officer and Tony both, for a total of three languages’ worth of profanity in the air, followed thereafter. The inventor was the one who stumbled back with a bit less breath in his lungs and the feel of blood trickling down his side.

Shit, the kid who shot him looked like he was barely more than a goddamn teenager. He was also about to fire again.

Hello future nightmares, Tony thought as he raised a hand toward them, thinking about repulsor blasts and vectors and threads. It all came together in a blaze of calculations and data, and with it his vision went white for a second.

Then the hall was clear, except for all the blood everywhere.

“So this officially qualifies as a violent awakening,” the inventor huffed, sliding down the wall a few inches. He caught sight of Loki’s runes again, hazy and half-glowing, and lashed out, this time able to feel the foreign tugging and pulling at his mind, able to pinpoint it and lash out: cutting the threads and twisting a few of them so they did still worse to their wielder on the other end.

There was a muffled scream, and more guards appeared.

Tony grinned at them as a couple of them slipped in the blood.

M called for them to halt, staggering out of the interrogation chamber and looking enraged and harrowed and charred. He had ugly burns on his hands, wrists, and up one side of his neck, and in a few places down his back where the flames burnt through his shirt. “You are a rare form of stupidly brave fool, Anthony Stark.”

“Yeah. The fucking brilliant kind,” Tony mocked.

Then M gestured, rings aglow.

The inventor gave a half-choked scream as the solid steel-enforced wall behind him became spiked, each spike very deliberately slipping between his ribs, not quite deep enough to kill him—at least, not quickly, but Tony knew a few organs got pierced in ways that promised a slower and more painful end if he didn’t get treatment in the next hour. “Fuck. You. Sir,” he snarled, as the floor underfoot began to shake. He reached back along the more refined threads of Makluan magics leading back to M’s rings and twisted and pulled and reshaped.

M’s hands jerked back as though burnt. “You idiot, what are you doing?”

“Taking you and everyone in a mile radius down with me, or threatening to.”
The room went very quiet.

The soldiers looked pale and shaken. M looked calculative, but scared.

Tony didn’t want to know how he looked just then. The way that odd light reflected off of nearby guards’ riot gear made him wonder where it was even coming from. Belatedly, he realized there was blazing light coming from his hands: flickering like smoke-wreathed flame, in the colors of dried blood and fox-fur. There were shapes in the glow, where he’d woven strings into shapes meant to behave like repulsors, but they didn’t seem quite steady or solid the longer he looked. The strings weren’t following any plans now, and it felt disconcertingly like he was being played by their music more than he was playing with them in any sort of harmony.

“I’m not in full control, you know. You might want to either make your move, or fix me so I’m not dying, before my hold slips,” the inventor snarled.

“No need, Anthony,” said a cold, gloriously familiar voice from the air overhead.

Tony’s eyes fell shut with relief for a moment at the chill that filled the air as Loki appeared in front of him.

The trickster kept his back to his ally, shielding him. He did not arrive alone.

M exclaimed something panicked-sounding in Mandarin.

“Papa, don’t!” Sasha snapped. “Don’t.”

“The Beyonder is freed. Your pet abomination M.O.D.O.K. is destroyed,” Loki announced in fierce tones. “All of dear Sasha’s business infrastructure has been burned to the ground and all subterranean spaces that she has ever owned with even the remotest connections to A.I.M. have been raided by S.H.I.E.L.D. and destroyed utterly by the Hulk, and S.H.I.E.L.D. along with a woman you may recall known as Gamora have eliminated all Ten Rings safe-houses in North America, Russia, Central America, and one third of South America. Your own empire, as you will find in the morning, is now being hunted as the pet project of an independent S.H.I.E.L.D. team run by a man I once murdered, as well as the Avengers. On top of that, I’ve personally made certain that Hydra has reason to believe you and yours have committed acts of war against some of their highest-ranked members. If you do not wish to lose still more of your legacy, I recommend you shed your rings in my presence, and we make arrangements for me to leave unhindered by your powers, taking my ally with me.”

Notably, his hand was wrapped around Sasha Ling’s throat almost delicately, though it did seem that she had no ability to move away from his hold, and struggled just a little to breathe as she grew a bit more afraid, but she kept her composure with stern determination even so.

Helplessly, Tony reached out and grabbed a handful of Loki’s cloak.

The trickster reached back and gripped his wrist loosely, to reassure, and to make certain he could teleport them both out in an instant if needed; although it would be to no avail if M used his own capabilities to stop them.

“I have no reason to believe you would let her live if I did,” M responded. “With them, I at least know what my chances are.”

“I have a much more important war to wage soon enough. I will offer you this one single opportunity to flee with the remains of what is precious to you, if you disarm here and now, and make no efforts to prevent me leaving with my ally. If you agree to this, you have my word that I will take him and
go, doing no harm to Miss Ling on my way. I would burn you myself, but I would much prefer to allow Tony the pleasure, at a time more suited to our mutual convenience. I strongly recommend that you accept this offer, for my next one will leave you with nothing but pain, grief, and agony, in a place of pure horrors arranged by the mother of the Beyonder you and yours stole from his home.”

The human criminal mastermind began removing the rings from his fingers, dropping them to the ground one by one, never dropping Loki’s gaze. “He is dying.”

“I am a god.”

The last ring hit the ground and M stood with his bare hands up, fingers spread wide, palms-forward in a gesture of helplessness.

Only then did Loki turn his head to look at his ally. His face, already a study in livid ferocity, darkened further, with a hint of that most potent of rage-catalysts (genuine fear) pushing him over the edge from practical war-monger, to cruel and shattered creature inclined to murder all responsible for the damages to his ally’s person in painful, slow and creative ways. “Tony?” the trickster inquired.

“Losing blood... by the way...”

“I need one promise from you.” His free hand glowed faintly where he held Tony’s wrist, as he prevented their next words reaching anyone else in the room.

“Seriously?”

“I want you to promise that you will utterly destroy this man and his empire until there is naught left of them but ashes and blood. I want to know that you will do it so that I don’t have to take it upon myself to do it to them now, for this offense.” His voice sounded very tight, full of more barely-controlled, snarling and bloodthirsty anger than the inventor had ever heard a mostly-human-ish voice contain. I want to destroy them utterly, was heavily implied. Tell me this. Make me believe, for a moment, that you will make them suffer as I believe they should, even though in truth we both know that you will be kinder to them than I would ever be. “Promise me, and I will let them live today.”

“I promise.”

Loki took a deep breath and let it out, at the same time he pushed Sasha Ling away towards her father, by her throat, and pulled Tony off the wall with surprising delicacy, letting the inventor slump against him at the sudden lack of support and decrease in his blood pressure. “Good,” the trickster said raggedly, and disappeared.

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Things went hazy after that, thanks to the blood loss and the too-long teleport home as Loki tried to contain the fresh-woken gift for magic in the one and only Tony Stark, who kept only half-consciously reaching out to try and run his fingers through the whole of the cosmos, because the journey seemed so much slower, now, and yet far more elegant than when the inventor had previously tried to do it himself earlier.

Then he passed out altogether for a while.
Next thing he knew, Tony felt a cold lab table against his wounded back and Loki leaning over him, and a smaller device made of cool metal pressed against his neck.

“Tony, please, I want you lucid for this.”

The inventor forced his eyes to focus. His bones were on fire. “Loki?”

The trickster held his stare searchingly for a few long moments, then gave a ragged exhale of relief. “You’re truly awake.”

“Mostly. Kinda. Everything hurts.”

“You’re dying.”

“So why aren’t you—oh.” He realized that was the device against his neck: Extremis. He relaxed a bit, let his head further loll back. “You think you need permission? I gave you fucking permission when I told you where it was.”

“I do not know what this will do,” Loki whispered almost fearfully. “With your magic awoken, I do not know, Tony, if this may interfere, or worse.”

“Not got much chance without it do I? I’m a bit beyond hospital repairs.”

The trickster god swallowed thickly. “I... might arrange something.”

“No debts.”

Loki’s lips thinned, but he steeled himself. “If your detonation kills one or both of us, I will persuade my daughter to make your afterlife extremely unpleasant, I promise you,” he said sharply, and applied the serum.

Tony felt suddenly like his bones, buzzing and too heavy and too heated as they’d seemed moments before, were suddenly like ice, so hard did the heat hit him everywhere else. It increased too fast, too harsh, threatening to fling him out of his own mind and body, threads on newly-discovered magic seeming to wither against the molten fiery heat.

Then it wasn’t just his bones that were ice. Actually, his bones were heating up now, but still buzzing with aggressive magic. There was ice almost all around him, enveloping him, pulling him closer and tighter and-

Oh. Tony’s eyes fluttered open hesitantly, as the cold stabilized him, and kept him from going nuclear. It cracked and stung, but it forced him down, soothed the burning. He could feel Loki’s face against the side of his neck, and the cold rolling off the trickster in waves as they both struggled to breathe.


“Trying,” Tony grit out, but it was increasingly hard to hang onto consciousness. Everything was spinning and the heat was overwhelming, and the crunching buzz of magic in his bones was maddening and didn’t get better as Extremis continued to take hold. The buzzing and crackling sounded, and somehow felt, like the rumble of a chainsaw in the middle of a roaring house-fire just before his vision faded to black.
One week, five days...

Tony woke up in a cave, which was, in Tony’s book, not a good sign, historically, but the cave was clean and made elegant by the natural formations fitting in amongst more deliberate architectural touches. Torchlight spilled down the high walls, which were decorated with intricately carved marble pillars. The air was cool and still, but not cool enough to make the inventor’s skin prickle even though he was stripped to the waist, and Tony could hear a low murmur of conversation happening over him. He was on bedding composed of a pile of warm furs from no earthly beast, laying on his side with his back toward someone...

Someone who had a gloriously cold hand on his forehead. It felt so good he wanted to rub his whole face against the it, but refrained.

“His more fiery aspect seems to have receded again.”

_Familiar lady voice_, Tony thought hazily.

“He is still not quite stable. His magic did not agree with Extremis,” said another voice, slightly closer: _Loki_. “And Extremis did not agree with it.”

“There are few mages of our sort with fire in their blood. Fire is not an element that coexists easily with mage-craft and colder forms of power, unless the magics are very powerful indeed, or have time to mature alongside the elemental aspects from early youth; such is why there is a scarcity of fire-mages. You knew this.”

“I knew no other way to keep him alive.”

“Fair enough.”

“Why the fuck am I in a cave?” Tony groaned rolling over onto his back so he could see Loki and... yes, that was Lady Hlín; although he made no move to dislodge the trickster’s hand from his brow, and went as far as to lightly grip the god’s wrist to keep him there. In reality, while a bit tired, he felt otherwise better than he had in years: no aches, no pains, no soreness or stiffness even. A glance down at himself was momentarily disconcerting, because all of his scars were missing, but he then refocused quickly on the trickster and his former mentor.

“These caverns are my home and laboratory, Mr. Stark,” Hlín explained. “You are feeling more clear-headed, I hope?”

“I feel less like my skull is full of angry hornets, yeah.”

“I’ve restricted your magic, for the time being,” she explained. “You will need to learn to control it, and prevent it overwhelming your mind and body alike. You’ve already displayed some impressive understanding of its capabilities, as I understand it.”

“I’m a quick study.” His eyelids lowered a bit as Loki’s fingers slid from his brow to card through his hair. “What were you saying about Exremis?”

“It exacerbated the violence of your gift manifesting,” Hlín said gently. “You nearly... lost physical
and mental coherence altogether. If you hadn’t been able to regulate your temperature with Loki’s aid, yourself and your tower would have both been wiped off the face of your world. Anyone or anything near you would’ve been caught in the blast, too.”

Belatedly, Tony noticed that half of Loki’s face, while healing, still appeared pink and burnt. “How long have I been here?”

“It’s been two days since our exchange with M,” said the trickster.

“I burned you kinda badly, didn’t I?” He winced, knowing the trickster’s healing as he did, and how bad it must have been to still show any visible signs when the trickster wasn’t severely drained.

Loki nodded. “Your resemblance to a son of Muspellheim was profound, but I’ve had recent experience learning to combat that variety of heat. It was nothing I could not withstand, for the sake of keeping us both alive.”

Hlín’s eyes narrowed where she stared at the younger god for a moment, but she said nothing, and soon refocused on the mortal.

“Great. I get to learn to regulate, in stereo. Extremis and magic. What could possibly go wrong?” Tony sighed.

“It could require more than twelve days.”

“Gee, thanks, Loki, no pressure,” the inventor muttered.

“Tony,” the trickster said, soft and serious, waiting for the mortal to look him steadily in the eye before he said in firm, certain tones, “I think you capable of containing your gift in a far shorter time than that. You already have the mind of a mage, and it’s clear you’ve learned a great deal already, based on what footage I stole from the Ten Rings of your escape. You will not be able to use your newfound capabilities safely in this upcoming war, perhaps, without risk to yourself, but I do not foresee going into battle against Thanos without you at my side, even now.”

“Sweet-talking fiend,” Tony accused, but with a bit of warmth in his smile that belied the sarcasm of his response.

“The very best,” Loki acknowledged.

“Rest for now, both of you,” Hlín commanded, with a hard look at Loki in particular. “Mr. Stark—”

“Tony.”

She half-smiled. “You begin training tomorrow.” With an all too knowing look toward Loki, which was in equal parts disapproval, resignation, and amused exasperation, the elder mage turned away from them and vanished.

The trickster, wearing only a soft tunic tucked into loose black leggings, sat beside Tony on the wide bed. It was one of several in a wing designed to facilitate medical treatments of a magic-based variety, and each bed was thus a large stone block covered in intricate designs (most functional like the sigils and symbols “Loki’s worktable” in Tony’s lab back home now bore, some purely decorative) and furs or other bedding piled atop the flat top to make it comfortable. All of the other beds were empty, and both of the room’s heavy oak doors were shut.

“You let them live,” Tony muttered.
“I left them for you to destroy for yourself, at your leisure.”

“You need them for something.”

Loki remained silent for a few moments before admitting, very quietly and full of ire, “I wish, at this point, that I did not.”

“Post-war, then.”

“Yes.”

Tony sighed, his eyes falling shut. “Don’t suppose you can send me a memo when you’re done fucking them over so I can coordinate wiping them out for good?”

“I don’t see why not.”

A bit surprised, the inventor shot Loki a sidelong look.

“They have angered me, and deliberately jeopardized plans I have spent years designing and maintaining the machinations of,” the trickster explained. “There is good reason I demanded of you the promise that I did. In exchange, I suppose, you may have my word that you will know, the day I have used them as I require, and where to most effectively strike them first.”

Tony felt something fluttery and aching and uncomfortable right behind where his arc reactor used to be—a newly scar-free patch of skin now, which he also could blame Loki for. “You plan to keep making deals with me, like this? Are you developing a habit?”

The trickster seemed to seriously consider it. “I do not know.”

That wasn’t the answer Tony was prepared for, of several possibilities in his head that he’d come up with, just from watching Loki’s expression. “You... don’t?”

“For the time being, you have one key advantage with me, in that you are not as beholden to your promises made to me as I am to those I make to you. That will change, as you develop your gift for mage-craft and spend longer in this realm, channeling its magics.”

“I knew picking up Allspeak would probably come with a catch,” Tony muttered. He tugged a bit at the trickster’s shirt until Loki moved closer, and the inventor could press his side against the god’s thigh. *Ahh, cold feels nice.*

“It won’t affect your dealings with any other mortals on earth, save perhaps more powerful magic-users and others who wander between the realms frequently and also bear traces of their travels in body and blood as you will, in the form of Allspeak in your mind and some of the magic in your veins.”

“At least there’s that.”

“I enjoy sharing mutual enemies with you, but those occasions remain the exception more often than the rule. The general rule being that I am war criminal guilty of attacking your world, opposed to your long-time allies at S.H.I.E.L.D., casual nemesis of Thor, enemy of Asgard, and also a fickle trickster god known for lies, chaos, mischief and mayhem. You, by contrast, are a guardian of earth, friend of my brother and thus considered a sometimes ally of Asgard, and overall a self-deprecating but ostentatious hero out to bring your world into a bright future. We have only so many enemies to share, and all of my usual allies are more often your enemies than not, just as yours are more often opposed to my plans and machinations. Even if this became habit, to what end? We both remain
Tony narrowed his eyes a little, just for a moment. “If I thought you were more than 33.333% pure evil at most*, I’d maybe agree with you, but you’re not as much of a villain as you let most people think you are, though. Not that you’ve lost any of your amoral and dangerous edge, because you clearly have issues with valuing the lives of strangers more than whatever games you have in play, after centuries of considering them to be widely acknowledged as pawns with roles to play in the adventures you crafted for your friends, and it still hasn’t fully sunk in that the way you constructed those games let the players keep those illusions of us-versus-them that have caused you so many problems as the official ‘disreputable other’ prince of Asgard, rather than question them and see their enemies as people with lives and value and so forth. You’re still a terrible person, generally speaking, but as a force in the universe you’re chaotic neutral and selfish, but not irredeemable, and not actually as overly sadistic or as would-be-tyrannical as you let us believe, during the invasion. You don’t want to rule people directly, as their king, when it’s so much more fun to fuck with them when they can’t see the strings you’re pulling to do it, and requires a lot less public-opinion maintenance for the sake of peace and preventing violent and bloody revolution and all.”

“I’m an inconvenience more than an evil?” Loki scathed.

“More like... you’re a storm, not a bomb. You’re not evil by design. You just do evil things to achieve your ends, which themselves are more generally selfish and ruthlessly practical than actually evil or sadistic when it comes down to why you want it and what you actually plan to do with it upon achieving it; but even when the end results aren’t evil, or are maybe even good for other people, those ends don’t justify your means often enough to meet the usual quota for ‘actual good guy’ by most standards, especially because you just don’t much care to bother considering things like ‘does this do the greatest good for the greatest number of people?’ more than you consider ‘will this be fun and show Asgard what dicks they are in one fell swoop?’ If that makes sense.”

“If I do not intend to carve a kingdom for myself wherever I might see fit, what is it you suppose I am after? What is it you believe that I want, Tony?” The challenge was light, curious, and sincerely interested, with only a hint of veiled mocking.

“I think you want to do things no one else can, because you can. I think you have something to prove, after our war is up, but beyond that, I don’t think you really know. Maybe you will, after you thaw Jotunnheim and whatever else, and show Asgard and the nine realms just how much of a force to be reckoned with you are. Until then, you’re just playing the games you have, and leaving room to plant seeds for future ones if you see a place for any.”

Loki leaned in close, his expression carefully blank, though the air around him was very cold indeed—cold enough to bring out his more elemental Jotunn aspects: the blue skin, the slightly raised markings, and those bright red eyes. “I do not want any throne of Jotunnheim.”

“Who said it had to be a throne? You’d still have a whole world to play with, to rebuild as you see fit, as its savior and maybe more than a king ever could be, especially given the deeply-ingrained cultural lack of respect for distant authority figures. You could raise up whatever leaders you best saw fit, and bring them down in order to replace them however you might like if they no longer suited you.”

A slow, wicked smile appeared on the trickster’s face. “Just so,” he murmured. “You know me far too well already.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Tony muttered. “You wouldn’t be bothering the earth as much, with that kind of project going on.”
“In theory. The nine realms being interconnected and interdependent as they are, that may not be the case at all. It depends upon what resources and conflicts I might need, in future, to engineer events as I see fit, across them all.” He traced two fingers along the line of the inventor’s jaw.

Tony let his eyelids lower partially as he leaned into the deliciously cold touch. He remembered how much Pepper had enjoyed cold things, while she had Extremis: nothing was numbing, or painful, the way it had been to her before. The thought of enjoying all of Loki with this sort of added temperature-differential now non-harmful made the inventor’s mouth run dry. “You feel good.”

“Were it not for the fire in your veins at present, you would have frostbite.”

“I’ll keep the fire if you keep the ice? A little conscious effort should keep it working for a while.” His grin was openly lascivious.

“You’ve barely been conscious since that application of Extremis. I somehow doubt you to be in full control.”

“Try me.”

“You’re easily distracted.”

“Not really. I can just tell you’re genuinely not sure whether or not you like the idea of being an ally to me more than one and a half times, and figure I’ll surprise you with a reminder inquiry later, now take off your shirt and let me taste you.”

Loki took hold of the inventor’s wrists, putting his weight on them first, then pushing them up until they rested on either side of Tony’s head. “And if I’m inclined to play a different sort of game?”

Tony grinned, wide and welcoming and fierce, then swiftly knocked the trickster off-balance and rolled them, freeing his own wrists and grabbing Loki’s in the same movement, pinning them above the god’s head. It wasn’t effortless, but it was far less of a struggle (or failure) than the last time he’d tried that same move, and Loki appeared genuinely shocked and a bit impressed with Extremis-borne super-strength. “Then I think I might change the rules.”

Keeping one hand pinning the god’s wrists, Tony hooked one finger under the fabric at the base of Loki’s throat, not bothering with the tunic’s untightened laces, and with a bit of focus heated the finger enough to make the fabric smoke, and rip easily down the middle when Tony pulled. Reaching where it tucked into Loki’s pants, the inventor tugged the fabric free and ripped the remainder open with merely another sharp tug. Only then did he slowly pull out the laces at the top, smirking when he noticed the trickster was already breathing faster.

Holding his gaze steadily, Loki mused, “You often do.”

“You like it.”

“I love a challenge, admittedly.” The trickster then hissed as Tony pressed their bodies together, and the temperature contrast, abrupt as it was, left him breathless. It was almost painful, almost searing, but not quite.

“Well, the challenge is, don’t let me melt you, and I won’t let you freeze me,” Tony offered, his mouth very close to the god’s own, not quite touching, but the heat of his breath was tantalizing. “Think you can handle that?”

Loki grinned, quick and sly, and leaned up to capture that mouth, making them both inhale sharply at the rush of sensation, at the clash of fire and ice.
Tony was dizzied by it. The cold of Loki was comfortably luxurious in an utterly foreign way. It was soothing the way that almost-scalding-hot water might be soothing to sore muscles of a normal human, but instead of relaxing him it left him sharper and more alert: cooling a haze that he hadn’t previously realized that his head was in. In this form, Loki still tasted faintly of apples and spice as he always did, but the note of spice was weaker, and there was an added flavor component akin to fresh, cold well-water with a hint of pine.

The way the god of lies shuddered and moaned at the feel of Tony’s free hand running down his side and back to grab his ass, was also eminently satisfying, and suggested the temperature difference was affecting him, too, in equally good ways. With reluctance, the inventor broke away from Loki’s mouth to lick and bite at the trickster’s neck. “I almost think you like this, too,” he growled.

Panting a little, Loki offered a half-hearted glare, which looked only a little strange from red eyes instead of green. “I thought you an observant man, Tony.” He rolled his hips, emphasizing the very obvious evidence of his enjoyment by using it to apply pressure and friction against Tony’s matching erection.

The inventor made an incoherent noise in response, then moaned outright when Loki did it again just after removing their pants with the usual spell. This time Tony could see a glimmer of after-image from the strings such magic pulled. “Fuck, Loki, that feels—oh god.” It was almost too good: all of Loki’s bare skin under him, cool and delicious against him as he burned. He let go of the trickster’s wrists and moved down Loki’s body quickly because he had to taste.

Loki seemed almost startled by the abrupt and insistently sucking invitation into irrumation, but his surprise didn’t hinder his enthusiasm once the inventor took him to the hilt, if the sharp cry of helpless pleasure and the way his entire body went bowstring-tense and shivery at the feel of so much heat—too much, causing just the faintest hint of pain, but the trickster was too far gone on the far greater pleasure it wrought, as Tony’s tongue reminded him of all the reasons he really appreciated the mad inventor’s mouth.

It took him a long few moments to realize he was repeating Tony’s name over and over like a plea or a fervent prayer, interrupted by occasional half-coherent praise, but by the time realization struck, Loki was beyond caring.

“Tony, Tony, Tony, don’t stop, don’t please, oh yes do that again. Ah.”

It was as music to the inventor’s ears, focused as he was on his task. Loki tasted different here, too. The popsicle comparison was inescapable, but Tony didn’t even care. Loki tasted like everything refreshing he’d ever wanted to have in his mouth on hot summer days where being an engineer meant that billionaire or no, working up a sweat and becoming a hot mess in more ways than one, wasn’t always escapable. And he was obviously a bit more sensitive, because of the heat and his own cold, and the noises the trickster kept making because of it, and the way his usually polished and precise words had utterly fled him, made Tony’s head spin and his cock twitch.

He paused, making Loki hiss in disappointment for a moment. “Lube.”

Loki muttered something and offered one hand, palm-up.

Tony swiped his fingers across the god’s palm, and they came away with enough slick somehow. He didn’t ask, but made note that the threads of magic from its summoning looked surprisingly complicated. “Thank you.” Then he swallowed Loki to the hilt again and swallowed around him for reward, slicking himself quickly before slipping two fingers slowly into the god’s entrance, feeling Loki’s long fingers tangled in his hair grip a bit tighter as the god gave a breathy moan and arched his hips to facilitate more, which Tony obligingly gave: opening him up teasingly at first, until Loki
was almost squirming with frustration, then applying three fingers hard to the trickster’s prostate with hard, dragging little strokes.

Caught off-guard and close as he was, Loki came hard with a broken-off, shuddering moan, followed by a series of low ‘ah’ syllables of varying half-pained half-blissed-out intonations as Tony didn’t let up on his assault and sucked him harder, too hard and hot and Loki almost sobbed with it, his head falling back as his back arched. “Tony, T-tony, please can’t... your mouth, I can’t.”

Pulling off slowly, Tony tried to meet the god’s eye, but found Loki’s squeezed tight shut, his expression utterly open as he jerked and shuddered with the aftershocks bringing him back to full hardness as the inventor’s fingers continued to work him. “You’re so fucking gorgeous,” Tony rasped, and tugged one of Loki’s legs up to hook over his shoulder, replacing his fingers with his cock as fast as he could, earning moans from both of them, and making the god’s crimson eyes snap open as he grabbed hard at Tony’s ass and pulled him in deeper still.

“Your blue is fading,” Tony murmured. “Still comfortable?”

“Don’t. Stop.” The blue abruptly stopped looking so faded.

“Fuck yes,” the inventor groaned and jerked back, only to drive back in hard, at the angle he knew from experience made Loki mouth fall open and his expression turn smoldering no matter how stern and composed his glare had been moments before. And this occasion was no different. “Yes, just like that.” Again, and the trickster was making breathless sounds that only increased in frequency as Tony set a punishing pace, leaning in to lick at the markings at Loki’s jaw, down his throat, and across his chest, now hearing Loki swear at length in Asgardian, sounding reverent and vicious by turns until the inventor’s hand wrapped around his cock, at which point Loki lost words again, and instead bit Tony’s shoulder to muffle is cry as he came again.

Tony tried to hold back, but the feel and the sight of Loki falling apart, and the bite, and how tight and perfect and improbable but fantastic everything felt, took its toll, and he rode out his orgasm with a few more sharp thrusts, making the god gasp, before they both slowed to a halt, catching their breaths.

“Holy fuck,” the inventor panted. “We need to do that more.”

Loki gave a breathless half-laugh. “Better than expected.” He then shot the mortal a thoughtful look, and sat up on his elbows, drawing Tony in closer with the leg not still over the mad inventor’s shoulder. “Now I wonder...”

Tony made a strangled sound at the feeling of Loki deliberately tightening around him, and pulling him in deeper again. “Fffuck.”

“Let’s test your endurance further, now you’re a little more Jotunn-like,” Loki purred in his left ear.

“Yes, let’s,” murmured a second Loki, in Tony’s right ear.

The noise Tony made became more strangled still. “You’re—seriously, you-”

He felt a cold, immaculately muscled chest press against his back and a cold mouth suck at his earlobe.

The Loki before him looked very pleased with himself.

“Yeah. *Fuck* yeah,” Tony said, with feeling, squirming a little for more friction. Goddamn, cold should not feel so good, but oh it so did.
“Good,” purred both tricksters, in chorus.

“Shit, that’s creepy, can that-” He was firmly interrupted by Loki’s tongue in his mouth and another intimate squeeze, and before he could consider protesting that, two cool and slick fingers were pushed into his ass and rubbing hard across his prostate. He pushed his hips back into it helplessly, and gasped a little when the Loki at his front yanked his hips back forward hard again, driving him back in deep as he could go.

“Fuck me,” the other one commanded in his ear.

Tony obeyed, hard and fast as he could managed, each pull back fucking himself on the trickster’s fingers, and each thrust forward giving Loki all he had.

The addition of a third finger and the god more ruthlessly targeting his prostate had Tony desperate within only a few minutes. When Loki’s duplicate finally seized hold of his hips, the inventor broke away from the kiss with a moan. “Loki, fuck, please, don’t tease just-AHFUCK!” Pound me so hard you make yourself moan with me. Oh fuck. Total success.

“Good boy,” Loki purred, as Tony let them be dragged nearer the edge of the bed by his duplicate.

Surprised his legs supported him once he had his feet back on the ground, Tony tried to brace himself. He really did.

Then Loki in front of him gripped the edge of the bed with one hand, and Tony’s shoulder with the other, and used that as leverage to take from Tony as he pleased, which he did, hips greedily working the inventor over, in perfect time with the other trickster pounding into Tony’s body from behind, leaving him gasping and struggling to keep himself together and move with the tempestuous rhythm they’d trapped him in.

The Loki at his back gripped his hair and pulled Tony’s head back. The Loki at his front took the opportunity to bite and mouth at his throat.

Tony was lost. He came hard, far too fast, and it didn’t stop.

“And I want you to feel a little of what you do to me,” Loki purred.

And he did, helpless noises of bewildered pleasure-and-pain escaping his lips as he started to recover, even as his nerves all screamed with the sensory overload of it, and it ached and burned, but so sweetly. He moaned and pulled Loki into a desperate kiss as he regained his strength and sped up the pace once he did so, making both of Loki keep up to stay in rhythm, even as the one he kissed came again, shuddering prettily and breaking the kiss to swear as it swept over him.

“I see the appeal,” Tony admitted.

Loki bit his lip in response, then kissed him again, shuddering through occasional aftershocks.

Loki’s duplicate barely outlasted the mad inventor a few minutes later, making the inventor feel thoroughly trapped and used with a hard bite to the back of his neck as they both rode it out. Then the duplicate faded, and Tony hissed at the sudden loss, burying his face in the trickster’s neck and slumping forward, letting the god draw him further onto the bed after a quick cleaning spell.

Both of them boneless and sated, and settled under the topmost fur comfortably, Tony had to ask, “How’s the meetings on earth?”
“I’ll find out tomorrow. I left Thor, Mar-Vell and Miss Romanov in charge once I found your location. Thor was here briefly some hours ago, mostly to explain how surprised he was that Gamora actually returned to the tower after going missing, seeking to track down the rest of the Ten Rings still left alive, to no avail. They have retreated even more fully than before, but I’m sure you’re aware what impressive feats they are capable of, given time to regroup and rebuild.”

“Uh...stuck on the part where you handed over the reins to... anyone.”

“I was needed here, to regulate your temperature. Hlín has spells which work on fire, and which work on fire-giants, but neither quite worked so well on you as my own elemental abilities. I can’t have you *combusting* when I still require your alliance.” He sounded tired suddenly. Very tired.

“You haven’t slept in how many days?”

“I have not had the time for it since you vanished. It’s been damned inconvenient. Now come closer. I’ll wake if you change temperature too drastically in your sleep, if I can feel you.” He tugged the inventor over, pressing his chest to Tony’s back and curling around him loosely.

Trapped under the blanket with his own warmth, perfectly counter-balanced by Loki still wearing elemental Jotunn chill, the inventor had to admit that he was ridiculously comfortable. “I’ve been asleep for-”

“You’re still recovering. Your magic particularly. It’s like loud static, do you not feel it?” the trickster chided.

“Well... a bit. It's not as bad as-”

Loki tisked, cutting him off.

“What?”

“Feel mine.”

“Uh... how?”

“Expand your awareness, using the threads. I saw you eyeing them earlier, and I know you have more control of them than would usually be expected of someone so new.”

“You may not be the one with plans to teach me, but I’ve already learned a lot from you, let’s say. And a lot of it... well, it’s about expectation and confidence. I gathered that much from importance of ‘know thyself’ and all that.”

Loki hummed. “You do have cocksure self-confidence in spades and seem to expect always that forces will bend to your will. It grows complicated, depending upon which forces those are, and how far you try to bend them. That will be for you in the morning however. For now, you have a more minor exercise. Look at me with your eyes closed, feel the difference.”

Tony shut his eyes with an impatient sound, but slowed his breathing a little and managed to consciously map his own body, and the buzzing caged within it. He could feel gentle pressure keeping it in, and with an effort he could not-quite-*see* it. He was aware of it, as he was the strings. The threads of the spell across his skin were thin but strong, lavender in color, all organized and smooth—Hlín’s, they had to be. He looked past them, imagined reaching out to touch and felt—or heard? It was akin to both. And it was Loki, all emerald green so dark it might be black to his visual cortex, but the rest was... peaceful: airy yet heavy, smooth like the surface of a very deep pool with no hint of wind. It wasn’t silent, there was a low thrum singing through it, deep and resonating, but it
was smooth, unwavering. Somehow the sound made Tony think of a waterfall down a cliff-face, or more likely the waterfall that circled Asgard itself: always overflowing, never running dry because the water never really fell, and was never really lost; it just cycled through, held in by the same forces that kept Asgard suspended in such a near-impossible way.

“How the fuck do you do that?” Tony muttered.

“Millennia of practicing assured self-awareness and presumed self-knowledge, along with natural talent,” Loki murmured.

*Presumed self-knowledge* was a weighty phrase. Tony recalled it from discussions of foundations and anchor-points for mages that he’d had with Thor before Loki’s return to earth for the sake of their alliance. He tried to imagine what he was sensing now, of Loki’s magic, being thrown into chaos, and almost shivered.

The trickster gave a questioning hum.

“There’s a difference between *knowing* and *seeing* is all.”

“Yes.” Loki’s arm about his waist shifted slightly, accommodating the way the inventor leaned back into the cold of him and settled there comfortably. “Sleep.”

Closing his eyes, as he continued to half-listen to the not-exactly-hum of Loki’s magic, Tony let himself sleep, trying to calm and focus his own mind. The sleep, at least, he managed.

~~

*One week, four days...*

Tony woke up a bit uncomfortably warm, despite being uncovered. Seriously uncovered. He was, in fact, naked in a large public-ish room atop a pile of furs.

Hlín looked unimpressed. Intimidatingly so. He knew it was probably habit for her by now, having been a teacher so long that she possibly remembered events that had happened in Loki’s childhood, even his infancy, far clearer than the trickster god did.

It still wasn’t exactly a confidence-booster.

Neither was the fact Loki was missing, and so were Tony’s pants.

He hated it when the trickster forgot to send them to the floor or somewhere convenient when stripping them both via magic.

“Well, this is awkward,” he said. Because it was. Painfully.

Hlín snapped her fingers, and summoned clothing for him: black slacks of almost-earthly style and ridiculously comfortable fabric, and a dark red tunic of a style not unlike the one he’d ripped off of Loki last night.

“Thank you,” the inventor said very quietly, but with sincere gratitude.
“At least the poor fool got some sleep, at last. He is already maddening to deal with enough without that, as well as fear for your health and incomplete vengeance added on to increase his moodiness.”

Tony grimaced. “You are a being of incredible patience, for not snapping his neck at any point in the past two days.” He slid off the bed to stand before her.

“Don’t think I didn’t try at least once.”

The inventor’s eyebrows raised.

“It wouldn’t do for him to believe me incapable of the effort. He needed reminding and he knows that was my purpose as much as to inform him that he was being insufferable.”

“Ah... sort of an... Asgardian thing?”

“A mage thing. We get along, generally speaking, as well as cats.”

“So some are friends forever and others require frequent swats to the face?”

“And some can never stand each other for long without making efforts to rip each other apart, which is why my other students are ‘studying abroad’ for the next few days.”

“Good way to keep them and Loki from destroying things. And each other.”

Hlín nodded with a slightly bittersweet smile. “Just so.” She rested a hand on his shoulder. “Your temperature is a little higher than a mortal’s should generally be, but you seem much more stable. You were a bit less so in your sleep.”

“I’m conscious and aware of it. It’ll become habitual for my system over time, but I do need to train it a bit. So that’s a factor.”

“Yes.” She narrowed her eyes at him a little. “I should warn you that leaping ahead of yourself in certain reckless ways will do you great harm, if you are not fully focused and aware of how you are doing what you are doing.”

“I figured.”

“You still attempted teleportation less than five minutes after your gift manifested, before it was even fully established. If you had any fewer of the meticulous safeguards Loki uses and you barely managed to mimic, according to him, you might have wound up halfway through a wall, or worse: fused to another living being. You’re lucky that none of your most vital organs ruptured, and that you grew new ones thanks to your Extremis serum not long after that. Especially if, as I suspect, you had no fully solid destination in mind when you pulled the trigger, as it were.”

Tony grimaced. “I... panicked, a little. Not gonna do that again. Anytime soon. I did feel the effects and belatedly realize how stupid of an idea it was to try that.”

Hlín nodded. “Good. That acknowledged, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of anyone having undergone an awakening as violent as yours having anything remotely close to that degree of refined control, let alone application of the necessary abstract concepts and the calculated approach they require, within such a short period of time.”

“I’ve been mapping every detectible facet of Loki’s magic for about four or five months now, and they made so little sense it hurts, but I’ve got the stats and the effect-maps memorized by now. Once I could actually see the strings, it was just a matter of calculating how to arrange them so they pulled
or threaded through those regions of the maps, and doing that I could actually figure out more about the constructions he was weaving and *why can none of my machines detect anything about these damn strings?*” He gestured widely, summoning a bit of unnatural light to his palm just to get a few strings to flash visibly for him. They were, he was startled to realize once his focus was suddenly brought to observing them without as many distractions, *fucking* everywhere, through everything, interwoven into himself and Hlín, the stone floor under their feet, and the air between them. He blinked a bit, startled at the density, and shook his head quickly. “Woah, what the fuck...”

“What did you see?”

“Hang on, trying to figure out how to dial back the string-sensitivity of my vision, and it’s not easy when I don’t exactly have menus to select filter settings from. Usually I have JARVIS do this sort of thing.”

“The sentient construct in your home?”

“Yes. He’s started out as my outboard brain, so I’m sort of not surprised he wound up sentient. I’m just glad he’s got a much less fucked up personality than I do. Okay... I think I got it. It’s now less like staring through a world made entirely of iridescent spider webs and complex cotton-candy constructions.” He paused. “Wow. Magic is better than acid.”

“Acid? Or caustic materials in general?” Hlín sounded uncertain.

“Uh, not ‘acid’ like any class of acidic compound. I mean, Lysergic acid diethylamide, particularly. Colloquialisms don’t generally jive with Allspeak, I did notice.”

“Ahh. Colloquialism. Yes, it is a bit limited that way. Idioms are worse.”

“Oh trust me, I know. Found that out with Thor.”

“I can only imagine.” She sounded deeply amused at the thought. She pushed his shoulder gently as she moved toward the door, and he let her touch guide him. “You will be an interesting student, Tony. Unconventional, certainly. Few mages with dormant gifts have such intimate knowledge of spell-work, and such cocksure trust in their knowledge and understanding of the physical world around them and what rules of it they are unconventionally manipulating, as to allow such unwavering confidence in their spell-casting. You’re a fool, but a remarkably brilliant and clever one.”

“It’s what I do.”

“No wonder you have such keen understanding of Loki, and he of you. He was unique to teach as well.”

“Because his gift woke up pretty much the first time he did?”

“Ahh, he told you some, then.”

“He said you’d mentioned I had dormant magic and mage potential. I asked a lot of questions about what that would entail.”

“Had your magic not awoken in a situation beyond your control, would you have accepted my offer to teach you?”

Tony smirked faintly. “Yeah. I was gonna.”
“Good.” Her smile was bit warmer and more genuine, at that. She was beautiful, Tony realized, not for the first time.

Hlín carried her age and an unearthly air about her almost tangibly, unlike many other Aesir. Odin had some of that same gravity, more so than either of his sons, who had fewer millennia under their belts. Frigga had it, too, but her aura had been somehow livelier, and every image of her in his memory, she looked like she was standing under a beam of sunlight. Hlín, by contrast, seemed like she spent her time with the moon and stars, and the dark, and had their quieter, colder wisdom memorized so well that the knowledge became a part of her, carved into her very bones. That made Tony recall Loki’s words from days before: *You seek, and you find, and you never tire of the endlessness, of how much there is to learn and how much of it there is to carry, especially when what you really desire from understanding is to know things so completely that the knowledge is a part of your very self. You cannot imagine a world without it any longer, once it’s yours.* He shivered.

Lost in thought as he was, he’d barely paid more than passing attention to the long hall they walked down, but he did snap out of his thoughts a little as they began to walk down a very, very long flight of stairs. Hlín had summoned a spherical lantern-like construct to light their way, hovering just overhead like a small moon. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“New mages, like yourself, particularly given the strength of your gift and all you know and are capable of inflicting on the world around just subconsciously as your mind is awhirl, require very strong walls to practice within, and learn control,” she said simply. “That is actually one of the key reasons so many Jotunn homes, before the ice, were subterranean, carved out of mountains and deep below the earth, wherever there was enough stone to make something worthy from. They would thus have walls thick enough to withstand young and inexperienced mages, for generations.”

“Thor mentioned that the gift was more common among Jotunns than Aesir, generally speaking. And they were often very powerful.”

“Indeed.”

“Did you ever see Jotunnheim, before the ice?”

She turned to look at him, mildly surprised. “Yes. A few times. My mother had kin there, as well as in Nifleheim.”

Tony’s eyes widened for only a moment. “Ah. That... also further explains why you want to help with Loki’s Jotunnheim plans, then. I think.”

She stopped dead, staring at him with more shock this time. “What do you know of it?”

“Oh... right. Well. It’s for after the war. I only know what I’ve guessed and called him on. Loki made one offhand comment to Odin about what wouldn’t be enough to de-ice Jotunnheim, and Odin asked him what would. Loki steered the conversation away from it in a way that made me think he knows what might, because he clearly wanted Odin to think he was trying to cover up that he had no answer. And Odin believed it. But Frigga didn’t seem to. He mentioned you had family on Jotunnheim when the ice hit, and wanted to help him, but no more than that, and probably only revealed that because he was still reeling from it, and was able to derail me a bit with the ‘by the way you have dormant magic’ bit right after that. He’s looking for something on earth that might be to do with it, but I’m not wholly sure what we might have for that, or if he’s just looking for someone in particular to manipulate into helping him get some artifact from another realm or something, you know? It’s Loki. Presume you know where he’s actually aiming his plans, and you’ll get whiplash when those plans take an abrupt hairpin turn and fly off a cliff somehow as he always intended.
That’s all I know. That’s it. You’re informed.” He made a sweeping, now that’s out of the way gesture. “Got it?”

Hlín frowned at him, bemused and a little disconcerted. “You keep up with him far more easily than I.”

“It’s never actually easy. I’m just vain enough I make it seem like that whenever I can pull it off. He does, too, with all the things he does. It’s showmanship.”

“It’s being a mage. Projecting confidence and ease goes a long way toward keeping ones magic in check, and in maintaining the frame of mind, somewhat clinically distant and hyper-observant, required for spell-casting,” Hlín said slowly, and began their descent again.

“Oh good. Something I’ve already got plenty of practice in.”

“You were made to be a mage, Tony Stark. Almost disconcertingly so.”

“I’m what I’ve made of what I have, given all that I understand, is all.”

“A mage.”

“Technomage, until recent, yeah.”

She shook her head, taking on a hint of exasperation similar to the sort she aimed at Loki, but a little more openly amused for the time being. “Oh, the confidence of the very young.”

“I’m approaching old, by mortal standards.”

“You’re very young.”

“And compared to you, Loki is practically still a punk teenager?”

She half-smirked. “Yes, quite.”

“That’s got to be irritating. Him being him.”

“His power exceeds mine. His understanding of the universe exceeds mine. All he may learn from me now, if he would bother to ask or to listen, is wisdom. That is all.”

“On the power front... how much of Loki’s is just what he was born with, and how much is actually accumulated over time?”

“Most of it is power he has always had within him. It is not a limitless well, and he can exert all of his power and be severely weakened for a time, until his energies recover. It grows, when unused, or only lightly used, and he has the capacity to draw power from sources outside himself and convert it into a form that he can use. His capacity, in that regard, is what makes him a strong enough mage to be perceived as a potential threat to Odin.”

“Uh... Wait, wait. Even before the whole... bridge-shattery thing? How did that even make sense? I swear, things get crazier the more I learn about this place.”

“It is a truly long story, I warn you.”

“As long as these stairs?”

She laughed softly, her smile knowing and a bit wickedly amused as she began, “Mages are
respected in Asgard, but without wars to show their loyalty, their mettle and their courage and skill within, Aesir find them difficult to trust. Odin, myself, and others who fought in the last great war against Jotunnheim, to halt further spread of the ice, are vivid in the memories of many in Asgard. They trust Odin because to them he is an exceptional warrior, a great leader, and the fact that both of these things are in no small part because of his mastery of magic is one more often forgotten. He is viewed in our world a bit like you are viewed in yours.”

“A crazy brilliant genius who drinks and parties too much?

“That is only one of your facets, and one you feign more often than not over the past few years, I suspect.”

“... Maybe.”

“Odin is seen as an inventor, who inherited his empire by birth but whose achievements and advances thereof have made that empire his more than it ever truly belonged to kings before him, in the eyes of those currently living in Asgard. The belief they all have in him has its own power, which has also transformed him. I do not know if Asgard will ever have need of another king, personally, given how masterfully he has constructed his kingdom and himself, providing peace, a mostly uniform culture, a stable population with few conflicts and powerful warriors able to protect not only Asgard but help his allies throughout the rest of the nine realms when they may need us, or need reminding that we are with them, for good or ill.”

“It’s good to be the king,” Tony quoted absently.

Hlín shot him an odd look.

“It’s from a... movie... keep going.”

“Mages are notoriously immune to the charisma of others. We are the primary dissenters and voices of reason left in Asgard, and while most know and respect this, we are still frowned upon. We are the ones who remind them that not all is well, not all is golden, and while their peace and prosperity is fine enough, there is far more to the universe than what they see. We are dissatisfied with sameness, by nature, and we get bored very easily. It is not in the nature of most, if not all, mages to be content for long surrounded only by thing they have seen before, or things that we already know and understand because they are so simple that the knowledge is flat compared to matters more complex, and with daily cycles that feed into weekly and seasonal ones, all varying shades of the same with so many of the same faces over hundreds of years because of how long-lived Aesir are and how low their birthrates are in times of relative peace... Mages can get very bored, in Asgard.”

“Which can lead to trouble-making, I’m guessing. Chaos. Things going boom.”

“Yes, particularly if more than one mage are offended by one another.”

“Basically, you’re all doses of necessary entropy in a place otherwise set on preserving order and fighting entropy?” Tony mused.

“Something like that, yes.”

“So... all mages are unstable and kind of hard to like unless you know them and are a little bit broken yourself?”

“There are always exceptions. Healers of mind and body are a variety of mage given over so far into compassion that they have less insatiable minds, and at times I envy how peaceful they do seem. Others of a meditative sort can tend to find Asgard not too slow or unchanging, but rather too fast
and noisy. They go to less habitable places, and learn of many things that could never be expressed into words. Few of them return unchanged, if they return, for after a certain point, understanding those smallest of things mirrors understanding the very largest, and some of them slip too easily between cracks into other universes, sometimes without even noticing. These are considered ‘harmless eccentrics’ for the most part, though they deeply disconcert Aesir by their very presence, despite how Odin is always eager to meet with them, and share knowledge.”

“Most of your students, though...”

“Most of them travel extensively throughout Asgard and often to other places in the nine realms. They are restless, and easily bored, and young.”

“And you?”

“I am half-Jotunn, and while I am generally more meditative than peripatetic, I am also fiercely self-possessed and far more interested in seeing deeper into myself and the universe through the doors and other means I have woven into my home, than I am interested in losing myself to the air or the earth. I have been to all the nine realms save Nifleheim, I have explored all but Jotunnheim quite thoroughly. I have also been to other galaxies on a few memorable occasions, quite accidentally. I’ve seen more different stars than any other living creature in the nine realms, in fact.”

She turned he eyes from the way ahead, to fix on Tony’s face. “I find enjoyment in seeing many of them anew through the eyes of each different student I teach. I have become fascinated with mages and what makes us who and what we are, and the knowledge I have collected over the millennia has made me very good at what I do. There are other teachers of mage-craft in Asgard. All of them still come to me for advice, as my pupils. I am not satisfied, per se, but I have a world of my own here that does not leave me hungry and wanting enough to leave it.”

“Cool. Back to the... the Loki and Odin thing...”

“It’s to do primarily with the Odinforce.”

“The what now?”

“It is a deep power reserve which maintains all of Asgard, and regulates the flow of power and life-force through all of the roots and branches of Yggdrasil, keeping the tree strong and the connections between worlds harmonious rather than dissonant. It was not traditionally controlled by the king of Asgard, but Odin has been its caretaker even before he took the throne, and few remember a time when it was not his. It is strengthened and stabilized in no small part by the power of the people’s faith in the leadership of Asgard, which is channeled to it by old magics long ago carved deep into the stone, and woven into the air and water, which keep the realm eternal so eternal. While Asgard loves its ruler, and is happy, Yggdrasil is at its strongest and most healthy. Should someone less revered and respected occupy the throne, to the people’s knowledge, they either resign, or risk losing the whole kingdom and causing loss of life in multiple realms, effectively defeating the purpose of being king in the first place. It’s a sort of political safe-guard against corruption.”

“That... sounds fucking insane.”

“It’s ancient and powerful magic.”

“Still insane. Sword of Damocles, eat your heart out, goddamn.”

Hlín chuckled softly at that. “The Odinforce had a different name, before his ascendence to the throne. Few still remember what it was, but they all recall that it had another name. While he had no
children after he took the throne, it comforted people to believe he would be the only one to wield it in the future, as well. When Thor was born, and had little gift for magic and even less capableness in wielding it, that illusion remained. Even if Thor ever took the throne to lead, surely Odin would still attend to the Odinforce. Then came Loki, whose gift for magic became obvious when he was merely an infant and utterly unable to control it. Loki, who could shape-shift before he could walk. Loki, second son of Odin, far more clever than his elder brother, a brilliant strategist, charming even while being casually manipulative, impossible to contain, impossible to restrict, a trickster, and a perpetually dissatisfied mage prone to being acerbically blunt and inclined to publicly dissect people’s ignorant failings before their eyes with immaculate precision and accuracy even if he’s only known them for five minutes. He is not only himself constantly dissatisfied, but he is more than capable of making other people feel the same, and so he was known as a bringer of discontent, prone to disturbing the peace, from a very young age. And never lost that reputation.”

“Wow,” Tony muttered. “Does he even know?”

“Know what?”

“If he spread discontent, that suggests there was potential for a movement. People probably expected him to maybe lead one. Especially if they somehow thought he looked like something of a future king.” He paused. “Wow, he had no idea that was on the list of things about him that scared people, you know that, right?”

“I did not until his fall from the rainbow bridge, but yes, I’m now aware.” She sounded a bit sadly thoughtful.

“So, why did they not feel relief that they had a capable-looking back-up king in case they lost Odin?”

“There was a movement, of sorts, but not of the sort many feared. There was talk that, underhanded and greedy as Loki could be, he might seize the throne by evil means. No one trusted him, many knew him, and knowing all that he does about the crown, Loki did not even consider it an option, then. He would not be loved as a ruler of Asgard if he were to kill Odin, and he still was loyal and loving, if slightly disappointed and hurt, in his feelings toward his father then, seeking Odin’s approval as he still was in those days, so the idea would have struck him as absurd at best, or outright offensive at worst. As a mage myself, I know Loki to be too self-centered, too easily bored, and too peripatetic to have genuinely desired Odin’s throne.”

“That seems to be an uncommon opinion.”

“It is uncommon for someone to know Loki’s nature as well as I, or even you, currently do.”

“You got me there. What is it about Odin’s throne though? You said he’d constructed things around here, so I’m presuming you mean politically and rule of law...”

“It suits Odin’s nature, which is fond of control of his own people through kindness and courage and codes of honor, and doing what is best by all of them. Loki has actually met all of those people, and most of them he finds boring, or was actually insulted by them, or he had a torrid love affair with them that didn’t end well, or they actively want to kill him, but usually he just finds them dull.”

“That, I can see. And relate to, actually.”

“I’m sure.”

“Hey, now.”
She continued, “He finds their peaceful, stable lives dull. He finds maintaining peace and prosperity, growth of the harvests, and even the control of the weather, if only as it is contained over Asgard, also rather tedious. He would be driven mad, in Odin’s throne, with all of Odin’s duties, unless he was determined enough to spite someone, or several someones, by proving himself more than capable, but even that would strain after a century or so. He would be changed by it, but not enough to love it as Odin does. He could not rule Asgard without shattering it and remaking it to suit his nature, but he would have a far easier time, and did have a far easier time, controlling the parts he found most interesting by less direct means. That included dissatisfaction with a number of aspects of Aesir culture that had grown regressive since the war with Jotunnheim.”

“Yeah, he seemed to run into a lot of problems with those...”

“Many who recalled the wars had—very particular views about how Aesir should be, and all the things that their enemies were that made them uncomfortable were viewed as moral evils. I found it ridiculous, but I was already established as I am, apart from most Asgardian public life precisely because I cannot stand that sort of thing. Loki did not have anything which consumed him so thoroughly and allowed him such comfortable isolation. Instead, he would go out of his way to pull tricks on people that made them think, made people around them think, and whether he realizes or not, because he always got the worst of any backlash against the ideas he put in people’s heads, he had more positive effect than he knows. I think he may not see just how much, perhaps, until Jotunnheim is free of ice and what has survived of its cultures is returned to the nine realms.”

“But the backlash folks thought he was trying to foment dissent?”

“There are stories of revolution under kings past, but that was back when Asgard was part of an entire planet, rather than what we are today, which puts them... almost half a million years ago, in earth terms.”

Tony gaped. “Uh... and people still thought that was a thing he might do?”

“This is Loki.”

“Well... yeah, okay, I see your point.”

“It occurred to many, in Asgard, that if Odin were lost, Thor might take the throne, but could not maintain the Odinforce. It would fall to Loki, and opinions on how good, or catastrophic, that might be, have been divided ever since. Some believe he would be poison to it. Others believe that he would breathe new life into it. I, personally, think he would grow bored of it within a year or two, and spend the next century designing, constructing and implementing something for it, so that it wouldn’t require a living mage to maintain it in quite that way, and so that it could instead pull from the life-force of the throne, or perhaps even the entire populace of Asgard, with only occasional maintenance.”

Tony snorted. “You know, I can totally see that. Also, exactly how long are these stairs? Seriously, can’t you teleport us down?”

“All of my students must walk this way at least once. The walk is as long as it needs to be, let us say.”

“That’s... creepy. Is this a test?”

“No. There are things on your mind you wish to ask me before you can calm down sufficiently that I’m willing to remove my restraints upon your magic.”
Well, yes, there’s a lot on my mind. Got a war going on. Got a mad god ally. Got magic and Extremis at the same time making my thoughts a bit sluggish because the overall effect is like a haze, really...

Strange, is it not, that so few of the matters we’ve discussed are yours? You’re quite a self-centered person as well, Tony. Why have we spent all this time discussing Loki?” she inquired lightly.


“Do you know yourself, in this matter?”

“Better than I wish I did, honestly.”

She nodded. “That is the best one can generally hope for.”

“If he...” Tony hesitated, swore at himself silently for a moment. “If he had a broken world to play with and rebuild as he saw fit, you think he’d rule it?”

Hlín looked almost startled, shooting him a shrewd look. “You mean Jotunnheim.”

“You know any others of that description he’s been interested in?”

“You truly think he plans to thaw it?”

Tony considered. “Yeah.”

“I thought... Even for him, that should be impossible.”

“A lot of things Loki does fall into that category, in my experience.”

“The ice is over a mile thick, encasing the entire planet. There are salt reserves under the ice where oceans once were. All bodies of water on the surface of that world were dragged into the sky by hungry storms from the Casket of Ancient Winters, then sent back down only once it was all frozen.”

“I’d wondered about the oceans, if there was any liquid water left.”

“There is not.” Hlín swallowed tightly. “I was one of the ones who confirmed the state of their world, after the war.”

“Oh. Wow, I’m sorry.”

She shook her head sharply, lips thinning. “He is going to do something either more brilliant than I can fathom, or something reckless and horrible in ways I can’t imagine yet.”

“Probably both,” Tony mused. “You didn’t answer my question, though.”

“I... do not know. It would depend on whether there is enough potential left there to win over his wild heart. If there is, and they ensnare him with the promise of a place he might feel at home in all of the ways Asgard has always felt restrictive and dull to him, they might find him capable of incredible devotion.”

The inventor’s heart might have skipped and then ached. He tried not to acknowledge either event, and pretend that they hadn’t happened. “So it depends on the survivors.”

“And it depends on him.”
“Well, let’s hope his great-great-grandmother gave him a bit of advice along with telling him there are survivors.”

Hlín sighed. “I see you are constantly better informed than you should be. What person is this? Did he find them in Jotunnheim?”

“No. The, uh, the one in Nifleheim. If there are other kin he's found elsewhere he hasn't said, but he announced the Nifleheim ones a few times in his little speech to Odin. Did you not catch that bit.”

Her eyes widened a bit in a way that suggested she hadn’t. “Who...”

“Uh, he keeps calling her the first of the three.”

Hlín again stopped in her tracks, this time with a muttered curse that sounded a bit awed. “Of course he would be of her line.”

“Side note, and you don’t have to answer me anything, but if you know anything, it might... Then you should tell Loki, I think. He found out that he was abandoned both because of his size, and also because his mother was executed for treason not long after he was born. His father was Laufey. Do you know anything about that, from the war or elsewhere?”

“Perhaps it’s not only you the stairs are this long for;” she mused. “My apologies. Usually I do not have so much weighing on my mind, but Loki does bring with him so much trouble, I suppose I should not be surprised.” She crossed her arms over her chest, momentarily deep in thought. “I do recall. Had I known...” She sighed heavily. “I was one of the of the few that the Jotunns would speak to, after the war, because they respect mages and perhaps knew something of my heritage. It occurred to me to ask what had happened to Nál.”

“Nál?”

“Well... I do not know her true name, but we called her Nál, because she was ‘Laufey’s Needle’ in battle: never visible until she had punctured you. I did not even know, until I asked after her, that she was his lover. I knew of her only because I had fought against her more than once. Enough to respect her skills, and fear her a little.”

“What did she do?”

“She had contacted Nifleheim, as no one had done since the ice took Jotunnheim, and especially not since Laufey had regained the Casket and set out to conquer still more worlds with an almost religious fervor, exacerbated by exposure to the power of the Casket.”

“And she was killed for that?”

“Laufey wanted nothing to do with the three. He feared them, as he was right to.”

“Yeah, I’ve gotten that impression.”

“She tried to steal the Casket.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“The Jotunns I spoke to knew only that she had been Laufey’s lover, and was recently executed for treason. I think they kept her pregnancy a secret, given that if she had not done those things, and Laufey had not been blinded by anger, betrayal and spite, he would have wanted to protect his child... or perhaps Loki’s size would have still offended him, even then. By the end of the war, he
was unpredictable in his rages, but if I’d known slightly more, then I might have realized earlier...”

She shook her head slowly, lost in memory for a moment. “Son of Nál. You have no idea how blind
I feel, not seeing that resemblance sooner. He has the same markings she had, on his brow.” She
gestured a bit. “Laufey was small by giant’s standards, and she was only a little less so: a bit taller
than him and long of bone, elegant as a willow... I had wanted to learn from her, if the war ever
ended. When it did, I’d thought at first, that she’d perished in their last stand with the rest of their
mages, but when she wasn’t found amongst the fallen, I’d hoped...” She shook her head slowly.

Tony gave her a few moments, then asked quietly, “So you’ll tell him?”

“Yes. I will; however, before now I did not even know who his father was, or I would have told him
sooner. He will wonder how I suddenly discovered that knowledge.”

“You can say I mentioned as an aside that it was obvious he didn’t like being called Laufeyson or
Odinson? Maybe you asked why JARVIS calls him Lie-smith?”

“That might work,” she mused. “I will consider.” She sighed, and began the descent anew.

Tony tried not to think about Loki’s markings and which ones he still hadn’t gotten to thoroughly
map under his fingers or his tongue yet.

“You still have something heavy on your mind.”

“It’s just my heart. I’m used to it.” He tried to sound as flippant as possible.

She shot him a cautious look. “It distracts you?”

“No. I’m really freakishly good at suppression by human standards. I don’t have as many millennia
of practice as some of you guys here, but I’m told I’ve got some real natural talent going for me.”

“It’s Loki?”

“I don’t trust him. I’d like that to be clear.”

“But you know him very well.”

“As well as he allows, and a fair number of things he can’t prevent me seeing even though he might
prefer to, but not enough for him to kill me over. That’s all I’ve got, and I’m very aware of that.”

“You desire more.”

“I’m not as ‘dissatisfied’ with him around. It’s disconcerting, but pleasant. I’m still puzzling him out,
but I was doing that as his enemy, too. I want more, yeah, but I also don’t want to get murdered, you
know?”

“A definite challenge with him.”

“Yeah.”

“Especially given that he’s already attached to you more deeply than I suspect that he ever intended
to allow himself,” she added.

Tony paled a bit. “Sorry, what?”

“I’ve known Loki for a long time, Tony Stark. I’ve seen him drag Thor to the very bed you
occupied, to bring his soul back from where it had been lost, desperate enough to beg for my aid while Odin was in the Odinsleep because he was too drained to do it alone, and he trusted no one else’s competence. I’ve seen him dragged in here himself by Thor, barely alive under the weight of curses he spared his brother from. I know what he looks like when he’s realized just how badly he does not want to lose someone.”

“I... don’t know what to think about that.”

“For better or worse, he values your life. He still spoke of you only in terms of your alliance, but his expression when he looked on you was not so clinically distant as his words. He is uncertain of you, but he wants you alive. Given he is... very different than he was before his fall, and no longer anchored as he was by Thor in the centuries before that, I can’t say that actually guarantees he won’t kill you anyway after this war, when he will far less comfortable with the vulnerability associated with that, and might see fit to cut you out of his life by ending yours.”

“You’re saying that just to make me feel better.”

She shot him a strange look.

Tony waved it off. “I actually meant the murder part.”

“You’re reassured by the fact he might kill you?”

“It helps justify not asking him for more. He isn’t asking, I’m not asking, everyone is convinced we’ll either kill each other or elope after this war thing because they don’t understand I’m Tony goddamn Stark, and he’s Loki, and casual no-strings sex is something we’re both really damned good at. Except apparently less so with each other, maybe, a bit, a lot.” He swore for a few moments.

Hlín looked torn between amusement and concern.

“Look, he doesn’t know what he wants, or he’s just not interested, and either way there’s a colossal pile of trust issues that will probably send him running far, far away from me when the war is over, and when he comes back there’s like an 80% chance he’ll either be indifferent to me, or want to kill me. Probably. I know almost exactly what I want, but if he successfully rebuilds his walls and the next time I see him after the war, he doesn’t give a shit? And if then I tell him I do, or even if I mentioned before then? I’ve basically just handed him a free pass to wreck my life for fun, profit, or both. Or worse, he might play along and then wreck my life once I think I’ve finally gotten...” He ran a hand through his hair with a frustrated noise. “That is shit I just can’t fucking do. I do not need another back-stab from someone that I want so badly to want me as more than just an expensive piñata to be hit with a betrayal stick until prizes fall out.” He huffed. “Goddamn, I need a drink.”

“I see your reasoning.”

“Thank you.”

“And I think you’re both idiots.”

“If he wants me, he can fucking admit it. He’s got less to lose.”

Hlín considered that. “Would you believe him?”

Tony sighed heavily. “Probably not.”

“You don’t think you’d be able to tell when he’s being false?”
“I know better. He can lie to me. Easily.”

“And you to him?”

“Less easily... but on occasion.”

“You really both must be so difficult.”

“Oh my god, are you trying to get us together now or something?”

“I’m far too old to play match-maker for a pair of adolescents, especially a pair so volatile and ego-laden as you two. You’re both on your own. Idiots.”

“Oh thank fucking science,” Tony sighed heavily. “I have it bad enough in the tower with Thor giving me these looks.”

Hlín snorted a laugh at that, then asked, “What would make you believe him?”

“If I had a clue what might, I’d try to find a way to arrange for it to happen. And I would fucking succeed, too.”

She snorted. “I suspect that’s part of what he likes about you.”

“I can’t tell if he’s running tests on me or not, anymore. Should I be worried?”

“Idiots,” Hlín muttered. “Both of you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Teach.” He stumbled when the stairs ended, and would have face-planted, except that the elder mage caught him by his arms at the last minute. “Goddammit.”

“I hope you’re ready for your first lesson. This won’t be pleasant.”

“Please give me something to focus on that isn’t my personal life.”

“That’s the spirit,” she said, with dry mock-approval, as he got his feet back under him properly. “This way.” She strode down a narrow path between vast stalagmites.

Tony looked up, and his eyes widened considerably. They had walked very far, for a long while, but not that far. “This place... is huge.”

“Yes, but the more sturdy section of the cavern is this way. Come along.”

Feet still sluggish because his head was caught up in awe, Tony followed.

Chapter End Notes

*For those wondering, Tony's breakdown of Loki is something like 33.333% Sadistic or "pure evil" tendencies, 40% practical egotism, 23.333% heart (slightly broken), and 3.334% pure good.

His breakdown of himself is simply 100% pure awesome
If asked, Loki would probably breakdown Tony to: 5% pure good, 25% inclined to be a dick, 26% inclined not to be too sadistic when being a dick, 14% guaranteed to be good to those he considers his even despite his dickishness, 30% practical egotism.
Family is Always Embarrassing; Royal Ones Take it to New Levels

Chapter Summary

Loki is in need of all the distractions he can get, and he is more than adept at finding them.

Perhaps too adept. And this time, Hel and Fenrir will have no truck with it, especially after Mistress Death gets involved.


Also: family drama from Hel. Somewhat literally.

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes with a deleted scene here, which has a lot of esoteric world-building from Hlín explaining a lot about how magic works here: Part XI.2

One week, four days...

Loki’s return to earth was brief: just long enough to collect his brother, Gamora, Steve and Natasha, and teleport them to Titan.

Entering the throne room, they found A’Lars once more, along with Mar-Vell and two other Kree ambassadors of considerably higher rank. Around them were high-ranking members of Titan’s parliamentary bodies, discussing matters in hushed tones that became more hushed still as the new visitors approached. All but Mar-Vell looked scandalized to see the interplanetary assassin unrestrained and head held high, amongst their allies of earth.

Weapons were drawn before they made it halfway to the throne.

Loki, who led them with Gamora right behind him, flanked on either side by Thor and Natasha, with Steve at her back, stopped and held up both hands, palms forward in a sign that he meant no harm, though he smiled small and sly and all too polite. “Please, gentlemen and ladies of Titan and Kree. I come with good news for you all.”

“You come with a war criminal, unrestrained, into my throne room,” A’Lars bellowed immediately in response.

“I am a war criminal, A’Lars, and very nearly a destroyer of worlds, though only a little as the first attempt was stopped by Thor, and the second I deliberately botched in order to wipe out the Chitauri and spit in Thanos’ eye,” Loki responded. “While I was his captive, in between those two events, I
made acquaintance with many of his loyal followers, and one among them listened to me speak. She listened, and I showed her what Thanos and the Other had done to myself, to her, and to many others. I showed her the truth, for which I may never be forgiven, but despite the unkind nature of that exchange, she defended me before Thanos and fought outright with the Other, over my treatment, and her own, alike. Thus, Titans and Kree, there stands behind me a most noble traitor, called Gamora.”

A susurrus of disbelief and awe ran up through the court.

The trickster held A’Lars’ gaze first, for several long moments, until the Titan nodded. He then repeated the process with each Kree in the audience, and the main speakers from the three parliamentary houses of Titan.

“May we approach further?” Loki inquired.

“How long has she been in your company?”

“Mere days.”

“How?”

The god turned his head toward Gamora, whose lips were a thin, uneasy line, and she nodded, not looking away from A’Lars.

“She arrived on earth through the portal opened for the Chitauri, and hid there, gathering resources and allies on earth with intent to create a cosmic cube to use to destroy Thanos. She was betrayed by her allies, and locked away within solid rock compressed around her by a force-field, so that she might struggle, and move, only for it to compress again, and all of her progress lead only to more damage to herself as the rock crushed back in around her,” Loki explained, his voice rich and cool, politically appropriate, yet suited to the vivid image he impressed upon them. “She was imprisoned in such conditions for over a year. Had we not found her, she would have been there until her untimely demise.”

Further murmurs from the crowd, a bit more positive this time.

Lowering his hands until they hung at his sides, palms still facing his audience, Loki concluded, “All this, she has suffered for her desire to rebel against Thanos. It has not dissuaded her. Thus impressed, I have made her my ally. I would like to negotiate, on her behalf, with the kingdoms represented here, to absolve her of actions taken against the Kree and Titan alike, in exchange for all information she possesses regarding Thanos and his forces, and her aid in war against him in just over one week’s time. If you all may be willing to allow me.”

A’Lars strode down toward the trickster, from his throne, followed by the uneasy-looking Kree ambassadors. All of them looked very grave.

“You believe that she does not deserve punishment for her crimes?” the female ambassador asked.

“I believe she has suffered enough, and been deeply betrayed by Thanos after being raised to believe that she should trust him,” Loki responded. “Unorthodox, perhaps, her trials have been, but given a chance at a life independent of Thanos, I have a sinking suspicion she has something in her more akin to heroism than I myself have ever personally possessed.”

A’Lars half-smirked at that, and at the sincerely shocked and reluctantly flattered expression on Gamora’s sight upon hearing those words from the god of mischief. “So why is it you defend her? Why is she important to you, Loki Lie-smith?”
Loki smiled coldly. “She wishes for Thanos’ death even more than I do. Also, I am of Asgard, and I
know heroes when I see them. No matter how twisted and misused they might be at the hands of
villains, when shown the truth, they grow offended. They feel grief for the wrongs they have done,
even if only because they resent having been misled, if not for more noble cause. I do not feel this, in
quite the way that heroes do. My brother does. And so does this assassin behind me. You would do
well to offer her mercy. Unlike me, she will return the favor of her own free will, and do right by
you.”

“Is this so, Lady Gamora?” A’Lars inquired.

“I will fight against Thanos. I will protect those who fight with me against him. I will not forget what
I have been spared from, and I will not commit against Titan or Kree the crimes that I have before. I
have sworn my word, in my alliance to Loki, to leave this solar system after the war. I intend to keep
my word,” Gamora responded, her voice strong, though behind her back where her arms were
crossed at the wrists, her hands shook until she tightened them into fists.

“I, for one, am willing to negotiate, then,” A’Lars said. “My son has done you great harm, it would
seem, during your lifetime. It is the fault of Titan that he still lives, and committed these acts against
you, which led you to the life you lived before escaping his rule. It seems only fair to me, that we do
better by you than he has done.” He turned to both Kree ambassadors. “I presume you must have
words with your own people on this matter, before you make any such final decisions.”

“We must, yes,” said the second ambassador, a male with blue-green skin. “Though perhaps, not
alone. Lie-smith, would you join us? Your words, I believe, will resonate more with our superiors
than our own.”

“A wise decision,” Loki concurred. “It will be my pleasure.” He then let the two Kree lead him to a
communication console to the far left of the throne.

Gamora stared after him for a long moment, eyes a little wide. “Damn, he’s good,” she muttered,
barely above a whisper.

“He has his moments,” Natasha concurred.

Then A’Lars stepped closer, extending a hand to Gamora. “I am actually honored to meet you,
Gamora. Your work against the Universal Church of Truth, while ordered by Thanos, was much
needed for far more than his sake.”

“I... thank you,” she said, a bit uncertain, as she shook his hand in return. “I’m afraid I’ve heard
nothing but the worst stories about you, which I’ve long suspected were a bit exaggerated given
Thanos’ occasional, ah, dramatization of events conducted against him.” Her tone suggested that
what was once a familiar quirk to her about him was now comfortably sobering in retrospect.

He smiled sadly. “I’m not surprised, somehow. I am curious what other terms were outlined in your
alliance with Loki.”

There was a very loud cry of outrage from the holo-conference Loki and the two Kree ambassadors
(who had notably both stepped back from the trickster to distance themselves from any association
with what he was saying) which apparently caused the trickster to grin wolfishly. He said a few
quiet, sharp things with apparent savor, and the face closest to the screen was visibly removed from
the communication display on the Kree end by armed guards.

“I think he just revealed a traitor in the midst of the Kree,” Mar-Vell mused, stepping up beside
A’Lars. “That’s bound to win him a little favor with the queen. She does so appreciate that sort of
“I do appreciate, with him, that when he is manipulative, he does it well,” A’Lars admitted. “And seeing him manipulate others, I realize he must like me, given I seem to be relatively unscathed in comparison.”

“He does respect his mentors, in his way,” Thor acknowledged.

“I think if they have a traitor they’re already focusing on, of sufficiently high rank, they might prefer to make an example of them, rather than capture and execute someone like Gamora who has recently changed sides. It will make them feel better, then, to have taken a formerly infamous assassin of Thanos’ as traitor against him, as well. They’ll be flattered by it, almost,” the red-haired assassin pointed out.

“You know the Kree well, these days, Natasha,” Mar-Vell sighed.

“We have plenty of governments and people on earth with similar... constellations of quirks,” Steve reassured. “You’re not alone, at least.”

“Oh, Loki was thinking that I might capture one ship of the fleet alive,” Gamora remarked casually. “If I succeed, and turn over or otherwise dispatch all of the crew loyal to Thanos, I was hoping I might keep it.” She smiled toothily.

A’Lars frowned deeply. “Pardon?”

“I didn’t swear anything about the weapons and stuff on-board, but you can take the gliders, but leave the ship defensible with enough supplies and fuel to support a crew to get me to the nearest outpost outside this system, and I won’t be your problem anymore after that,” she offered. “I’m not pirate material, and I’ve got a pretty unique skill set only good for certain bloody and violent things, but selling that ship, even if I just scrapped it, would keep me from having to kill anybody for a good long while, and frankly I could use the vacation, you know?”

The king of Titan shot her an odd look between disbelief and amusement. “I suppose that can be arranged... again, only if you capture a ship and keep it free of the others, so that it does not get caught up in the destruction.”

“I’m happy to earn my way,” she concurred.

“And I presume he is persuading the Kree to follow this same plan?”

Gamora shot the trickster a thoughtful look. “I’ve talked about my plans a bit with him. He might even find me a buyer for the ship, at this point. He’s clearly on a roll, today, despite being tense and snippy back at the tower.”

“My brother is adept at using his skills most effectively when he is distracting himself from matters he prefers not to contemplate,” Thor intoned gravely.

“At least he’s here. That means Tony is recuperated enough not to need convenient Jotunn cooling powers to prevent him from exploding,” Natasha added.


“None taken,” rumbled the thunder god. “I’ve come to terms with the fact that my brother is quite mad.”
The king smiled faintly. “Oh good. Is Mr. Stark well?”

“He has a recently awoken gift from magic which had been dormant throughout his life until now,” Thor explained. “He will require at least a few days before he is quite... safe to be around for any length of time.”

“That’s most unusual,” A’Lars mused. “Most with freshly-woken gifts are adolescents, on Titan. Is that no longer so on earth?”

“On earth, there really aren’t many magic users,” Natasha supplied. “It seems generations without a lot of powerful magics around in most population centers, has caused more gifts to lie dormant and undisturbed for longer. Most magic users of earth these days, though by no means all, are thus rather unconventional in how they’ve acquired their gifts. Our Sorcerer Supreme notably didn’t learn his arts until his gift was awoken through extensive training and exposure to powerful magic artifacts, two decades or so after he left adolescence behind.”

“Extraordinary,” the king said.

Natasha shrugged. “Loki explained it all, at great length, when Thor and I went to Asgard to figure out why exactly he’d returned to the tower for less than ten minutes and left JARVIS with a message involving a lot of swearing that summarized as simply ‘gone to Asgard; Natasha, Thor and Mar-Vell are in charge’ and no further explanation.”

An amused hum from A’Lars. “Sounds like him.”

Another round of noise erupted from Loki’s diplomatic negotiation with the Kree.

“Perhaps we’d best keep track of what he’s up to,” Mar-Vell suggested. “Your majesty?”

“Yes, quite.” He headed toward the display, followed by Mar-Vell, leaving the others to a few long moments of awkward silence.

“At least he looks like he finally got some sleep,” Gamora remarked, looking at Loki. “He was using too much magic to keep that insomniac thing going too much longer.”

“His more rested appearance did indeed convince me more than anything else that Tony must be recovered from his injuries, at least,” Thor said. “That leaves only his magic to contend with, I should think.”

“And Extremis,” Natasha reminded.

“Right.”

“You know what convinced me?” Gamora asked airily.

“What?” Thor asked.

“No,” Steve said sharply.

“Aw, come on,” the alien assassin purred. “Why not?”

The soldier was blushing by then. “Ma’am, please don’t discuss this in the middle of a diplomatic meeting with the king of another planet possibly still in earshot.”

“Only because you asked so sweetly, pretty-boy.”
Steve’s blush increased, but he said nothing further.

Gamora glanced sidelong at Natasha, who seemed to be idly touching the side of her neck, in the exact positions Loki had one or two bite marks. The red-head’s expression was utterly innocent. Gamora grinned at her. Lowering her hand back down to her side, Natasha smiled back.

The super-soldier sighed at them in mild exasperation, but said nothing.

Ten minutes later, Loki sauntered over to them with a wide, smug grin. “We have a success. The Kree and A’Lars have dismissed us, having other matters to discuss, some to do with other possible gift to you after the war, Gamora, in exchange for your captured ship. Titan wants Thanos’ technology almost as badly as the Kree, it seems.”

“You think you’re so damn clever,” Gamora muttered.

“Well, yes,” Loki concurred. “I am, in fact, very damn clever.”

“We’ll see in a bit over a week how well that goes for you,” she countered, though stepped closer and kissed his cheek briefly. “Thank you, by the way. Bit of a stretch though,” she said, stepping back. “Me? Heroic?”

“It was unbelievable enough, that they trusted a liar like me to come up with something better, if I were actually lying,” Loki assured. “Those are my favorite truths to tell, whether you believe it or not.” He patted her cheek when she looked utterly disbelieving at him. “Better you than I, darling. I haven’t the stomach for it, myself.”

“What the fuck have you been smoking?” she demanded.

“Nothing, lately, more is the pity. The only interesting plants I’ve picked up from Alfheim have all been boringly practical for the sake of use on dragons, of all things. I tell you, the Ten Rings really do cut into my leisure time,” Loki riposted. “Shall we return to the tower?”

“What did you do to the Kree?” Steve sighed.

“I revealed two traitors in their midst who have been communicating information back to organizations which support the Skrulls, and thus leaking government secrets to the enemy, pled Gamora’s case, and possibly scandalized a few people who dared suggest I’d let her seduce me into supporting her, by letting them know exactly whose teeth have marked my skin recently. The usual,” the trickster offered, with a casual shrug. “The Kree are amusingly predictable after knowing them for a century or two.”

“They thought I’d seduced you?” Gamora asked, making a face.

“One person suggested I might have such a bias in your favor. I laughed at him. He was displeased. So I then displeased him further still.” He grinned brightly, though it did not quite reach his eyes. None of the myriad smiles and smirks he’d worn so far today quite had.

“Of course,” Steve sounded resigned. “Yes, let’s go back to the tower.”

With a flourishing gesture, Loki obliged.
Upon arrival back at the tower, the Avengers, Loki, and Gamora all found themselves staring in mild disbelief at the sight before them.

Clint Barton was dead asleep on the couch, which wasn’t unusual. Bruce had fallen asleep in a nearby armchair, which also wasn’t too unusual. The woman sitting on their couch, wide awake and drinking his tea, was more than a little unusual.

She was tall, which was obvious even before she stood, and lithe. She wore armor of an Asgardian style, with cloth in shades of darkest imperial purple accented with black, and intricate metal pieces polished to a silvery shine. Her hair and skin had a bi-color theme, with red-gold waves on her paler side, and black hair on the side with skin of such dark blue as to be easily mistaken for black. Her darker skin was decorated with barely-lighter natural whirling markings, fine lines sweeping along the lines of her fine features, occasionally curling into spirals, which had the effect of making that side of her face look almost like a death mask from some angles. Her lighter eye was a familiar green, though the one on her darker side had sclera stained black instead of white, and an iris the color of graphite. She smiled, and the wicked curve of it, as well as her high cheekbones, also looked oddly familiar. “Hello, Avengers. Hello, Uncle. Hello, dear father.” She rose to her feet, then, and grinned sweetly.

“Is something wrong?” Thor asked, worriedly, the first to step toward her. Loki held his ground, appearing bemused and a little wary.

“Why are Clint and Bruce both still asleep like dead things?” Natasha pointed out.

“I didn’t wish to alarm them, before the rest of you arrived.” The goddess snapped her fingers and both of the other Avengers jerked awake, blinking off confusion and staring around the room at the others, stopping on Hel with some bafflement.

Hel kissed her uncle’s cheek idly, as she stepped past him toward the trickster. “I am well, for now, my uncle. I merely have matters to discuss with father.” She halted before him. “You do not look pleased to see me,” she said.

Loki smiled a bit wanly, and touched her cheek on her darker side with affection more gentle than the other Avengers had ever seen from him. “I worry, that is all. I am always glad to see you look so well.” He let her pull him into an embrace, returning it warmly, going so far as to spin her sharply, just to make her emit a disapproving noise.

She huffed at him when he set her down, tucking her hair back behind one ear. “I’m hardly a child,” she scolded.

“I am highly aware,” Loki returned. “May I introduce the allies of my allies. And my ally Gamora.” He gestured toward them. “Avengers, meet my daughter Hel, Queen of Helheim.” He then bowed to her with a flourish.

“Stop that,” she snapped. “No one believes it’s serious when you do it.”

He stood up straight, smiling a bit more warmly, almost sincerely.

“Lovely to meet you all,” Hel said, waving them off. “You and I must have words, father dear,” she said warningly, resting her hands on his shoulders and vanishing them both.

The Avengers stared for a moment at the place they’d just been.
“Thor, your family is weird,” Clint said.

“I am aware,” the thunder god sighed.

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Loki was fairly surprised to find that Hel had taken them all the way to Niflheim. To the library, even, for reasons he could only guess.

“I do have important matters to discuss, but I also know you,” she said. “You’re tense as an overtightened lyre-string, and there is something leaden to your expression. What is wrong?”

“I am a fool, that is all,” Loki said simply.

“You generally tend to be, but it does not usually weigh on you so.”

“I require only time and to regain my senses a bit. Perhaps a grave and distracting enough crisis here might do the trick,” the trickster said, looking around the library, settling on a figure nearby, longboned and narrow of build, draped in a dark cloak. She was returning a book to its shelf, with hands that while strong and sure, showed her to be far from young. He smiled faintly, as she turned to face him, and he knelt.

The woman was only a few inches shorter than Hel and her father, but thus quite small by Jotunn standards. Warmed by the less freezing air of the library, her skin was not quite pale, but tanned over millennia of exposure to strong moon- and star-light reflected and amplified by so much ice, in Niflheim’s freezing summers. Her long hair was once black, and a few such darker streaks still remained, amidst all the dark grey and thinner streaks of white, and it fell in a long thick plait halfway to the floor. Her eyes were the same vibrant green as Loki’s, when she stepped closer and tilted his face up to meet her gaze. Her face was lined, but her skin was not loose with age, hardened instead by the elements: wise, and sage, and yet still elegant.

“Hretha, first of the three,” he greeted softly. “What aid may we be to you?”

“I would have words with you, Lie-smith, about the coming war, and your plans thereafter, of course. In the interim, there is reason it is Hel who brings you to us. We have another visitor, who seemed inclined to speak with you here.”

Loki rose to his feet again when her hand fell away, looking to his daughter, who looked uneasy, and took his hand, leading him out of the library and out a door that had not been there until just a moment before her hand touched the wall. The trickster followed, his skin darkening to blue as they stepped outside the walls of Niflheim’s nameless city’s royal palace, and into the cold.

The courtyard was large, tall and sturdy walls of iced-over stone shielding it less than the faint barrier created by the magic wards carved into them, which kept most wind and precipitation at bay, but not the cold. Frost covered every surface, but was kept thin except where it had grown into detailed sculptures of male and female figures, which seemed pale against the dark sky overhead, lit by torches on either side of the door Loki and Hel had entered through. Standing at the top of the short flight of stairs leading down into the sculpture garden was a female figure draped in black robes, seeming small in a courtyard designed to accommodate giants. She turned her head at their approach, and Loki’s breath caught.
The lady’s face was pale as bone, her full lips a pale grey, and her eyes black from lid to lid, save faint sparks of silver that seemed far away, as though looking right at them somehow involved looking through the woman’s face, rather that at her.

Loki released Hel’s hand, and approached the figure slowly, not even flinching when her flesh vanished for a moment, leaving behind only bones and her cloak, before another shift of clouds and starlight seemed to bring back her more human-like face. “It’s been some time, Mistress Death,” he greeted, and bowed deeply. Struggling not to flinch as her cold fingers touched his face when he moved to straighten back up, Loki found himself frozen, staring up at her, not quite able to move.

She offered a small, humorless half-smile.

Swallowing tightly, the trickster kept staring back, knowing better than to expect words from the notoriously silent lady, and eventually she pulled at his chin, returning him to a fully upright position. Then she trailed a hand down the side of his face, and the flesh on her cold fingers vanished, and her bare bones met his skin.


Images of Loki’s webs of allegiances and plans, some past (speaking to Kronos on Titan, grinning fearsome challenge at Odin, dodging dragon-fire) some present (Titan’s ships and those of the Kree traveling to the place they would lie in wait for Thanos’ fleet), and some near-future (warriors of Asgard in the skies of the earth, patiently awaiting alien crafts to destroy, Tony Stark enveloped by his deep-space-travel suit and its combat-capable shell) followed after.

Then Loki was snapped back to himself.

Mistress Death, wearing flesh again, arched an interrogatory eyebrow a him.

“I plan to send him to you, if you’ll accept him this time around,” he answered.

She looked thoughtful, but also annoyed and disapproving.

“Either that, or you may just find him dull once his head is removed from his shoulders, and eventually deign to reap his soul then?” the trickster suggested.

Death glared at him.

He felt a shudder of pure fear down his spine, and cleared his throat. “My apologies.” Resisting the urge to fidget, he took in a deep breath, and let it out. “He sent me to earth to retrieve a cosmic cube, one in particular called the tesseract. With it, just as with the Infinity Gems before, he would do one of two things. The option he hasn’t attempted before, is that he would have brought death to all living things in the universe, which is, admittedly, more than there has ever been before now, to kill,” he explained.

Mistress Death smiled a little, seeming to relish the thought for a moment.

“That said, if he does that... there is no life. Your victory would thus be so short-lived as to be outright pyrrhic.”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, before she turned skeletal again. The impression of her shrewd expression somehow lingered.

“You are defined by that which you are not, Mistress. He would destroy you, to pursue his love to its ultimate expression, and you know that as well as I. No life left in this universe, means that there is
nothing to define you, nothing to hold you together any longer. You will perish, starved of your opposite."

Her flesh returned in an instant, and she moved in a manner that, were she a creature who breathed, might have suggested a silent, exasperated huff.

“I know, I know. I would hope he had learned by now, too, if I were you. He clearly doesn’t listen to you as he should. He is in love with his own idea of you, but you are many ideas, many stories, and he should cease presuming that he knows you, and can express all that you mean to the universe better than you are already doing.”

She reached up quickly, seizing his tongue before he could close his mouth. She shook her head at him. *I am not to be toyed with, god of lies*, her seldom-heard voice hissed, at the edges of his mind, stale and fetid as the air within a tomb. Mistress Death became all bone once more, smirking at how Loki flinched at the sensation of his tongue caught between finger-bones, then let him go.

Loki grimaced slightly, and just barely resisted the urge to turn and spit. “I see no reason to lie to you. These are merely suggestions, from a concerned father of one of your chosen,” he offered, gesturing toward Hel. “And I know you care not for my reasons in wanting to kill him, so I tell you instead why I think that you should let me.”

Mistress Death crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him hard.

The trickster held her stare for longer than most, shearily out of stubbornness. “He is a genius, Lady, and cunning and powerful. He has every right to an ego, and yet what confidence he has is all laced with desperation—trust me, I’d know,” he said, low and self-deprecating. “His second option, which would be more logical for him given his failure to win you by empowering himself to lord over all reality and remaking it as he saw fit, would be for him to instead attempt to makeover reality in your image, but he is a living creature, he is a Titan, and he is flawed, Mistress. He would remake you, as you feared and loathed him for making you dread his ability to do to you, when he possessed those gems. He would remake you in his vision of you, and how much do you trust his vision not to alter you into a creature you might barely recognize as a version of yourself?”

She seized the lapels of his coat and yanked him down, her upper lip curling akin to a snarl just before her face became a grinning skull once more.

Loki stared at the bones of her face, his own expression resigned. “I do not fear you, dear Lady. I have not feared you for a very long time, myself. You will seize me when it is my time, or Hel will fetch me for you, or perhaps I will be lost, but I will go. I am already yours in the future, however distant or near that may be. I seek no bargain with you. I desire nothing from you save perhaps rest at the end of my life, and that is mercy enough for me. It is Thanos who desires you to be what you are not, and to return his love. You are fond of him, but for you to love, Mistress? What changes would that require to all that makes you merciful, and your embrace so peaceful?”

She let him go gently, and stepped away, hands folded behind her back as she gave the question serious thought.

Loki forced his breathing to remain steady. He had known there was a risk of Mistress Death choosing to involve herself, given her long history of preferential treatment of Thanos, and accordingly he had planned his arguments long ago, and let them fall freely, trusting his words to carry their meanings, and persuade, but despite the truth in every syllable this time, with only a bit of carelessly offered opinions, he felt uncertain. Death is beyond all of the gods, beyond all things in the universe except life itself. Patient, omnipresent Death, who will watch each and every one of the stars go out, and stand beside the last living creatures in the universe, to end their suffering in their
final hours.

She made Loki Lie-smith of Asgard, brother of Thor, kin to the three of Nifleheim, feel very small indeed, just by looking into him with those eyes of hers, like looking into the opposite end of what the big bang started.

Breathing slower now, he glanced sidelong at his daughter.

Hel looked at him with concern, and uncertainty, unable to offer comfort where she herself found none.

Refocusing on Mistress Death, Loki only had to wait a few moments longer before she turned to face him again, flesh covering her bones, but her expression so blank that this made her intentions no more readable. She strode up and again touched her fingers to Loki’s face, this time trailing them up into his hair and tugging him sharply down. *You will bring him to me. You will walk the path to Helheim yourself, and bring his body and soul to me therein, by the paths that the dead walk.* Her other hand held up a small box, seemingly carved of ebony, or something older and stranger but equally dark; although also strangely opalescent where the light reflected off of its polished surfaces. It was intricately decorated with designs painful to the eye, which seemed to move when viewed only out of the corner of one’s vision. *If you fail, then I take more than your soul, and let him free again, and whole.* She pressed the box into his hand, then stepped back. Shortly after, she vanished.

Loki took a deep breath, and let it out, his fingers squeezing around the box. He then grimaced as the carvings almost seemed to slither beneath his fingers, and vanished it up his sleeve. “That went well,” he said blithely.

“She seemed to speak to you.”

Gravely, the trickster nodded. “She did. Instructions and a warning. Little more.”

Hel stepped closer, until he could feel the faint warmth of the spell preventing her from freezing. Seeing his blood-red eyes squeeze shut, she curled her arm around his and leaned against him, sharing warmth and comfort both; although he remained in his more elemental color scheme. “I’ve been watching you, now and then. You’ve seemed happy, preparing for this war.”

Loki’s eyes fluttered open. “Have I?” he asked, his voice very quiet.

She half-smiled, shooting him a sardonic look. “You have, actually. I haven’t seen you look so well in a long time.”

The trickster tilted his head back slowly and swore at length.

Hel looked torn between amusement and concern. “You did something really unwise, I’m guessing.”

The trickster didn’t answer, but did open his eyes to gaze skyward and inhaled a sharp breath. “Oh,” he said softly. “I’ve never managed to be here when there weren’t storm-clouds.” Above his head were stars he’d never seen before: thousands of them, so distant from other worlds many of them he might have never seen the light of before from any of the other realms. They formed constellations that belonged to stories and characters to the people in the city, he knew. He wanted to learn them, suddenly.

He wanted to show a particular person this view.

“I’ve made a series of bad decisions,” he intoned gravely.
“That could be the summary of your entire life, father,” Hel sighed.

“Well... yes... I’ve made some good ones. Occasionally.” He rested his chin atop her head when she rested it on his shoulder. “If nothing else in my life, I feel proud to have done right by you and your brother.”

“Except when you almost got me involved in few wars once or twice.”

“I did apologize,” he muttered.

“I’ll still kill you if you pull that again,” she chided sweetly.

“I’m aware.”

“And I thank you.”

“None needed.”

“I know. You’re a fool, but you’re my favorite fool.”

“Where is Fenrir?”

“I think he’s trying to prove a point to someone again,” she said dryly. “Something about his ability to get through shields and barriers without breaking them or any-”

Loki might have believed it an accident, if she hadn’t disentangled from him and side-stepped half a second before half a ton of wolf-shaped creature hit the trickster square in the chest sent him to the ground hard. A second later he took his own wolf-shape and the resulting wrestling match send both enormous lupine figures tumbling down the short flight of stone stairs, stopping just shy of the first ice-sculpture.

Hel laughed at them the entire time.

That was how the first of the three found them: the queen of Helheim giggling evilly from the top of the stairs as her father and sort-of-brother wrestled around in the form of over-sized wolves. The wolves were be-furred green-eyed blurs in motion: one pure blue-black with eyes aglow, the other brown-black, both of them growling and yelping playfully as they tumbled and struggled against each other.

Hel wiped at the corner of one eye briefly. “Sorry, they’re always like this.”

“No apologies needed,” Hretha assured, sounding amused herself.

Eventually, Loki pinned down the younger wolf with a rumbling, more serious growl, teeth at Fenrir’s neck, but not exactly threatening in any earnest sense, rather than symbolic.

“Fine,” Fenrir rumbled, in a slightly rougher and more guttural voice than could have escaped any human. “Conceded.”

Loki stepped back and presumed his usual shape, dusting himself off lightly. He smirked at the horse-sized brown-black wolf on the ground. “You’ve gotten quicker.”

“Mayhap you’re slowing, in your old age, Loki,” the wolf mocked, rolling to his feet and shaking his coat out before stepping close enough to nuzzle at the trickster’s arm, rumbling contently when Loki reached up to scratch between his ears for a few moments.
“No more so than anyone else in Asgard.”

Fenrir snorted. “Most of them are slow. Maybe you need better practice than you get there?” He sounded amused and challenging.

“I’ve had enough ‘practice’ lately, trust me, and not in Asgard. There aren’t Makluan dragons there.”

“Mmm. Do you still have any of it? Those are tasty, when roasted.”

Loki snorted. “He still lives, for now, but I’ll let you know.”

The wolf’s tail wagged and he pushed Loki towards the steps, urging him back up. Once the trickster stood again with his daughter and great-great-grandmother, Fenrir perched at the base of the steps and rested both forepaws on the top step, curling comfortably in the artfully curved stairwell.

Hretha snorted, amused. “He truly is more a son of yours than a construct, I’ll grant you,” she conceded.

“I did tell you,” Hel muttered.

Loki bowed his head slightly. “He is his own.”

“What are your plans in the coming weeks, Loki?” asked the first of the three.

“I plan to kill Thanos, and I’ve been charged by Mistress Death to deliver his body and soul into her care personally, walking the paths between worlds to Helheim as any departed soul might. Once done with that, I plan to spend a few days recuperating, steal a few golden apples from Asgard, and thaw Jotunnheim by dubious and extremely reckless means that may actually get me killed, or close to it. Hence the apples being on hand.”

“You think it might come close to killing you more than once?” Hel inquired.

“It will be... a bit of an endurance trial, I suspect. I’m thinking at least three...”

“How do you plan to thaw Jotunnheim?” Hretha inquired.

Loki grinned very sweetly. “By stealing a creature of fire from Odin, of course.”

Hel shot him a look that clearly questioned his sanity. “You’re joking.”

“I am not. I’ve been preparing for this for three years, when not preparing for Thanos’ death,” the trickster corrected.

“Surtur is a mage too, Loki,” Hretha reminded. “And more powerful than you.”

“He cannot escape his bonds, and those restrain his magic,” the god of lies explained with a smirk. “I simply need to cut the chains locking him in place, but leave the rest of the containment spells untouched. He would have only his elemental capabilities for use.”

“You’re certain?” Hel inquired lightly.

“No, but I have other plans, if that goes wrong.”

She made a noise of disapproval.

“Dear Hel, I love you, but you do need to learn to embrace a bit more spontaneity and reckless joy in
“I do try to suggest it,” Fenrir called. “Frequently.”

“I’ll leave that to you two,” she countered. “You clearly have an excess.”

“Which is why you are a queen, and I am merely myself.”

“And that in turn is why I have more fun than both of you,” Fenrir added.

Loki snorted at that, as Hel chuckled.

“You are certain Surtur will thaw enough of the ice?” Hretha asked.

“I am, yes.” Loki assured. “It will bring him near to death, but I don’t consider that particular part to be very problematic. I can then either return him to his prison, or kill him. I’ll leave that decision until I’ve spent a few days being hunted by him, and work out whether he might be best left alive, or if the more convenient option might prove the better and more satisfying.”

“How will you break his chains without breaking his wards?” Hel inquired.

“Oh, I won’t.” Loki grinned. “That’s why I left the dragon alive. Brute strength, claws able to dig through solid stone and obscure Odin’s carved-in wards where I cannot? Yes, I do think the dragon should serve nicely for the purpose. He has already sworn to aid me, as well.”

“If a manacle breaks?” Hretha inquired.

“I had a well-disguised duplicate of mine collect Odin’s designs for Surtur’s prison from the weapon’s vault upon my last visit to Asgard with Thor,” Loki added. “I’ve made several replacements for each manacle, and borrowed a few Midgardian technological concepts to make them heat-seeking and targeted. I need merely activate them, and they will latch onto Surtur, who will still be busy chasing me.”

“So you won’t need the dragon once you're off-Midgard?” Fenrir asked hopefully.

The trickster offered an indulgent smile.

“… I've always wanted to try this particular roasting technique on one, you see,” the wolf suggested.

“It might put the dragon on edge. I did nearly rip out his throat in wolf-shape,” Loki mused idly. “I will consider.”

“Father,” Hel warned, through gritted teeth.

“I won’t take him to Jotunnheim, and given the size of that dragon, his age, and his origins, there are honestly few safer ways to be rid of his remains,” Loki reassured. “And they are actually considered a delicacy by Kree and Skrulls alike. Or they were, a couple of centuries ago, until they finally realized the creatures were sentient.”

Fenrir snorted, with a rumbling sound almost akin to a chuckle.

Hretha shrugged. “Some consider it showing respect to their enemies.”

“I used that excuse once,” Loki muttered.

“I recall. You went from being a breaker of hearts to an eater of them,” Hel recalled, a little
nostalgically. “Everyone was so terrified of you when you returned home until you reminded everyone of that time with Odin and the blood-mead. That was a really good speech of yours.”

Hretha shook her head. “Asgard can be ridiculous to me, at times. I had long forgotten what children they are.”

Loki beamed at her helplessly. “Did I mention how much I appreciate being related to you?”

“On a few occasions,” she admitted. “I need you solemn vow that Surtur will not escape Jotunnheim without you transporting him, and that he will be returned to his cage if he is not slain there. I recall him of old, and do not wish the nine realms to be unbalanced by him again.”

“You have my word,” the trickster promised, inclining his head. “The suddenness of the thaw will cause considerable flooding, but I plan to start at the highest points, in the hopes that there will be established streams and rivers back to where the oceans once were, before the vast temperature changes lead to storms. Even once all of the ice is gone, and all of Surtur’s heat spent, the storms and flooding will be violent for some time. Protective wards that kept those under the ice alive so far would not let up before those pass, and most of the waters of that world will return to the seas. Some subterranean water sources may thaw, and that along with rains might bring back to life a number of streams and rivers inland. Otherwise, fresh water may be in short supply.”

“Ask those remaining of icy nature to freeze water from the sea,” Hretha said. “The salt will be drawn out of it. It can then be transported inland more easily.”

Loki nodded. “I shall do my level best to persuade them.”

“I still can’t believe that your ‘plan’ is to let Surtur chase you around Jotunnheim,” Hel sighed. “You plan to lead him on the chase possibly for days, so that he thaws the places you want thawed. You... are insane.”

“Also brilliant,” Loki insisted.

“Brilliantly insane, but insane nevertheless,” his daughter drawled.

“I would never have thought of such a thing, but if any son of Muspellheim might have the sheer power and eons of rage for such a feat, it would be Surtur,” Hretha acknowledged, sounding mildly impressed.

Loki tried not to think about how much warmth in his chest that sliver of approval made him feel. He blamed Odin, and let himself enjoy it accordingly.

“If you get yourself killed, so help me, father,” Hel growled. “I will feed you feet first to Níðhöggr, and make sure you’re fully conscious throughout each nibble.”

Loki shuddered. He’d seen Níðhöggr once, and once had been more than enough for an entire lifetime. “I was already really, really planning to not die.”

“And what of the remaining frost giants?” his daughter reminded. “More than a respectable army’s worth of them survived what you did to the place, you know.”

“I am aware of them. They are highly disorganized, and widely scattered, these days,” said the trickster. “In the time it would take for enough of them to worry about to gather together, the storms will be starting, and they will have to fight through floodwaters slightly warmer than they have ever been accustomed to.”
“So you thaw Jotunnheim.” His daughter sounded thoughtful. “You then have some time to recover before you return to look for survivors, once the old magics under the ice awaken and help re-stabilize the planet’s climate. What then will you do?”

“I wait.”

“Nothing else?” Hel inquired.

He frowned at her. “Not that I have planned, no.”

“Usually you tend to risk life and limb in threes, is all,” she mused.

Loki shook his head. “Not altogether intentionally.”

“Then be on the lookout for a third one,” Hel warned. “By the way, how is this first official test run of ‘being sincere with your family’ going for you so far?”

“I’m finding it deeply uncomfortable, actually.”

Hel patted his cheek. “Get over it.”

“I concur,” Fenrir rumbled.

“Remind me again how I was ever persuaded to agree to this?” Loki sighed.

“For my aid in locating the exact position of Thanos’ fleet, based on Hel’s visions,” the first of the three reminded.

“Right,” the trickster lamented, “damn.”

“I was surprised you trusted my inclusion, frankly,” Hretha mused.

Loki considered. “You need little from me, in truth, and thus have no reasons to betray me, but you expect much of me. You see me as I wish to be, I think. I trust you because you gave me a history I could live without resenting, and inspired me toward the purpose of making amends for my actions against Jotunnheim in my own way, as Asgard could never imagine.” He looked at her very calmly, feeling far too young as he met her eyes with his own. The cold had rendered them both in shades of blue, save for their blood-red eyes, and Loki was elated to find no loathing, no resentment, but instead something akin to admiration. “I trust you as I can no longer trust Odin, ever again. And I respect your wisdom as I can only disrespect his.”

The first of the three smiled warmly at him. “Your appreciation is mutual, Loki. Your brand of chaos has been something sorely missed in my life for a very long time, now, in this quiet place, and your brilliance makes for some inspiring spectacles.”

Again, the trickster felt an almost uncomfortable degree of emotion strike him, and had to look away for a moment. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“No thanks needed,” Hretha replied.

“What if you don’t need more than one or two apples, maybe?” Hel mused.

Loki tensed again, all at once. “What of it?”

The queen punched him hard in the arm. “Have you seen Thor? Have you seen how depressed he’s been since that ridiculous debacle in Asgard with the mortal Jane Foster? I’m not even on the same
planet as him; I only see him when I settle in to watch the show you’re putting on over there, which is only so often, and I can see it plain as day. He’s wounded, and he’s realized that Odin’s judgement isn’t infallible, and last I glanced he was even having lunch with the woman civilly!”

“I was nowhere near that event,” Loki said dryly.

“Well I didn’t know you were in Asgard with your ally, so when I detected that you weren’t on earth I might have checked on Thor anyway. He’s my favorite uncle; I’m allowed,” Hel countered. “The point is, you’re going to be stealing apples anyway, you should by rights owe him a boon for your failed attempts to kill him to date, so the only reason not to offer him a stolen apple and a chance to rebel against Odin’s decision-making, is your own pride and possibly an unwillingness to give him the chance.”

Loki blinked a few times, feeling surprised and a little relieved, though his expression was one of mild confusion. “Ah. Actually, that hadn’t occurred to me.”

“Oh.” Hel’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

The trickster hesitated. “My thoughts were elsewhere.”

“They always are. Actually, they’re usually everywhere, unless you’re hung up on... You’re hung up on something.” Her eyebrows raised. “Is this about your string of bad decisions you mentioned earlier?”

“Possibly,” Loki admitted. “I’d really rather not discuss it. It has no bearing on any of my current plans whatsoever.”

“Why not?” Hel asked sharply. “If it’s bothering you, fix it!”

“I’ve been considering a number of options, none so far appear viable.”

“Try a gift,” Hretha suggested.

Loki stared at her for a moment, deeply disconcerted at being seen through quite so quickly. “A gift,” he repeated dully.

“A gift with no debts owed, no obligations, no expectations. If possible, I recommend being sincere.” The elder mage shrugged.

“I am deeply uncomfortable, and even more deeply bemused,” Loki said flatly.

“Think on it again after your war-debts are paid,” Hretha suggested. “Think on it once you know what you want more so than you do now. You are currently seeking solutions in the wrong place.”

“I’d prefer to be free of the problem,” Loki growled. “Not invite further ones.”

“By the Norns, you’re infatuated,” Hel suddenly realized.

The trickster swore.

“Then try being free of the problem, and see how that goes for you,” Hretha suggested, sounding amused. “Run from it, and smother the flame at your leisure if you are able. If not, then rethink your other options. Until then, enjoy what you have while you have it.”

“That’s admittedly been a fine enough policy so far,” Loki mused.
“I’m still in shock,” Hel muttered. “And not at all certain I want to know.”

“I do appreciate our general father-daughter policy of not discussing one another’s casual sex lives,” the trickster admitted drolly.

“Me too.” She patted his arm, beaming at him sweetly. “Me too. That won’t get you out of fessing up to a name, though, and you know it, because if this were casual you wouldn’t be bothered, therefore there is no possible way you can now escape my inquiries except to answer them.”

“Damn.”

“Tony Stark, isn’t it?” the elder mage inquired.

Deeply alarmed, Loki shot her a very wary look. “I’ve never mentioned his name to you, Hretha, and I’m most curious as to how you found it.”

“Hel is not the only one looking out for you.”

Loki’s brow furrowed, unsure whether to find this comforting, or very disturbing. Particularly given that he knew himself to be shielded from Heimdall’s sight perfectly over the past months, and that somehow the first of the three hadn’t been so deterred. He left *allowances* in his spells which left Hel with the ability to find him, whensoever she might look; he had not made such exception for Hretha.

“Your ally?” Hel asked, eyebrows raising. “A mortal?!”

The trickster closed his eyes for a moment, wishing himself elsewhere.

“You owe Thor an apology,” his daughter said, sounding amused.

“I most certainly do not.”

“You do.”

“I do not!”

“What’s so different about Tony Stark, then?” Hel inquired.

Loki opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again.

Fenrir had enough of slumping on the stairs and took a humanoid shape, draped in furs, with some resemblance to Loki in his facial features, but his short, floppy hair appeared to be a very dark brown instead of black, and strode over. “I must admit, I’m curious. Mortals so very seldom catch your attention. I can’t remember any past occasion one has earned your regard, let alone deeper interest.”

“I’m not having this conversation,” the trickster growled.

“Yes you are,” Hretha insisted. “You owe them that much.”

“I...” A heavy sigh escaped him, and he folded his arms across his chest. “It’s hardly the same as Thor’s case, given I’m hardly in love with the man.”

“But you could be?” Hel inquired.

“Frankly, I’m not certain I’m capable,” Loki snapped. Seeing their concerned and displeased faces in response to that, he winced. “Don’t look at me like that.”
“We’re looking at you like that,” Fenrir said flatly.

“You should stop.”

“I love you. I’m not stopping,” the wolf challenged.

“Me too, and me neither,” concurred Hel.

“Damn.”

“And you can’t scare us away like you can Thor,” his daughter chided. “I always suspected that was part of why you always made it such trouble for us to get information out of you about problems, before. This kills you, doesn’t it? Us worrying about you?”

“I’m not worth your concern,” Loki said quietly, his voice brittle. “You’re far better than I, both of you. I am your father, and I should not be a source of worry for you. You are free of me, you need me but little in your lives, and I love what time still I have with you both, but as your lives are now independent of mine, my problems weighing upon you is a sign that I am not being the father I should be to you both. It hurts me to thus see you concerned over me, and looking hurt because you know I am in pain, when it should be for me to bear.” He sighed a bit when both of them leaned against his sides in tandem, which he considered to be utterly unfair, because it warmed his heart where he had been determined to cope on his own, and he couldn’t even pretend it wasn’t a comfort and a relief.

“We worry regardless, because while we don’t rely on you any longer to support us, we do still need you,” Hel said firmly. “I understand matters that shouldn’t overlap. I certainly do not need you fretting over my kingdom and how I run it. Fenrir doesn’t need your constant supervision in any regard. You need neither of us meddling directly with your games throughout the realms. We all know this, but father, please recall that we still do need you because we love you, and I am not at all prepared to lead your soul to its rest. I am not yet that strong, father.”

“And as long as we need you alive,” Fenrir added, “we prefer you to be not miserable. You do all sorts of questionable and life-risking things when you’re miserable, and that can be pretty worrisome.”

“Therefore, you’re our concern whether you want to be or not,” Hel concluded. “Deal with it, and let us help, or let us comfort you, or at least tell us what’s bothering you and get our thoughts on it, so you are not facing it alone any longer. We might help you come to terms with it, we might not, or we might even tell you that you’re being an idiot, but we do that anyway, the only thing you really have to lose here is a bit of your pride. You’ve given that up more than once just for my sake.”

“Hel—” Loki started, firm.

“I know,” she said sharply. “I know how you see me, how you have always seen me. I mean that you let me hide when I asked you to, despite all that. You let me appear like other children, like it was a phase the way Angrboða always insisted it should have been. I knew the truth, and that the people who believed my lies and changed the way they behaved toward me because of it were all fools, but it was still so much easier to function, day to day. I shouldn’t have had to hide, but you let me when I need to.”

The trickster stared at her, unable to find the words. After a moment, he closed his mouth and kissed her forehead gently. Then Fenrir’s, his arms around them both. He breathed in deeply, and exhaled slowly. “Alright. You have me.”
“On that note, I think it time we go in,” Hretha remarked. “There is a storm coming, and the barrier over this courtyard is but thin. It will not keep out all of the winds and snow when it blows quite that strongly.”

Reluctantly, the queen, the trickster and the wolf disentangled enough to follow the elder mage through the door, which vanished behind them. Hretha then turned to Loki and touched his face gently as his skin and hers both paled in the warm interior air. “Thank you, Loki. Now I think I’ll leave you to the mercies of your children.”


She laughed at him, and strode away.

Hel grabbed his right arm. Fenrir took his left.

“Come along, father. We’re discussing Thor and your love life,” Fenrir announced.

“Can’t you just kill me and leave me to bleed out in a corner somewhere?” the trickster pleaded. “I’m fine with this. I’ll be very still.”

“No,” both of his children declared at once.

“Damn everything,” Loki groaned, letting them drag him out of the hall.

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So vast was the cavern that Hlín finally led him to, Tony couldn’t make out the ceiling until the elder mage sent their lantern floating up, brightening along the way until it resembled a small, pale and silvery sun: too bright to look at directly, but still only enough to cast the whole chamber in shades more akin to bright moonlight. The cavern had been carefully altered until the dimensions of it resembled, to Tony’s eye, the dome of Florence in overall shape: modeled after an upright egg with only the bottom broken. He had little doubt that more than two cathedrals could fit within this open, echoing space. If this place had once had stalagmites or stalactites as the rest of the place had up until they arrived here, there was no longer any sign of them. The walls were carved with a single line, not quite perfectly horizontal, spiraling up in neat, close rings, to the very top of the dome.

Tony Stark sat in the middle of the open space, his ass right atop where the spiral that began at the top of the chamber and spun down the walls met the floor, and kept going along it, rendering shallow grooves in the dense stone. He had demanded Hlín explain a number of things about the nature of magic, and with some prodding, she had obliged. After about half an hour, the inventor started to feel like he got a few things better than he had previously.

“So... You guys hack the physical laws of the universe by means of finding stressed points or lines of force where the overall psychic force and energy of the astral plane is pulsing through all matter in the known universe, and plucking the threads, which are actually flexible fissures really, and releasing that energy in a way that makes physical matter susceptible to the rules of the astral plane, which are heavy on belief, strength of will-power, self-knowledge, symbols, expectations and sometimes just random association?” Tony translated slowly. “And since there’s less delineation in the astral plane between past and future, the fissures, the threads, are places where the outcome is uncertain precisely because of the presence of a mage capable of manipulating it in ways that wouldn’t otherwise be possible?”
Hlín positively beamed at him. “Yes, very good, Tony.”

“And the ‘gift’ is basically how much I can stretch reality through those means?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“How much have I got?”

“I cannot say for certain, until I see what it looks like once it ceases rebelling against constraint, which it has not yet ceased to do,” Hlín said. “It is not weak, but until you spend time learning it, and it learning you, there is no way to be certain of your reach.”

“It... learning me?” Tony asked cautiously.

“Magic is not without a will of its own, just as any part of our minds which is not under direct voluntary control. It is an irrepressible, wild force of nature. Yours has been unaware and unmoved and silent for a very long time, and it is a reflection of you. It wants to fly. It wants to create. It wants to do everything at once.”

The inventor looked a bit sheepish. “Fair assessment.”

“It is not patient. It is young, hungry and fascinated and full of fight against anything trying to restrict it,” Hlín warned. “When I remove my restrictions on it, your own magic will try to tear you apart. You must not let it. I will intervene if necessary, but you need to feel it, if you are going to have any hope of gaining control.”

“You’re saying this is probably going to hurt.”

“It might indeed put you through agonizing pain the likes of which you’ve never before known, yes;” she concurred in dry tones.

“Such a vote of confidence.”

“You have better hope than most, Tony. You have already cast spells, successfully. It has reason to cooperate with you rather than defy you; only you can show it how to have that much fun again.”

“The teleportation wasn’t at all fun.”

“For you.” She patted his cheek and rose to her feet, taking a few large steps back. “Do you need a few moments to prepare, before I release it?”

“I could use a drink, actually.”

She shook her head at him, looking genuinely disapproving.

Tony felt very small, and marveled at the woman’s skill at inflicting such a reaction. “Well. Sorry.” He cleared his throat and settled a bit more comfortably, taking a deep breath or three. “I guess I’m ready as I’ll ever-”

Hlín gestured with a flash of pale purple sparks and Tony’s world went red-and-black and agonizing.

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In the end, Loki wasn’t entirely sure what room they dragged him into, but it was thankfully isolated. His children deposited him on a large couch, Hel settling in against his right side, and Fenrir laying on his back with legs hooked over the arm of the couch and his shoulders in Loki’s lap, while the top of his head touched Hel’s knee: effectively trapping him in place.

It was also despicably cosy.

Loki couldn’t help but relax under the affectionate assault despite trying valiantly to remain aloof. He could deny all the rest of the nine realms his good will, and keep from them any generous thoughts and feelings; however, he could deny his children nothing, even now they had long since grown into powerful adults with their own lives. They had his heart unconditionally, and knew it, and used it to their advantage, just as he’d always taught them.

“You’re infatuated with a mortal,” Fenrir began. “How is that working out for you, father dearest?”

The trickster sighed, even his exasperation and deep reluctance unable to stop the warm feeling he got when the shockingly intelligent construct, usually wolf-shaped, that he had raised alongside his own daughter, and gently guided through the ordeal of developing a soul, called him that. Out of age-old habit, he rested a hand in Fenrir’s hair and began stroking, scrunching a bit with his nails in a way that caused the human-shaped wolf to relax bonelessly with a content noise. “It is deeply disconcerting and uncomfortable to contemplate, and I plan to be rid of it.”

“You think you can be?” Hel asked lightly.

“By the Norns, I hope so.”

“Why? You’re Loki. You made me. You raised her.” He pointed at his sister. “You defied more than half of Asgard to keep me out of chains and allow me to choose whether or not I wanted a soul and to live as your kin, or to remain as I was, rather than destroy me outright for what I might have become, either way.”

“I care about no one’s disapproval or lack thereof.”

“So Thor wants you to pursue it?” Hel cut in, able to read him too well. “He knows then. Oh, that’s interesting.”

Loki sighed, and tried to recall why he’d encouraged cleverness and perceptiveness in them both. Surely it had occurred to him, somewhere along the line, just how bad an idea that was. “He does, and he can take his good intentions elsewhere. I have no need for them, in this matter.”

“He’s oddly certain that you don’t want just a torrid affair, then,” his daughter mused. “Or he wouldn’t be inclined to help.”

“I already have one of those, here. It’s lovely, so far,” the trickster recounted airily.

Fenrir’s brow furrowed. “You want more from him? How seriously?”

Loki rolled his eyes with a scoff.

“Mistress Death handed me this when she arrived,” Hel said, holding up a piece of twisted metal, summoned from thin air. Formerly, it had been a series of plates and other interconnected parts, but some very high heat had melted it enough to solidify it into a single piece, which now only barely resembled the front of a human ribcage. “I suppose this might have some bearing on matters?”

The trickster’s fingers stilled and the wolf made a faint noise of concerned protest. Loki took the
warped metal object from her fingers and held it up. His own fingers still fitted perfectly into grooves along the top of it, where he’d pulled it out after the heat of Extremis caused... considerable complications with the ability of Tony Stark’s body to accept the intrusive metal obstructions, busy as it was growing fresh bone tissue in their stead. Rather abrupt, forceful extraction had been required, to prevent molten metal pouring into the mortal’s then-fiery heart, potentially causing infinite complications once Tony had cooled.

“What is it?” Fenrir inquired.

“Replacement for bone, partially melted,” Loki said dully.

Hel’s eyebrows raised. “Your mortal’s?” She sounded worried.

“He’s not mine; far from it. He also no longer had need for this. I had to remove it.” He swallowed convulsively, realizing how close Tony must have been to death as Extremis took him. “As he is my ally, I saved his life.”

“A warning, then.” His daughter shook her head slowly. “How dramatic.”

“Apparently, she wishes to threaten his soul,” Loki said slowly. “I suddenly suspect that the way to Helheim, after I destroy Thanos, will be a more harrowing journey than even its usual. She wold not bother with this threat, otherwise.”

The wolf snorted. “It’s not so bad after about the thirty-seventh... thirty-eighth time.”

“Not along even the longest of his usual paths, brother,” Hel said. “He will walk those usually reserved for the dead themselves.”

“So... third time?”

“Second, though the first time I did not wander them. I fell but briefly through them,” Loki said. “Not briefly enough.”

Both of his children fell silent, at that. After a moment, Fenrir nudged his head up against the trickster’s hand and started the petting up again. “You haven’t spoken much of it,” he said.

“There is little to tell that I ever wish to remember, if it may be avoided.”

“I understand,” Hel said. “We both do.”

“I know,” said Loki.

That sat in silence for a few moments before curiosity again struck.

“What has he done, this mortal,” inquired the queen of Helheim, “that has so caught your attention? He must be exceptional.”

“He is.” No hesitation.

“What’s he done?” Fenrir asked.

A half-smile tugged at his lips as he regarded his questioner with some amusement. “If might interest you particularly to know that he has constructed an advanced robotic intelligence which is fully sentient, and possibly might have accidentally developed something akin to a soul, though I will hardly tell them that myself,” Loki offered.

The wolf stiffened. “What?!”
“Pardon?” Hel sounded a bit aghast.

“You heard me.”

“But—how did a mortal—”

“Not with magic. JARVIS, as he is called, has no single physical body. He inhabits machinery, devices, networks, and occasionally suits of armor for battle,” the trickster recounted.

“I want to meet him,” Fenrir said immediately. “The... this JARVIS.”

Loki blinked a few times, then reeled in momentary dismay at his own obliviousness. Of course he would wish to meet JARVIS—a fellow construct, one made instead of born, but alive and clever and brilliant nevertheless. At times, the trickster forgot how few such creatures existed at all in the nine realms, and how singular and lonely Fenrir’s life might be, if not for his family. “I... Forgive me, I should have told you earlier. And sought an invitation—"

“Invitation not needed. You’re the mortal’s ally, Fenrir is your son. It’s simple hospitality,” Hel said crisply.

“-from JARVIS,” Loki finished.

“Oh. Right,” she muttered. “I presumed you expected resistance from... sorry.”

Fenrir grinned, his teeth a bit more wolfish than the rest of his appearance, as was his wont. “Well, given your vanity, father, I can’t say I’m surprised such an intelligent and unusually inventive creature caught your eye.”

“He invents new things by trade. Machinery, tools, weaponry, intelligent systems... many things,” the trickster admitted.

“He never grows bored of it? The machines?”

“No. Given what he is able to make out of them, I am not at all surprised.”

Hel smiled at him a bit knowingly.

He glared at her in return.

“Tell us more,” Fenrir prompted. “Why did he create JARVIS?”

“Initially he required a system to aid him with his work, I believe. He then began to program it to anticipate his requests and ways to facilitate them without being instructed. He gave it vast amounts of data collected from recorded human voices, one in particular he had been close to as a young man in his father’s house. He then developed it further, to understand not only signs of human emotions like distress, but many others and what they indicated about a person’s state of mind. By then, he was treating JARVIS as he would another person, albeit like one slowly learning to speak and to understand the world around itself. From there came understanding, on both sides, and JARVIS developed a personality, a wry sense of humor, and genuine care for the humans who occupy the rooms he watches over. Particularly Tony, of course, but it’s clear in how he communicates with many of the others that he knows their personalities and habits well, and takes care to treat them if not well, then just as they deserve.” He smirked faintly at the memory of an automatic dispenser shooting a coaster at Clint’s head when the archer had put a drink down on a wooden surface without one.
Hel nodded, thoughtful. “So he began as a servant?”

A nod. “He is now invaluable as a partner in any venture of importance, sounding board, co-pilot of any technology Tony himself uses or occupies, and, I suspect, an occasional stand-in for his conscience,” Loki murmured.

“Interesting. Is he free to make his own decisions? His mobility is presumably limited,” Fenrir queried.

“I think that Tony and JARVIS both want others to believe that he has more limitations than he truly does. I suspect, based on the intelligence and complexity of tasks entrusted to him, and how deeply rooted in all systems he is, that JARVIS is only limited as far as his own practicality and desires are concerned. It shows in how Tony speaks to him, and relies upon him, and regards him with a certain sort of awe, at times…”

Hel hummed. “And you believe that he is capable of desire?”

“He can make autonomous decisions, without instruction, which has saved Tony’s life on multiple occasions,” Loki said. “If he can do that, I see no reason why he cannot take other actions however he may wish.”

His daughter nodded. “But he doesn’t grow bored?”

“He does not have senses as we, but he has his own sort of life, and reach. He can see a hundred different locations across the world anytime he might have desire or drive to do so. If he wished, JARVIS could cause untold havoc and possibly hold the wealthiest nations on the planet hostage until his demands were met, if there were anything he truly desired, and Tony would be hard pressed to stop him. Unless of course it was a hostage exchange to retrieve Tony, in which case JARVIS would simply win,” Loki extrapolated with a casual shrug. “Given his access to global systems and all that I suspect him capable of.”

“Impressive!” the wolf crowed. “I like the sound of him.”

“Given recent anti-magic technology they’ve developed, JARVIS would actually be more capable of doing me harm than Tony Stark alone, at present,” the trickster said, clearly only just realizing it.

“Anti-magic,” Hel said dubiously.

“I’ve had it tested on my person twice only, and the second left me unable to cast even the simplest of glamour for almost half an hour,” Loki drawled. “It was utterly miserable, and one of the most appalling sensations I’ve felt in my entire life.”

Both of his children appeared mildly horrified.

“Maybe... you shouldn’t pursue this mortal...” Hel suggested gently.

“I rather appreciate the challenge, actually.”

They both groaned. “Of course you do.”

“I hardly know what you mean.”

They shot him unimpressed looks.

Loki continued to wear the most innocent expression he could muster. It looked outright angelic, causing both of his children to roll their eyes at him, making the older god chuckle softly. “He is still
far less a danger to my person than I could be to his, should I be so provoked.”

“Does he care about your well-being?” asked Hel.

“I am his ally. My injuries aren’t conducive to a successful war.”

She narrowed her eyes at him slowly.

Loki snorted. “He is fond of me enough that my person being mangled by a dragon did seem to cause him genuine concern.”

“Mangled?” Fenrir sounded amused.

“I had to leave the thing alive and, for the sake of the damned alliance, rescue several mortals from the wrath of both the Dragon, and a globe-spanning criminal organization,” Loki pointed out dryly. “It required more finesse than a mere dragon-slaying and a lot more getting dragged through rocks, thrown about by massive claws, and the rest.” He gestured vaguely “It was, admittedly, exhausting.”

Hel’s eyebrows raised. “Thor didn’t aid you?”

“He was incapacitated by a different enemy at the time.”

“How did you feel, pulling that metal from his chest?” she asked more quietly.

Loki couldn’t stop the flicker of something pained from crossing his expression.

“You really don’t want him to die,” she observed. “Very badly.”

“Hel-”

“I’m not offering you a deal, I just find this novel, for you. You care so little for most people that I can think of only perhaps twenty that I know for a fact you would be hurt to lose,” she recounted. “Most are kin, or old friends and mentors. It’s been a very long time since anyone you’ve known for less than a century has come to mean so much to you, father. I find that interesting.”

Her father wore a faintly chagrined expression for a moment.

“I told you this is what you would get if you let her keep getting cleverer,” Fenrir sighed, shaking his head. “But you never listened to me.”

“I can think of no way it might have been stopped. Can you?” Loki countered.

The wolf frowned. “I concede your point.”

“I don’t think you’ll be rid of your infatuation easily,” Hel said.

“Why not?” Loki asked, genuinely uneasy.

“I... can’t see his end.” Her brow furrowed. “I’ve observed all of the Avengers, and some have endings obscured by time, so that I cannot see anything clearly, but they still have their shadows: the thawed soldier, and the lovely assassin. The man with the monster in his soul is far less certain, a chaotic series of shadows and potential futures suggesting his personal timeline will become a mess at some point, I know not how. The archer is mortal, but will live a long life. Your ending, as always, is out of my sight, as most from Asgard, including Thor. Tony Stark... I have seen glimpses of possible shadows, but never for long. Wherever he is going, whenever his life may eventually end, I cannot see it.”
“Perhaps he will succeed in his endeavors with Extremis, then,” the trickster mused. “He seeks immortality by his own means. He needs no gods for it.”

“The fire that you pulled the metal from... was that Extremis?” Fenrir asked.

Loki hesitated. “Yes.”

Hel caught it. “You are certain he does not need even a single god?”

“He does not. He never has. More than any mortal on the whole of that planet, he has no need for any of the gods.” The trickster exhaled heavily. “However inconvenient that may be for myself.”

“Does he perhaps want your company regardless?” Fenrir suggested.

“I am a risk to all those he holds most dear, even at my most benevolent, just by virtue of who and what I am,” Loki said coldly. “Given he has no need of me, I can see no reason he would request my company further, beyond practical allegiances, as may prove convenient on occasions that we share mutual enemies.”

The wolf frowned at him. “If you promised not to harm those he cares about?”

“I suggested it once. His disbelief was palpable.”

“He didn’t think you were serious?” Hel inquired. “Did you sound serious?”

“I may have sounded predatory and vaguely threatening,” Loki admitted.

She shot him a disapproving look.

“I was under the impression, at the time, that he was playing a game that it turned out he had no interest in,” he muttered, with clear reluctance.

“What game?” they both asked, knowing him too well.

“I thought he had been deliberately attempting to ensnare me, by appealing to me as much as he did. I was incorrect. He was doing the opposite, leaving me every possible escape, once our alliance is done,” Loki offered. “There is a chance that he does not wish to give the impression he is vulnerable to mischief from me, in the wake of our affair, by anything akin to affection, or even lust. I personally believe, from long experience that where I am neither sought after, nor needed, I should not expect to be welcomed. Particularly when I do not know the game being played, any longer, and a worthy opponent seems to have given up with little fight.”

“That does sound a bit disappointing,” Fenrir mused. “If he asked you for more?”

Loki considered. “He won’t.”

“If he did, though,” Hel insisted.

“I would run.”

“Why?” inquired the wolf.

“To see if he would chase.”

Fenrir hummed, seeming to understand.
His sister frowned. “What then?”

“That would depend on the chase, and whether it were truly him asking.”

“And to be sure it’s him chasing, and not the whole pack,” the wolf added.

“I see.” Hel gave a thoughtful nod. “If, after your war, and your ordeal for Mistress Death, and thawing Jotunnheim... what if you miss him? What if you can’t be rid of your infatuation?”

“I will consider other options. Until then, I have much other work to do.”

“You always have work to do,” Fenrir growled.

“I’m always needed for something. Otherwise, I would be bored.”

Both of his children shuddered at the thought.

“I personally hope you remain busy for some time,” Hel said, her fingers darting out to tug on the warped metal in Loki’s hands.

His grip tightened instinctively.

She smirked at him knowingly.

Loki shook his head, but vanished the object up his sleeve regardless.

Hel’s smirk only widened.

“When will I be free of this interrogation?”

“Angrboða returned to Asgard, if anyone was wondering. I know you’ve both had your attention elsewhere,” Fenrir said suddenly.

Both Hel and Loki became still as stone.

“She looks different,” the wolf mused. “I think she’s come to terms with a few things fae usually throw such fits over.” He shot Loki a significant look.

The trickster took a deep breath, very slowly. “Ah.”

“About damned time,” Hel huffed. “Did it really take her so long?”

“Hel,” Loki said softly. “I do not regret a word I have said to her, about herself and her nature, nor yours. I do, however, have a better understanding of what it is like to find out one’s true nature would be considered repulsive and monstrous to nearly everyone in the world to which I thought I had been born.” He swallowed thickly, then cleared his throat. “Fools though they are, I know better than most, of the anguish and misery fools may cause, and how much spite and hatred they can bring someone to inflict upon themselves whether they know better or not.” He rested a hand atop his daughter’s darker one, where it still rested on his arm. “I still believe she could not have been more wrong, in seeing anything monstrous in your appearance. I also believe she could not have been more wrong in being unwilling to show her own true face to us out of fear that Sigyn and I would have loved her any less, for letting us see what she seemed to consider an unforgivable degree of imperfection, and which she refused to believe might be the form most natural to her.”

“Why could she not believe it? The forms we are born into-” Hel began.
“Are not always known to us, truly. I expected myself to be Aesir for millennia, and never suspected otherwise. If I had not learned from Angrboða’s example, I may not myself have been as able to accept that my true nature was not a curse, or a cruel trick, of Odin’s,” the trickster said, his voice gentle. “I might have come up with any number of lies more comforting than being of Laufey’s kin.”

“I’m happy to have provided alternatives,” she murmured. “I still do not understand Angrboða.”

“The fae lied to her, and her parents either believed them or simply did not correct them, when Angrboða was told repeatedly that the form she was born to would vanish as she ‘grew out of’ it; she was a shape-shifter, and they led her to believe that she would develop into another ‘more natural’ form as she aged, and her expectations altered her. Such a lie might have been a harmless enough to her, being half-fae as she is, but I would not have let her hide your beauty for the sake of making you look more like some glamourous, aristocratic Sidhe ideal, as though you did not outshine every maiden in the Seelie court already, when you did not seem to grow out of your fine colors with age as she did. I wish that she had never believed that the shape she was born with was at all reprehensible, and that she would have let herself be shown that, rather than declare me to be a monster unforgivable, and Sigyn a child-thief, and then disappear where none of us could follow for over two centuries.”

“She knew you were right. She couldn’t face it,” Hel sighed. “I... sought her out.”

“I suspected.”

“Of course you did,” she sighed. “She... I wore another form. She did not know it was me. I got her drunk enough to discuss it.”

“A wise tactic, actually. I taught you well.”

She half-smiled, very bitterly. “I don’t hate her. I never could, after that. She has always wandered as she does because she knows that she is welcome home with her kin at the end of even the longest journey, but everything about her home would not accept her in her true form. Just daring to show any such appearance, as more than a passing glamour for dramatics or a joke, could get her expelled from the company of all who care for her, and sent to the Unseelie court for their people to accept or ignore as they might see fit. More than that, she no longer remembered what it even felt like, father. She could no longer go back to what she had been.”

“Then something changed,” Fenrir mused. “Because she looked more like you.”

Hel took a sharp breath in, and let it out slowly. “Well, father. I’m going to Asgard.” She shot him a look. “You?”

“I do have an ally to check upon. He’s receiving lessons from Hlín.”

The queen and the wolf both gaped at him for a moment.

“Oh. Until recent he possessed a dormant gift. It awoke violently.”

Hel elbowed him sharply. “You could have just mentioned that was why you were sulking, you ridiculous lunatic!”

He laughed, pushing aside her further attempts to swat at him. “It would have exempt me from none of your further questions. I saw no point.”

Tired of his resting place being jostled, Fenrir growled and returned to wolf-shape, only a bit smaller than before to accommodate the dimensions of the large couch, which his bulk now affectively
pinned both his father and sister to, rendering them immobile. “Are you both done?”

Loki chuckled, a bit breathlessly. “I would say so, yes,” he wheezed.

“I hate you both,” Hel groaned. “Get off me this instant, by order of your queen.”

Fenrir licked her face pointedly, earning an indignant noise, then rolled off of them both onto the floor.

The queen of Helheim cleaned and dried her face with a quick spell, glaring at her brother. “We will settle this later,” she promised.

The enormous wolf merely let his jaw hang open in a panting, canid grin.

Loki shook his head at them. “And you two call me ridiculous.”

“Well you are,” they insisted, in unison.

“And you are both very, very obviously my children,” he countered, beaming at them with mocking warmth and benevolence. “To Asgard,” he said, proffering a hand to each of them. Fenrir affectionately gripped his father’s arm in his jaw, careful to grip only lightly. Hel took his hand.

They vanished soon after.

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Everything tasted like blood and overheated metal

There was no fire. It took Tony’s entire focus not to let the pain cause his temperature to spike and set off Extremis, at first. He fixed his attention on breathing first, stopped himself gasping and deliberately slowed his breaths, until they were calm and even again despite all the rest of him screaming.

As he clenched his jaw and started, slowly, to adjust to the strain, his vision went from black shot through with red, to a fiery haze of orange-gold, matching the color-scheme his hands had displayed earlier, when they’d started to glow as he faced down M during his escape attempt. Rust and fox-fur and fire: his color was apparently not quite golden, but also not blood-soaked.

It seemed apt. Just as Loki’s green was lively and lush, yet also poisonous.

If only all of this energy weren’t struggling to distance itself from him.

Then Tony realized it wasn’t fleeing. It was reaching, pulling, struggling as though trying to escape and go in every possible direction at once, along with a few impossible ones too. I don’t like limits either, but if you just stop, he thought, stop fighting, we can work on that.

The pull lessened a little, but still kept up. Tony had the feeling he was being listened to, but words weren’t the way to go. The forces here weren’t verbal in nature, though words could catch their attention. Shaping them took will. In the heat of the moment with M, it had seemed natural to reach out with thought alone, throwing out ideas like he could feel them spinning out of his head, but the high was gone, and he was in pain, and he had no clue what he was doing.
Eyes still shut, the inventor could dimly hear sounds of objects striking stone, and something like rushing winds, but it all seemed so far away. His own body seemed far away, too far.

The gulf between imagining something, and expecting it to happen, had widened again, and with it came the struggle to believe that anything he did with thought and imagination alone would have any effect on something so viscerally real as the power crackling through him and around him so chaotically.

Convincing himself otherwise, under the weight of distraction from keeping Extremis in check and coping with the intense pain throughout every fiber of his being, was slow going. *I've done this before,* was his focal point, because he had. Like Loki’s name in his mind before had anchored him to the conviction that the horrors around him weren’t real, that memory allowed him the conviction to believe control was possible, and within his reach. Magic had, for those few wild and utterly insane minutes, been a natural extension of him. He had been in tune with its frantic energy and explosive intentions, and it had been glorious.

“Music,” said a too-distant voice. Hlín.

“What?” Tony grit out. His mouth felt dry and he was suddenly dizzy. Where was he, even? What was touching his face? He didn’t open his eyes to check, but it felt like stone. Moving, he discovered upon trying to lift his head, hurt.

“Think of a piece of music which you find calming.”

“Kind of having trouble, with the thinking,” Tony growled.

“It’s been hours now, and you can finally hear me again. You’re making progress.”

The inventor was thrown off by that. He didn’t feel like he’d moved while trapped in the fox-fire maelstrom of his magic, but he realized that he wasn’t sitting upright anymore. He was curled on the ground, cold stone against his cheek, arms shaking. Dream-like didn’t begin to cover it.

Despite his words, his mind did supply music, but none of it helped. It was too complex, too chaotic, until finally his memory supplied a single, serene note.

It led into another, and another, and he could feel them in his mind like rain-drops, as always, falling so naturally and pleasingly. The Goldberg Variations had been one of his favorite pieces to play for a long time, when he was alone and trying to think. The memories of peace and the movement of the music through his mind began to clear the haze. Each note of the Aria seemed to tug at the force trying to pull away from him, out of him, making its struggle weaker not because it had given up, but because it seemed to be curious about the music. Tony felt the pain ease almost all at once as the music picked up into the second variation, and the power formerly trying to tear him apart in a few thousand different directions settled around him like a cat in a sunbeam, and felt like it was almost purring, with every piano note seeming to reverberate through it, the music shaping his magic in just the same way it shaped sensation and mood in Tony’s own mind. The inventor sighed with it, and pushed himself upright again slowly, as the music picked up, the Aria fading and variation 1 a 1 beginning in its wake.

His body felt lighter now, as he sat up, keeping his eyes shut but not squeezed tight with effort anymore. Feeling as though still reeling in the wake of receiving a concussion, Tony's head was, for a while, blissfully quiet except the music and the sound of his own slightly ragged breathing.

As he breathed, he felt the magic settled around him begin to move with it, flowing through him as naturally as a good mood, and almost as comfortable. Once meditatively sitting cross-legged again,
Tony started to really examine the sensation of it, able to ignore the music now thoroughly stuck in his head without actually stopping it, and really feel the subtle ways that his magic responded to his thoughts as well as his emotional and physical states.

It wasn’t separate from him, he realized: no more than his panic was, when he suffered an attack. It was somewhere between conscious thought and emotion, and affected by both. It only seemed more alien for being unfamiliar, with triggers Tony didn’t yet fully understand. Settled as he increasingly felt, he found that it wasn’t acting independently of him at all; he was just flexing mental muscles that he’d never had to consciously operate before, in order to prevent it behaving in ways that he didn’t want it to, just like steering a train of thought. He could feel the ache it had beenstraining to escape, somewhere deep in his chest, and suspected it was phantom pain from the sudden transition between dormancy and activity. It had been there and Tony had been dimly aware of it since his attempt to escape the Ten Rings, but Hlín’s containment spell had numbed it a little, while it had been in effect. The violence of his magic had been reaction to the pain, and reflexively as pulling his hand away from a hot stove, Tony’s system had told it to move away from the pain... except that it couldn’t, not when it was anchored in Tony’s blood and bones, and that anchorage was what hurt.

“Nice trick, with the music,” the inventor rasped. “Uses enough different parts of the brain to foster new connections and disrupt the patterns running through it before that, and stirred old sense-memories too.”

“I had hoped for as much.”

Calmer now, Tony began to experiment, and found that if he imagined reaching out and touching particular threads with his magic, then it reached out and touched them. Simple as point-and-click, but with an added level of complexity. The less certain he was of any gesture, whether because his own idea of what he wanted from it happened to be unclear, or because he felt uncertainty over whether his magic would actually obey because it seemed too easy and too foreign and not-part-of-himself, then the less likely he was to get any result that he’d intended.

Sometimes he got results he really had not intended: a clumsy gesture yanking a few strings that caused a surprisingly large explosion for reasons Tony wasn’t altogether able to discern.

He realized belatedly that the smell of smoke around him was stronger than a single explosion like that should’ve caused. It disturbed older memories he didn’t want intruding on his current serene calm and intellectual hyper-focus.

Thus, he asked aloud why there was so much smoke.

“Welcome back,” Hlin said. “Your magic, as it struggled, gripped strings around you in effort to pull itself away from you. The results were rather... violent. Your subconscious mind, it seems to me, has a penchant for causing combustion, but given the simplicity of such reactions, this is actually fairly common, particularly among mages of warrior-like inclinations; although Loki, a child, apparently had a habit of only half-consciously summoning weapons from throughout an entire house, where they would stop patiently once within the reach of his arm. Knives, most commonly.”

Oh. That would explain a lot. For one, having expelled so much energy might be why he was so exhausted he was almost shaking with it, and why it was becoming more of a strain to get as much affect each time he reached out.

It seemed he’d tired out his capabilities to about half their previous strength.

“I... should stop, I think.”
“I would strongly recommend it, yes.”

“How long have we been down here?”

“Six hours.”

Tony slowly opened his eyes. The world seemed clearer somehow, more vivid, than it had before he had closed them at the very beginning. He became aware of the quiet in the room around him as he sat up, the music in his head trailing off as he listened, and felt his awareness respond more than physically. His magic reached out, too, and he could feel the air, the stone, and Hlín’s calm yet charged presence. She had been standing at the ready, the whole time, ready to intervene if necessary.

The silence around them had in it the same quality as peacefully wandering around a house before dawn, knowing one is alone, no lights on, no electronics humming: just pleasant isolation and light, cool calmness.

It was a sort of quiet Tony hadn’t experienced in a long while, really. It wasn’t long before he missed the presence of his tech, comforting as it was, but his magic hummed instead: low, through all of him. It reminded him of when he’d had the arc reactor, always humming barely-perceptible except for the fact it was in his bones: only audible and tangible to him, or someone touching him and listening very close.

The inventor felt aware of details he would otherwise miss: the depth of the grooves carved into the stone and how the air stirred here and there with the echoes of chaos his awakened magic had wreaked on the formerly still room. He wasn’t aware of them tangibly, but somewhere between sight and touch and hearing was a different sort of resonation, and it resulted in him collecting more precise data about the room than he would have otherwise been able to. No wonder magic users were considered slightly “sensitive” stereotypically, if this sort of hyper-awareness was normal for them.

Tony wondered, for a nervous second, if the heady calm would last forever, because his thoughts weren’t accustomed to it, not really. As if on cue, a whirr of different concerns went off in the back of his head, his mind effortlessly switching gears to contemplating three trains of thought at once, for a start. When he wasn’t as tired, maybe he’d work back up to six or seven, but he relaxed, for now, feeling his magic respond not-unfavorably, instead naturally tangling with the shift and pace of his thoughts, continuing to be a low-level hum through his bones, so much like the arc reactor he could almost forget he had control over it, and the ability to tap into it.

Almost. Strings around him glittered as he trailed a final experimental touch across a few of them, not enough to stir them, but enough to feel their tension.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” said the inventor, smiling a little.

Slowly, Hlín approached him, matching his look with a faint smile of her own. “I do believe you are on your way.” She proffered her hand, once close enough.

Tony took hold of it, letting her pull him to his feet. He was exhausted, and his legs shook a bit, but he was also buzzing and wired at the same time. Then his stomach growled and he realized another reason he was so shaky. “Wow, I... really need to eat.”

“Yes you do.” She then vanished them from the chamber.
Suddenly understanding once more just how stupid he’d been to try teleportation the way he had, witnessing all of the key bits he had missed applied in Hlín’s spell, and getting a still better idea just what they were for and the risks involved without them, Tony was staggered and a little harrowed, and overall not quite prepared to be met with the sight of Frigga standing in Asgard’s royal dining hall, already greeting them both with a small smile.

He was grateful, though, that the transport had also come with a bit of a costume upgrade to make him feel less out of place: the red tunic he wore now accompanied by a heavy waistcoat of finely tailored leather dyed the color of rust, under a well-fitted black jacket with occasional red-and-gold accents, which fit like something from a leather-and-brocade Armani-goes-Elizabethan collection: two belts at his waist, and bits of metal that looked suspiciously like little armor plates incorporated into the design along his outer forearms, which matched the gold/bronze of similar decorations on his now-dark-leather pants. The weight of seams across his shoulders suggested there might be some metal there, too, all in the same shade, complimenting the gold lines of embroidery along the outer edges of his jacket’s broad, elegant wine-colored lapels. He wore heavy boots now, as well, which felt a little strange after so long walking barefoot through stone caverns.

He supposed that with his having spent two days unconscious in Asgard, and being a sort of ally/friend to a member of the royal family and Hlín’s student, contributed to his lack of surprise that someone had fitted him for Asgardian formal-wear and had some custom-made for him. He suspected his teacher had some design input.

“Good afternoon to you both, Lady Hlín, and Mr. Stark,” the queen said. “I am glad to see you both still intact.”

Tony tried to smile back, but he suspected it looked a bit pained. “I’m really glad too, right now, trust me.”

She raised an eyebrow, looking amused.

“He may be realizing in greater depth than before just how lucky he is to be alive after his rather botched early attempt at teleportation shortly after his gift awoke,” the teacher explained succinctly.

Frigga looked suddenly aghast, and reached out to rest a hand on Tony’s shoulder, light but very strong. “You truly did that?”

“It was a bad idea,” Tony admitted. “Very bad.”

“Indeed it was, Mr. Stark. Come, dine with me, both of you.” She took both of the inventor’s hands and let him to the table.

The way she moved, all grace and smoothness, made Tony recall that Loki had learned from her first, long before Hlín, and looking closer he could faintly feel how her movements affected the air around them. Her magic was quieter than Loki’s, more airy and subtle as fog and mist, but he suspected that it was no weaker for it.

“What do you observe, Mr. Stark?” she asked, as she took her own seat at the head of the table with Tony to her left and Hlín on her right, straight across from him.

“Huh?” The inventor shook his head for a moment, snapping out of it and focusing on her face again, instead of the still-exotic-seeming new sorts of data his brain was being supplied with.
Frigga gestured and the array of platters artfully laid out in the middle of the long table—full as they were of fruit, sliced cold meats, cheeses, some bread and a few bowls of heavy, spiced stew—reappeared directly in front of them in more practical organization. “I did try to tell our dear chef that this would be an informal meal, but I believe you impressed her enough that she wished to incorporate more show.”

The inventor blinked a bit. “I haven’t done much.”

“You’re the first mortal mage Hlín has been impressed by enough to offer her knowledge to in over a millennia,” the queen corrected gently. “My youngest son, called Lie-smith quite fittingly, admitted before our entire court that you politically and strategically out-maneuvered him and won his true sworn word to serve as your ally in return, which is a feat by the standards of any creature in all the nine realms, who has never been his kin.” Her eyes showed only a brief flicker of sadness before she continued, “You also destroyed the entire Chitauri fleet to save your world from both them, and the rash actions of your own people, who launched such a dangerous weapon effectively at themselves. You are more than a little impressive, Mr. Stark, and that is why I am curious what you observe of me.” Her tone turned teasing as she reminded him of that earlier question.

“Oh. I...” Tony felt outclassed. It was novel, and strangely pleasant. He’d met a lot of royalty in his life before, but Frigga was more queen than most any of them. She made him feel too young, and sort of inelegant. “You move like you’re floating, like an aria made into motion. It occurred to me that you were moving almost like Loki does when he spell-casts, but he’s heavier, more fluid than airy... or more like tidal currents than fog rolling in. I guessed you’re probably quicker than him, and more subtle, probably more precise, like you can and do use daggers and swords, but maybe almost consider them overkill because you can do worse to someone with a much lighter piece of metal, if you aim it just right, which would be all the easier for you, since you’re probably really adept at manipulating the way air moves.” He cleared his throat quietly once he finished, feeling unusually nervous, but she smiled warmly at his words. No small wonder she was a queen, Tony thought; that smile was like a late-afternoon winter sunbeam and threatened to make winning her approval an irresistible urge.

“I have always had great penchant for manipulation of light and air, yes,” Frigga confirmed. “Light is the simplest and easiest to persuade, and while air is easy enough to push around with brute force, it is one of the most difficult things to manipulate with great refinement and precision because it lacks heft and weight as heavier matter does.” She summoned a small dart to her hand with an idle gesture: small and light, flat and thin toward the back end, but very sharp and narrow at the front, composed of an alloy Tony couldn’t quite identify. She blew softly under it and it took to the air.

The inventor watched a veritable galaxy of plucked threads as it soared up, gliding in a circle above their heads for a moment, before sharply descending, faster than a diving falcon, its sharp tip buried in the table between the fore- and middle-fingers of Tony’s left hand, very close to his skin, making the inventor twitch. The force it had struck with had been impressive for an object so small.

“I was very fond of the complexity of doing so much with so little,” Frigga added, “and surprising people who would underestimate the value of precision.”

Loki was, Tony recalled not for the first time and certainly not the last, much more this woman’s son than he’d ever been Odin’s. He smiled a bit. “I hope I impress then.”

She smiled a bit wider, with just a hint of mischief. “You do.” She gestured. “Please, do eat.” She herself reached out and plucked a few slices of roast and a bunch of grapes from the platters, for her own plate. “You doubtlessly need it, after all you have been through.”

“I did, sort of wonder...” He looked sidelong at Hlín.
“It is traditional to fast for up to four days before undergoing what you just endured,” she said, smiling a little. “I kept you from dehydration, but that the lack of food in your system was more beneficial than not.”

“Admittedly, I didn’t even notice feeling hungry,” Tony mused, piling food onto his plate. He noted that despite the fruit selection being good, and even a little exotic in a couple of cases, apples were notably absent.

“Your magic had no small part in that,” said the teacher. “It was too unsettled for you to feel the absence of energy and stability that regular meals provide, contained under your skin as it was by my own spells.”

Tony made a noncommittal noise around a mouthful of food. As soon as the first bite of meat touched his tongue, it had been like a switch in his brain, and his appetite kicked into overdrive. He ate quickly, and as non-rudely as possible, because Frigga had an air about her that made him feel respectful where he usually took comfort in being careless. It was, he suspected, part of the maternal air of dignity she maintained precisely in order to have this effect on most people.

He could admit, if only to himself, that she was damned good at it.

By the time Tony had eaten what had felt like half his own body weight before he managed to feel sated enough to relax fully, Hlín and her queen were speaking his language, in terms of manipulating flying objects, air pressure differences, and the aerodynamics of projectiles in a design sense, Hlín having plucked Frigga’s dart from the table for closer examination.

Tony was able to insinuate himself into the conversation with relative ease, until he’d somehow found himself actively re-working the design for the three stingray-like drones he had incorporated into his space-travel-capable armor with the queen of Asgard, who was brilliantly devious in some of her suggestions. They barely paid any heed when more platters were brought to the table and both ends of the dining hall opened, allowing members of the court to drift in and out at their leisure. The inventor was peripherally aware of the crowd that appeared around the table, full of quiet laughter and discussion and not-so-subtle staring at the mad mortal. Tony was used to ignoring the attention of awed crowds of gawking people, and the familiarity of it was almost comforting, allowing him to be a little more animated as some of his exhaustion bled away, with the aid of food and probably Extremis.

He didn’t notice someone from the crowd spot the queen and start to slowly approach them, but Hlín did, and froze, her eyes widening a little. It took Frigga and the inventor a few moments to notice her quiet, and follow her gaze back to the source of the teacher’s shock, by which point the tall woman in an elegant traveling coat less armored than most Aesir garb, but still sturdy, and decorated with vivid embroidery everywhere that wasn’t fine leather, which was stained to look almost like wood grain. The woman’s hair was halfway pulled back from her temples in two braids which met and combined at the back of her head into a larger plait, while the rest fell in wild auburn waves over her shoulders, red-gold where the late evening sunlight from the windows struck them. Her skin was of such a dark blue it seemed almost black, with thin pale lines on the back and sides of her neck and the edges of her face, almost resembling tree rings. The sclera of her eyes was dark grey instead of white, making her pale blue eyes stand out very starkly indeed. She was taller than the queen, who stood sharply as soon as their eyes met, and took a few steps away from the table to stand between the stranger and her guests.

Having seen how cold Frigga’s expression had suddenly become, how full of quiet and hurt fury, Tony felt both intrigued and wary, looking again at the dark stranger, dressed in clothing that he didn’t think would look out of place at a festival in Rivendell.
Belatedly, the inventor caught sight of the strings around her, subtle and at the edges of everyone’s sight, his own included, vanishing before he could detect more than the faintest iridescent flicker, easily dismissible as his imagination. Whoever she was, she was good, because her work was keeping the crowd from looking at her instead of through her, and most of them seemed to be absent-mindedly drifting away and toward the exits, talking animatedly amongst themselves.

She was very good. The doors at one end of the hall swung silently shut. The others only halfway, but the room’s remaining occupants were too distracted to quite notice it, or the pale hand holding it open.

Not heeding the warning of the queen’s war-like stance and expression, the dark woman stepped closer still, until she stood within arm’s reach of the Aesir matriarch. The queen looked narrow and almost fragile compared to her, for the stranger was all battle-axe curves and quiet reserve that spoke of a confident surety of herself and her own strength; although there was an air of hesitancy about her, and regret in her own expression. “Queen Frigga,” she greeted, her voice wavering a little, and knelt, arm locked across her chest.

The queen watched her, curious now, but no less angry. “Angrboða of the Alfheim Sidhe,” she greeted in return, with the barest nod of acknowledgement. “You look very changed, since last I saw you.”

“The Sidhe no longer wish that I be called theirs, but I have enumerated against them a series of wrongs for which they owe me a considerable debt. I am not banished from amongst them, despite rediscovery and remastery of the form I was born wearing, which they stole from me and taught me to loathe, but I do not wish to call any but my kin amongst them mine, and I am certainly not theirs.”

Tony prodded Hlín, who seized his finger in a warning grip, tight enough to make his joints almost grind. He managed not to make a noise.

She was formerly indistinguishable from any Aesir in appearance, supplied his teacher’s voice, slightly annoyed, in the back of Tony’s mind.

The inventor tugged his finger free as unobtrusively as possible.

Frigga looked at once deeply touched, and still furious. “How long have you been in Asgard, hidden from sight?”

“One week. I had a number of apologies to deliver, and required time to find the courage and words to do so,” Angrboða said. “I began with Sigyn two days ago.”

“Has she forgiven you?”

“I did not ask her to.”

Frigga’s eyebrows raised.

“I was afraid where I should not have been. I harmed her out of fear and anger, to support beliefs of my own which had for centuries been my only solace, by only assurance that I would be welcome and accepted amongst my kin, whose love was the only value I could ever credit myself, however inexplicable it always seemed to me,” the mostly-Jotunn mage explained. “I was wrong, and wished to thank her for trying to teach me as she did, and apologize for the harm done to her family, which I might otherwise have been a welcome part of. I wish to extend similar apologies to you, for I know how you cared for me, and were also hurt by my actions, both in your own right, and in seeing the harm my foolishness did to your son, his wife, and their daughter.”
The queen nodded, her anger fading a little. “When did this transformation occur, precisely, if I may ask?”

Angrboða hesitated, remaining where she knelt, but resting both hands on her knees as she gathered her thoughts, the hem of her coat pooled on the floor around her. “My eldest sister died, and passed into Helheim this past winter. I missed her, and sought her out in dreams. To my surprise, for she never seemed the sort, she was dreaming. It turned out to be for my sake that she had.” She swallowed thickly. “She wanted to tell me about my daughter, and in doing so revealed, in the accidental way of souls peacefully at rest being so heedless of casual revelations such as lies unrelated to the message they are more focused upon, the truth of the accusations Loki and Sigyn had set against me so long ago. It broke me. It shattered everything that I had ever thought I was, and knowing what I did then—not just about myself, but the people I abandoned out of my pride and fear, and what has become of them: the daughter I left to the best possible parents to raise her is a queen respected throughout all the realms, her father has found his own uncomfortable origins and embraced them defiantly as I never could have imagined—I did not remain shattered. I had my wits, and and my own strength, and by the Norns, I would not let the likes of Loki outshine me for vengeance against such thieves without a great deal more effort on his part; although I suspect he is already at work upon that, for one of his next great tricks,” she concluded, with a tired but fearsome smile full of teeth. “He will exceed me, in the end, but for now I have my victories, and with those achieved I have the strength to seek something far more difficult, in facing the mistakes I have made and addressing them.”

“You would call me thief, then?” Frigga inquired, her tone cold.

“I was robbed of my true nature less harmfully than was Loki,” Angrboða said simply, her expression more solemn again. “I have always know my father and mother: their deeds, their misdeeds, and all the other details of their histories. While I was hurt that they failed me by allowing the lies of the Sidhe to alter who and what I thought I was, by insidious manipulation of my expectations to suit their ease... I still know they are mine. I was never intended to be a weapon, a pawn, or a peace offering to old enemies. While I do not believe you ever thought of him as such, and I suspect you were the cause behind Odin’s change of heart on that matter more than Loki himself, for your love of him as your son, you still maintained the same lie, in hopes you could keep him as yours without letting thirst for knowledge of his blood-kin, and possibly desire to redeem them in his own eyes and those of history, as he might have done when very young, because that, I believe, you deeply feared. You still aided in the theft of his very history.”

“I did not wish to lose my son,” Frigga said. “Yes. I have freely admitted that selfishness to him myself.”

“Has he forgiven you?” Angrboða inquired.

“I have,” said a calm, sharp voice, cutting through the air loud and clear.

All eyes whipped to the half-open doorway, wherein stood Loki, and a great black wolf so tall that it could have rested its chin upon his shoulder without effort. Over his shoulder, one hand buried in the wolf’s fur, the other balled into a fist and shaking slightly, stood the queen of Helheim, wearing an immaculately masked expression, only a little cracked around the edges.

Angrboða rose to her feet sharply, as though considering abrupt flight, but stood her ground, folding both hands behind her back, waiting in tense stillness as the trickster and his children approached.

Tony reflected that the high-ceilings and ostentatious-large-doorways aesthetics of Asgard’s royal palace must be considerable convenience to the enormous wolf, which was to date the most mythological creature Tony had so far encountered in Asgard, bringing into sharp focus just how
ancient all of the other people in the room really were, how deep their impact had been on his own world. Just the usual head-trip, by Tony’s increasingly weird standards, but momentarily jarring nevertheless. No small wonder there were stories about Fenrir one day swallowing the sun. As though able to hear the thought, the wolf glanced at Tony sharply, head cocking a bit to one side in interest, before fixing his attention again on Angrboða, and on keeping as close to Hel’s side as possible, going so far as to visibly lean against her a little when they halted and he rested back on his haunches.

Angrboða opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She started to kneel, but Loki reached out and took hold of her shoulder, gripping hard. He held her gaze steadily as his own complexion changed over from pale to blue, making her gasp sharply, her eyes widening.

“Loki,” she said softly, with tender familiarity and old pain. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “By the Norns, you look so very well.” Reaching up tentatively, she rested her hand over his, seeming more afraid of refusal than frostbite.

He smiled faintly despite himself, and it cracked his expression enough for some of the anger to show more clearly too. “You, my dear, have never looked better.”

“I know,” she said, a little haughtily. “And thank you for trying to teach me that when I was far more a fool, and just as stubborn as I am now.”

“You don’t deserve her,” Loki said firmly, his eyes narrowing as his complexion returned to normal. “I don’t either, given all I have done in my life, but you particularly have wronged her, and yet she is here for your sake: to see you, and to hear you.”

Angrboða’s head fell forward, resting on his shoulder for just a moment as she shook, before lifting her head again and taking a breath. “Thank you for not killing me. In your place, I would have tried.”

“I loved you far too much for that,” Loki said softly, cupping her face almost reverently, and kissing her cheek, lingering close for a long moment before pulling back to say more, the intimacy of it so hesitant in application, but still so obviously familiar and comforting-yet-bittersweet to them both, that it was almost painful to watch. “I still love you, not as I once did, but instead for what we had while it lasted, for your bringing such joy to my life and Sigyn’s for so long, and then bringing Hel into our lives and giving me so very much to be proud of, and grateful for, which has been worth any pain. I love you for all those things, and for all that we might have been; otherwise I would not hate all you’ve done and taken from us with your mistakes, as deeply as I have, all this time.”

She winced back from him with a hissing sound, almost as though she’d been struck. “Still so good at driving in poison, even as you compliment, I see.”

“As always.” He squeezed her shoulder, then released it and stepped away from her, to stand at Frigga’s right and observe. With his back thus to Hlín and Tony, they could see his hands curl into fists and relax again slowly, more than once, his long fingers occasionally fidgeting in a less controlled display of his restless unease.

At first, Hel remained half-obscured behind the body and head of Fenrir, speaking with him too softly for the others to hear, her eyes closed for just a moment as she smiled at something the wolf growled out. Then she lifted her head and met Angrboða’s gaze with eyes bright and sharp, her chin held high, looking every inch a queen and a force to be reckoned with. “Hello,” she said. “I’ve met you before, but I like this look on you better.”

Angrboða looked deeply unsettled for a moment, even as she stepped hesitantly closer. “I... do not
recall.”
“I was wearing a lie too.”

The older woman winced. “I am so, so sorry.”

“So I heard.”

“No, that was sorrow for a different queen. Not sorrow I feel for how incredibly blind and foolish I was, to see anything but greatness in you.” She took only one further step closer, within the reach of Hel’s arms, and the great wolf’s jaws. Eyeing Fenrir, she smiled a little. “And you, I could have never imagined would turn into the marvel you are, either, Fenrir. You are incredible.”

The wolf blinked once, and nodded acknowledgement briefly, but did not speak.

Angrboða knelt, as she had before, this time with both hands over her heart. “I had known you would be brilliant, that you would be clever enough to outwit your father one day, just from seeing you both together when you were small. I regret nothing in my life more than I regret missing my chance to have witnessed your life from a closer vantage point, and one from which I would have warmed your heart, instead of feeling utterly unworthy of your regard, Queen Hel.”

“Stand,” Hel said tersely. “By the nine, you’re worse than father.”

Fenrir was startled into a quiet laugh despite himself.

Angrboða looked a bit confused and disbelieving.

“I was raised by the likes of Sigyn and Loki Lie-smith, and I know bullshit when I hear it,” Hel said calmly, smiling a bit wickedly. “I do believe that you are sorry. I believe that you’re proud of me, and even that you wish that you had been more involved in my life long before now, Angrboða, but you believe yourself worthy of my regard or you’d never have shown your face to me in the first place.” Given that her mother hadn’t stood yet, Hel crouched in front of her. “You wouldn’t dare, because my anger and pain would shatter you like glass, the moment I recognized you. Instead you’re here, and you stayed after seeing me. You didn’t run. You didn’t run because you want my forgiveness, because you finally can believe I might actually mean it, instead of being just another liar like you accused my dear father of being, despite knowing he is much more than just another liar. He is the best liar you’ve ever met to date, and he had given himself to your trust entirely, and you still believed that he would lie about his love for you. Do you even begin to know how that wounded both of them?”

Angrboða shook her head. “I know that I can barely imagine,” she rasped.

“Good.” Hel seemed to consider her, looking her up and down thoughtfully. “Then I think I might one day forgive you, if you bring me to Alfheim with you, when you next return there.” She smiled sweet and venomous. “I would have words with some of the people there, on behalf of my parents. All three of them.”

“I would be honored, and would love to see it,” Angrboða replied, a tremor in her voice. She went very still as Hel stood back up, bent down to kiss her brow, and said, “Come. We should speak privately, too.” She pulled her mother to her feet with a playful half-smile, then shot the wolf a look, communicating enough with her expression that he nodded and lifted one foreleg with a head-tilt that gave the overall impression of a shrug. “Join us in the garden later,” she added, patting his neck as she passed.

Loki watched them go with a wry, slightly bemused expression.
“You raised her well,” Frigga said.

“Thank you,” he replied softly.

“That was extremely awkward,” Fenrir said flatly. “I’m never letting you have a dramatic entrance again.”

Loki grinned brightly. “I’d like to see you try and stop me.”

The wolf’s hackles raised and he gave a playful growl still loud and deep enough to make a few things clatter atop the nearby table.

“Enough, boys,” Frigga announced. “There’s reason your more quadrupedal form is still discouraged in here, Fenrir. I’ll make exception because I know you were only worried and anxious, but you had centuries to prove your coordination, and still we have replaced far fewer dining tables since we began requesting you remain on two legs while in this hall, Fenrir, dear.”

The wolf’s ears flicked back and he gave a disgruntled noise.

Frigga’s eyes slowly narrowed.

With a huff, Fenrir took the form of a humanoid biped, this time dressed in lightly armored travel garb, mostly dark brown leathers, with a hood lined in soft black fur, which he pushed back from his head almost haughtily.

Tony began to suspect that one of the reasons Loki had used Clint Barton as one of his favorite lieutenant-minions might have been something to do with the archer’s sense of humor being vaguely reminiscent of a certain magical construct the trickster regarded as his own son. He managed to stifle a half-hysterical giggle.

“He does have a point, Loki,” Hlín sighed. “You really just couldn’t resist, could you?”

“I did get a bit impatient waiting for an opportunity to-” he started, turning to shoot her a winning smile, only to spot Tony and look suddenly startled, only then realizing the mortal was present. “Stark!”

“Yeah, so, I agree that was extremely awkward,” Tony responded, flicking into this-shit-is-too-ridiculous-to-be-embarrassed-by-anymore mode with perfect ease.

Then there was suddenly a very tall, woodsy-smelling man standing next to him, looking ver solid for someone who had started out as something like a guardian spirit and magic-equivalent to an A.I., and clearly able to teleport even more sneakily than his father. Fenrir was, in fact, leaning in a little too close. He had green eyes only a little more gold around the pupils than his father’s. “You’re Tony Stark.”

“And you’re the magical equivalent of the singularity, aka Fenrir,” the inventor returned, his tone and demeanor still stuck on unflappable sass. “Nice to meet you.”

“I hadn’t thought to compare myself to that earth prophecy, actually,” Fenrir mused. “I think I like it.”

Tony’s eyebrows raised and he smirked a bit despite himself. “You keep up with us, then?”

“Mortals, having short lives they value so highly, tend to be among the liveliest in the land of the dead, actually,” the wolf explained, with a one-shouldered shrug. “And they often have the most
unfamiliar tales to tell, of any of the realms, given how much constant change your world has been through over the past couple of thousand years."

“Well, that’s one way to keep informed,” the inventor mused.

“Do you believe the sentient construct in your home to possess a soul?” Fenrir asked bluntly.

At that, Tony blinked a bit. “I... hadn’t really considered. I tend to be barely aware of the idea that I possess one, and if anything he’s the better parts of myself I’ve never had the patience to master, plus his own brand of wit and thoughtfulness that I only wish enviously that I could claim any credit for. I wouldn’t begin to know how to tell whether he has a soul because I’ve never really been able to quantify one personally, but if you recommend it, I’ll add that to my list of things to learn.” He nodded at Hlín, who looked a bit startled at the whole idea.

“I recommend giving him the choice. It’s... if he does not have a family as I do, it would get very lonely,” the wolf said seriously. “I am lucky, and I do know just how lucky, to have the capabilities and powers that I do, along with people I love.”

“You should meet him, sometime,” Tony said.

“If he wouldn’t mind,” Fenrir asked, smiling a bit with wolfish teeth.

“We can ask. Loki, I know you have my phone,” the inventor called.

The trickster muttered a curse under his breath and stalked over. “I don’t know what good it may do you.” He pulled the device, miraculously possessed of full charge, and handed it over to the mortal.

“Well, I’ve picked up a few things,” Tony said, starting to smirk wickedly. One of the calculations he’d been running since he left the training cavern had been to do with Loki’s explanation of the passage of time between Asgard and earth, and particularly the anchoring affect of frequent travel between the two realms, and the effect of a traveler like Thor having weight, sort of like quantum entanglement, wherein his presence on earth kept the passage of time between the two places the same.

He had plenty of scans of Thor and Mjolnir, and some of the data was even on his phone. Tony also had surreptitiously collected scans of Loki’s own phone on earth, and found it to be modified by magic, and he knew for a fact the trickster had placed a long-distance call to him from Alfheim more than twice.

The rest was just tweaking to suit his own growing understanding, and his own phone, and tapping into the magic in Asgard itself that permeated the whole realm, and Thor with it. “Hey, Loki, place the call for me, please?” He grinned.

Staring at him with a mixture of curiosity and mild disbelief, the trickster took the phone from his fingers and his eyes lit up the crackling charge it sent up his arm and the thrum of magic in the air around both of them. He stared for a long moment.

If the inventor wasn’t mistaken, Loki seemed to be barely restraining himself from removing all of their clothing, and it sent a warm tingle down Tony’s spine. “Well? C’mon, first major spell I’ve tried since achieving a state of zen acceptance and all, try it. Just call JARVIS at the tower. Has to be you.”

Loki tapped the call button and raised the phone to his ear. “Yes, I’m calling on Tony and my son’s behalf, apparently, JARVIS. The latter would like to meet you, sometime.” He smiled faintly. “Yes, Fenrir. I’m glad you recall. Do send me that conversation for future reference as well, won’t you?”
“Hey, that’s-” Tony started, but the trickster covered his mouth with one hand. The inventor bit him, but the god ignored it. Tony bit harder.

“Thank you, JARVIS, I’ll inform him.” Loki ended the call. “Tony, I’d like to remind you that I raised him, and ask you to consider whether your teeth are likely to bother me at all, truly.” He gestured to Fenrir, who offered another grin, complete with too-long, too-pointed teeth.

Tony tugged the god’s hand away sharply. “I concede your points,” he said, to the wolf’s teeth.

“Excellent work,” Loki offered, returning the inventor’s phone. “Innovative and ambitious as I’d expect from you, and yet still wholly unexpected.”

The inventor beamed at him a little smugly.

“He’s more of a showoff than even you were,” Hlín sighed. “I request you remain here at least another two days before returning to earth, Tony. Your control is still new, and may not be altogether stable.”

“Yeah, it’s not quite stable, yet. Working on it,” he admitted.

“You’re still doing admirably well for one so new at this,” Frigga said, reclaiming her seat at the table. “Your appearance was almost as unexpected as Angrboða’s, Loki. Were you here for a particular reason?”

“I told him Angrboða was here,” Fenrir said. “Sigyn told me, as she felt I’d deliver the message best to Hel, but I was rather prevented by the sudden arrival of the first of the three, who told us that Mistress Death had appeared in the palace of the Nameless City and seemed to be waiting for Loki, according to the visions she’d brought to their seers, upon her arrival. It’s been a very eventful day.”

“Sounds like it,” Tony mused. “Mistress Death, isn’t she-”

“Thanos’ love, yes,” Loki confirmed.

“What did she want?”

“To know my plans. Possibly it was her original intent to persuade me not to kill him.” The trickster shrugged. “We arrived at an understanding, and he will remain dead, when I kill him, and deliver him to her.”

“What are the complications?”

“My concern alone,” the trickster said, almost gently.

“Ahem,” Fenrir scoffed. “‘Alone’ not so. We’ve been over this today.”

Loki smiled at him very warmly, with a mixture of pride and faint awe. “Conceded.”

If Tony saw any more of this affectionate, loving facet of Loki’s personality, he was going to develop an arrhythmia, with all this embarrassing heart-fluttery-aching business. It was really starting to get to him, and that was... not good.

Before this, he hadn’t known Loki could look like this. He hadn’t known the trickster could be this generous with his love as he was with his children, nor as vulnerable as he’d willingly been before Angrboða some minutes ago. Now he was displaying love and a hint of self-deprecating paternal pride with a hint of wonder, and Tony had not signed up for this.
Before this, he hadn’t known Loki could do these things, and so Tony had been blissfully unaware of how much he wanted to be on the receiving end of looks like that from the trickster. He wanted so suddenly and intensely that it hurt, and while Loki wouldn’t see it (Tony really was adept at suppression to an almost worrisome degree), Fenrir cocked his head just a little, like he was listening intently to something no one else could hear, and there was a shrewdness to his expression.

Belatedly, Tony realized his heartbeat was jackhammering and just barely managed not to swear. A lot. Focusing on breathing more slowly, he eventually got it back to normal, but the way the wolf-in-human-ish-form’s nostril’s flared was also sort of worrisome. The inventor had an abiding suspicion that while Loki had senses only a little sharper than a human’s unless he changed shape, his son might be in the habit of keeping his wolf-quality senses as worryingly sharp as his teeth.

In which case, he might have some very uncomfortable questions later.

Again, Tony barely restrained the urge to swear at length.

“You’re oddly quiet, Tony,” Loki pointed out, fixing his attention on the inventor.

That made his son smirk thoughtfully and mockingly, and in that moment Tony Stark knew he was completely and utterly doomed, so he relaxed and settled back to wait for some sort of inevitable catastrophe for him to ride the wave of, when it hit. “I’m a little stunned at the moment. I was not expecting drama outside my head to match the earlier drama inside it.”

Fenrir’s head perked up suddenly. “Excuse me, I’m being whistled for.” He bowed his head a little to Frigga and Tony, then darted from the room, changing back to wolf-shape as he skidded through the doors, loping down the main hall outside them.

Tony gave an amused snort despite himself.

“He is, at times, moderately ridiculous,” Loki murmured.

“Sharp, though.”

“Well, of course.”

“Your humbleness and modesty never cease to astonish,” Tony deadpanned.

“You’re one to talk.”

“You both are,” Hlín chided. “At great length, like a pair of competing songbirds.”

“I find it rather entertaining,” Frigga commented, amused.

“Thank you,” Tony said.

“Is it safe in here?” called a voice from the other set of doors. “I’ve heard surprisingly few explosions so far.” A dark-haired woman with a sardonic smile, olive skin, and bright eyes stood in the doorway. She caught Loki’s eyes and gestured for him to join her.

Loki cleared his throat. “That is Sigyn,” he explained quietly. “Pardon me.” He then left them, joining his ex-wife, who appeared concerned and suspicious in equal measure, and shut the doors behind them.

“Is being royalty actually like this often?” Tony asked. “I thought it was played up to make history sound less dull.”
“Keep in mind who my children are, Mr. Stark,” Frigga reminded.

Tony chuckled. “Conceded.” He was trying very, very hard not to think about Angrboða, and Sigyn, and Loki, and a certain cock-ring, among other props, now that he had seen both of the women in question.

Almost as though sensing his distress, Hlíð said, “I think it time we began your lessons in earnest, Tony.”

Relieved at the offered distraction, the inventor grinned. “About damn time.”

“Fare you both well, then,” Frigga dismissed. “I will attend to my family.”

“To that, I wish you the best of luck,” Tony said, with sincerity.

“My thanks,” she said, just before her two guests vanished.
Chapter Summary

Loki does not like having emotional problems, his children are as manipulative as he is, and strange drinks are drunk. Extremis has problems, Tony’s brain has dark and uncomfortable things stored in some places, but he can fix anything, given a chance. War drums are drumming.

One week, four days...

Extremis was a problem. Tony had started out understanding perfectly well how to use it, but things were getting... tangled.

“Shit too much heat!” He leapt back from a half-finished spell and threw up a complex shield he had been contemplating ever since getting scans of the ones Loki had used during the dragon incident, and which he had altered to his own satisfaction in the back of his head over lunch. Instead of getting anything like a shield of Loki’s sort, the super-heated air interfered with the forces Tony had been weaving, and he got a sudden shower of particles of sizzling sodium and magnesium from the half-cocked reaction he’d been attempting, though thankfully it all seemed to be aimed away from his body. “...Shit.” He barely moved away quick enough to avoid severe burns.

Hlín’s brow furrowed. “It seems that the more of your power you focus upon finer tasks—”

“I super-heat the air. Not with magic.” Tony looked at his hands, struggling to make Extremis cool, especially with his magic reeling a bit drunkenly from the backlash of the failed spell. The heat and frustration didn’t help at all. In fact, the more Extremis heated him up, the looser and less precise all of his magic got, an the less he could concentrate out of sheer irritation. “This design needs altering,” he intoned gravely, his eyes narrowing.” Too much control-systems overlap.” He shot the elder mage a slightly fearsome smile. “I’ve got some ideas—though they could probably use your input.”

After having taught many mages, over more than two thousand years, Hlín knew trouble when she saw it. She also knew brilliance. It was never, ever easy to distinguish how much of the trouble and madness was actually more necessary than not, but she could tell when a certain degree of persistent intellectual ferocity wouldn’t be contained even if she made the effort, and knew how to pick her battles.

In this case, she knew that Loki was still within reach should the worst happen with Extremis, and her own capabilities could handle the magic side of things too. Also, she was curious as to what ideas the mad mortal had come up with.

She sighed. “Walk me through them first.”

Tony’s grin widened, and he began.
The deeply emotional interactions amongst Loki, his kin, and his former lovers, went on for another few hours, after he and Sigyn joined Hel, Fenrir and Angrboða in one of the courtyards.

With Sigyn and Angrboða, he was more guarded than around his children alone, and they did not press him; although he was a little warmer toward Sigyn.

He and Sigyn had parted ways amiably enough. Centuries after Hel was grown, her parents grew more distant, and eventually Sigyn began to fall in love with another; rather than share again, Loki had let her go, and she had let him. That they still deeply appreciated one another and were closer than most friends was obvious from how they teased each other and the looks that were sometimes shared between them, but there was restraint between them: a carefulness not to fall back into certain once-familiar habits.

It was clear Angrboða found the warmth there, paired with a lack of sexual or romantic tension between them, oddly fascinating, and a little baffling. Even knowing for so long that the pair had been parted, in her mind they had always seemed two parts of one story, she would later tell Hel, and only after those clear signs that they hadn’t been for so long and so peacefully, only then did their long separation, on all three sides, feel completely real and solid, and all too lasting for the Jotunn sorceress herself.

By the time all was done, and his lovers left after Hel had hugged both of them, and then Loki and her brother both too, before saying she needed some time to think, and vanishing, the god of lies was so exhausted he swayed on his feet.

Fenrir pressed against his side, stabilizing him. “You’re unwell?”

“I did not need this right now,” Loki said simply. “I have been so caught up in war, so focused upon chaos and machinations, that I’ve been able to ignore certain wells of pain and emotional disturbance within myself. It has been a sort of bliss.”

The wolf whined. “I know that’s why you do it, often enough. Why you obsess over all of it.”

“I’m good at it.”

“You’re astonishingly brilliant,” Fenrir assured. “It’s art. I’m more than art. You do amazing things, and I wish it got rid of more pain than it merely numbed for you. So maybe releasing some of it, even ill-timed as this, may do you more good than harm, long-term.”

“In the long term, I need to function at my peak for the next week. I can’t afford weakness.”

“Then accept help.”

Wrapping both arms around his son’s neck, the god let his legs slowly give out as they seemed so inclined to do. In turn, the wolf settled down and curled around him, shielding him bodily and wrapping him in warmth.

Loki had not needed to be so starkly reminded of the greatest loves he’d experienced in his long life, and how he had lost them: by not being enough to convince and hold and help in the case of one, and being too much fire and not enough closeness over time for the other who had even actually married him.
He had not needed such a sharp reminder that he has been alone since then, save for family, of whom all those not his blood-kin have recently done deep harm to him built over centuries of one drawn-out lie and how it had contributed to Thor’s ignorance alike. He had not needed to suddenly recall how much that warmth of being loved and known and welcomed and appreciated by lovers so clever and deserving had meant to him, how it had been a more welcome stabilizing force in his life than being a prince had ever been. He had been treasured, and had treasured his lovers in return.

Now he was older, wiser, and also more broken and mad.

Angrboða had seemed almost proud of him, yet disturbed by the pain in his eyes and his expression, especially when Sigyn had asked about his fall, and about Thanos. He had been very clipped in his answers, and so masked even they couldn’t read more than that pain he could not conceal even when he tried.

He was ashamed, that he couldn’t hide it. He didn’t want to give those who’d so harmed him that power over him, nor did he want those he cared for and respected to see him too weak to deny his enemies that power. It ached, seeing them hurt because he still felt the old agony too viscerally and deeply to shield them from awareness of it, so they wouldn’t have to be concerned that he might not be strong enough on his own.

It ached in the trickster’s chest, now: twisted thorn-riddled feelings of shame and horror and pain, helplessness and worthlessness. After he’d fallen, and been captured, he had wondered more than a few times if the pain would ever stop, if he would ever leave the accursed Other’s clutches, and that suffocating feeling threatened to return. Loki shook with it, tried to shake it off, reached with desperation for puzzles and the strength and focus they required, but something cracked.

He cracked, with tears rolling down his face and into Fenrir’s fur as his breathing hitched and shook. The great wolf rumbled, concern and danger both in the sound: concern for his father, and outrage toward the source of Loki’s pain.

“You’re not weak,” he growled. “You’re not, not for this. You came back to us; you’re alive as we need you to be. I trust you to do that, every time, no matter what, because I know how strong you are.”

Loki choked on a sob. “Stop.”

“You need to fucking hear it,” Fenrir snarled. “Do you know how proud I am to be your son? Do you?”

“Fenrir, I-”

“You don’t, or you wouldn’t dare presume I’d feel better kept in the dark than seeing you like this, and knowing I give you strength. You’ve always been my champion, father, do you now how much it means that I can help you, too?”

Loki gripped him tighter, words no longer an option for a few long minutes.

The wolf remained quiet with him, save a low, comforting rumble.

When he got his breath back, though it was still ragged, the trickster pulled his face back and didn’t flinch when Fenrir licked his face and neck, getting rid of all traces of tears and fur stuck to them. “I’m sorry,” he croaked.

“For?” There was a world of shrewd ice in that single syllable.
“For being such an ass as to refuse your wishes to help me with my pain,” Loki admitted, with obvious reluctance. “I... should have been less conceited.”

“You’ll be repeating this to Hel yourself, you know.”

He winced a little. “I had a feeling.”

“Lesson learned?”

Slowly, it dawned on Loki that the wolf had dropped this on him—the thrilling/horrifying/unbelievable hints of Angrboða’s change of heart and soul, sharing it with him at the perfect moment to throw Loki off-guard and fuel his desperate-for-distraction curiosity, and serve him right for thinking that sort of distraction wouldn’t backfire—with direct intent to bring this about. He leaned back, rising to his knees and pulling his son’s face down closer to his own. “You’re a manipulative and slightly cruel being.”

“I learned from the very best.” Fenrir sounded a bit smug. “And so did Hel.”

Loki winced. “You’d already told her about Angrboða.”

“Yes, I had. Her decision whether or not to go to Asgard was postponed by Mistress Death. I lied. So did she. Consider it our punishment of you, for how little we’ve seen of you since you returned from your fall, and your refusal of our desires to help, and listen, and comfort you, since then.”

“I should be deeply angry with you.”

Fenrir gave a noncommittal rumble.

“That was extremely underhanded.” After a moment or two longer of glaring with slightly bloodshot eyes, the trickster leaned up and kissed his son’s brow. “Good work.”

The wolf’s tail wagged shamelessly.

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In the end, it took a lot of effort from Hlín to keep the whole mess stable.

Also a mildly hallucinogenic potion and Tony’s sworn word to warn her if he even slightly loss control of Extremis in full furnace-mode, so that she might summon Loki to them as quickly as possible.

All furs removed from one of the stone beds in the healing wing, to prevent them combusting, and a thick anti-heat ward between Tony’s body (stripped, to spare his clothes catching fire) and the cold stone, the inventor lay engulfed in his own Extremis-based conflagration, channeling as much of the fire’s fury as he comfortably could.

His eyes were open wide and full of flames, but did not see.

He was adrift in his own mind; or, more precisely, between his own mind on the Astral plane, and his own body. He was tinkering, in ways he could never have done even with Bruce’s genius and all of the biotechnology available in his tower, back home on earth.
Extremis was an ambitious project from an ambitious villain who had gotten it into his head that humanity was meant to be upgraded. As such, he had treated the whole Extremis package as an upgrade to patch multiple systems. Fire and regeneration and greater density hadn’t been enough, so he’d added superior strength and speed. The physical upgrades not enough, Aldrich Killian had made changes to some things he thought needed to be done in the brain. The full map of affected areas was even still on Tony’s phone, luckily enough. Reviewing them with Hlín, they found a few things.

Those regions Killian had been happy to meddle with, Tony discovered, were indeed upgradeable, but not in the ways Extremis did it. They were actually evidence of the human capacity to control magic, and they’d been hacked for the sake of certain Extremis add-on features. Tony was not pleased that he hadn’t before realized before how unnecessary those changes were. He’d thought they had to do with keeping Extremis stable, just like everything else, but no; they were for doing offense-based tricks with the fire, and actually caused more instability than stability, especially because the way that the wiring had been altered fostered unusual connections with too much potential to create feedback interference between motor cortex and amygdala. Stupid, stupid Killian.

Tony could change it more directly, here, though: pull a few strings, muck about with some more symbolic objects on the Astral plane with Hlín’s guidance.

Well, the latter, it turned out, was the harder part.

“No, there’s no way these caves are where my master control suite is,” Tony snapped. “Fuck off. This is not where I keep that. This is where I lost it.”

Hlín, here, was a vague presence, semi-transparent. It was still very obvious when she rolled her eyes at him. “You regained it, obviously.”

“I still lost more than I gained,” the inventor insisted.

The elder mage raised an eyebrow. “I somehow doubt that.”

“Why?” Tony snarled.

“Do you miss what you lost?”

Forced to think about it, the inventor hesitated. “I lost someone who was trying to save me, and who I was trying to save. I miss him.”

Hlín’s brow furrowed, and she gave a sympathetic nod. “But is that loss so much more than what you gained by, I presume, escaping something here?”

“Good guess.” Tony folded his arms across his chest stubbornly. “I lost millions of innocent lives I’d never given full consideration before, like they hit me all at once, just how wrong I’d been, how callous and stupidly blind to have faith in who I did—” He rubbed his eyes hard with one hand. “I lost my faith in most of humanity except people who were wise enough to distrust me, or unfortunate enough to have no choice but to hope for mercy. I lived for those closest to me, those I could see and watch and know more about, those who had been the closest I’ve had to a real loving family so I’d thought, and even one of those people was still a lie that did even more damage to me later. I found some false hope, that I could know and trust and improve the world with what I make, but everything I’m best at making serves the purpose of destroying other things, violently. I know I can make chaos work for me, but I sure as hell can’t trust anyone else with the weapons I make, because if they fuck up with them, that’s more blood on my hands: my tech, my ideas, my responsibility.”
“Is there truly no one you trust?” Hlíð asked, curious. “You do not seem so lonely as you make yourself sound, with this.”

“There are innocent people out there who don’t deserve to be hurt, and don’t deserve to die, and I can believe in them, I can even trust them to be good people, but I can’t put that same trust in anyone interested in me, or my tech, and the power they wield. I have a few good friends who value me more than that, somehow, despite the real me being pretty much a self-absorbed asshole capable of love and devotion but not very good at showing it most of the time, except in the ways they’ve taught me to be better. Those are the people I trust; because they don’t want or need my power or what I can get them through my position or privilege, not really. They just like me, and haven’t let me down or just straight-up used me despite how much power they know they really have over me for that.”

“You regained them, when you escaped these caves, did you not?”

“I...”

“You regained your freedom, and defied and damaged your captors.”

Tony rubbed both hands over his face slowly, with a ragged sigh.

“You gained a sense of yourself and your purpose, perhaps?”

“Fuck,” the inventor muttered, voice thick with resentment.

“I am correct?”

“Fuck,” Tony repeated, taking a deep breath and facing down the path leading to the too-familiar cave. The rocks around it had marks from bullets and fire, but weather and years of time had cleaned the place up a bit.

That didn’t mean there wouldn’t be bodies, beyond the entrance.

Or worse.

“Why does it have to be here?”

“Because what you seek is worth a great deal of struggle to achieve. That is how all things work, here.”

“If I don’t succeed?”

“You aren’t ready yet, for the power you seek to have over your own body and mind.”

“I have to be. Magic practice won’t let me get better prepared without getting this fire shit out of the way. I can feel it, now it’s actively burning. It’s fucking with the flow, with my... with things...” He gestured vaguely. “Why do synesthetic sensations all sound ridiculous when I try to come up with descriptions?”

“Why do you think mages come up with their own magic words?”

Tony snorted, a little amused by that thought. He took a few steps toward the cave, slow and uneasy, then a few more, until he stood at the mouth of it. Inside was much darker, and Tony was almost inclined to let it stay that way, but as soon as he stepped inside, a burst of all-too-familiar blue light erupted from his chest and he grimaced at the feelings of stiffness and pain from when the arc reactor
had been freshly installed, taking him back over. He swore at length and went to lean against a wall, only to see bloodstains and bits of brain there, sending him stumbling back.

“Does that disturb you?” Yinsen’s voice, a bit rasping.

The inventor went still as stone, trying and failing to shut his eyes. “It does.”

“Surprising. You designed the weapons which make such abstract art out of human bodies. As a doctor, I found their efficiency a little horrifying, despite the brilliance of their execution.” Yinsen stepped into the light. He was bloody, but wore his jacket again, covering up most of the bullet-holes Tony suspected he was also still wearing. He looked pale, but a little morbidly amused. “You look frightened. Why?”

“You’re dead. And standing around in the dark, talking about mutilated bodies. I think I’m within my rights to be a bit terrified, don’t you?” the inventor shot back, but his voice was shaking.

“You don’t have questions about that?”

“This is in my head. Any answers you give are just me talking to myself, and I don’t want to know what I want the answers to be, that I don’t trust myself to tell, because they’re probably not what you’d actually think, and I respect you,” Tony said, hesitant and still a little horrified. “But... for what it’s worth... I’m so sorry.”

“You should be. Your weapons killed my family.”

The inventor winced. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know why you helped me, knowing that, but I think... I think you realized genius had left me stupid in a few places, and that aiming me at the people who had misused my weapons like that, would give me purpose I’d never had. So you aimed me, and fired, and let yourself die knowing you’d sent them to early and well-deserved graves, in fire and misery.”

Yinsen smiled thinly. “As I am an apparition in your own mind, I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“You want to show me to the main, uh, master control suite, here?”

His old friend shrugged. “I suppose I might. It’s an unpleasant trip.”

“I had a feeling.”

“Then come along. I’ll lead you to what you need once more, but only because you don’t trust yourself enough. I think my true self would be offended that I am here for that purpose alone.”

“It’s not just that.”

“Your guilt is the same as my guiding hand.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s true.”

Tony grimaced. “I know. That’s why it hurts.”

“And that is what will make your journey unpleasant.”

Again, the inventor swore at length, this time as he followed the ghost of his memory of Yinsen down into the dark.
Fenrir went when Hel whistled for him, sometime after dinner with Frigga.

Loki considered his options.

He was drained emotionally, rather than physically, but that still meant that impressive feats of magic might be riskier than usual, should he attempt any. He had managed diplomatic matters for the time being, and as any successful trickster would be proud to have instigated, all of those he’d cajoled into joining his cause were now doing his work for him, in preparing for Thanos’ arrival; however satisfactory that might be, it did leave Loki at a dreadful dearth of things to safely occupy his mind with.

Avoiding his mother, and with his children distracted, he sought Hlín and her new student. Upon finding them, he grew perplexed and disconcerted.

“What, exactly, is this?” he asked slowly, approaching the bed full of fire.

“Extremis caused changes to his nervous system and his brain which cause there to be overlap between control of his magic, and control of the fire,” Hlín explained, her eyes never leaving her student, hands glowing as she seemed to stare through him. “After my explanation of the astral plane, threads of magic, and how they pull and affect reality, he came up with an idea for how to alter them without removing, remaking, and reapplying Extremis.”

Loki inhaled sharply. “Nornsdammit, he’s insane. Why-”

“You, also, are insane,” the elder mage interrupted. “And he is more familiar with Extremis and his own physiology than either of us. I was curious to see what he might accomplish, given the sorts of demons in that head of his.”

The trickster swallowed tightly. “You are with him wandering.”

“I am. Also I have been ready to summon you at a moment’s notice if he seemed to lose any control of his fire, particularly since he descended into a cave system where I could not follow. He has been down there for some time, and do you not already feel it? Hear it?” She brushed his magic with her own, bringing its attention to Tony’s. “There is less clash with the fire.”

Loki nodded, stepping closer still, cooling his own temperature to better withstand the blistering heat, his eyes thus appearing red. There was less audible crackling struggle in the inventor’s presence, which had previously still been present even under the cooler, calm hum he’d sensed before, in the dining hall, like scratches on glass. “He is rerouting or shutting down parts of Extremis?”

“It would seem so. It was not originally a weapon to be wielded like a sword or aura; although which weapon-like qualities he may retain, I’m curious to find out.”

The trickster thought of unquenchable heat against his own skin, and how the inventor had shuddered with pleasure upon contact with icy skin that could have once killed him, or burnt him with cold. He managed not to shiver, but did not quite manage not to hope. “I am too,” he murmured, watching at Hlín’s side for almost half an hour, the air all quiet except for the rushing sounds of magic, and occasional crackle of flames.
Then the fire began to wane, slowly, seeming to pull itself back and inward, as though hiding under Tony’s skin, though flickers of gold still shone underneath even after, for some minutes.

Loki closed his eyes as he reached out to sense the inventor’s magic, and heard a hum almost precisely like the once-discarded arc reactor still up his sleeve, from when he’d taken it and Gamora both from her dismantled prison. Clear, unwavering, stable and calm as the inventor himself seldom ever was. “I’m impressed,” he half-whispered.

“You’re damn right to be,” Tony rasped, eyes fluttering open in time to meet Loki’s doing much the same. “Wow. You look like you’ve spent the day undergoing a slow, drawn out trip through a wood-chipper, emotionally speaking.”

Loki snorted. “And you look charred, lightly traumatized, and drained of more than seventy-five percent of your power.”

“We’re almost a matched set. Here, let me just set you on fire.”

The trickster took gentle hold of his wrist when he reached out, but smiled tiredly. “No thank you. I’ve been burned enough by my own faults today.”

“Fair. I can’t actually throw fire anymore. I’ll kinda miss the fire-breathing, honestly. I barely got to try it.”

Loki’s eyebrows slowly raised.

“I got rid of most of the fiery-functions that aren’t to do with self-repair, or deliberate temperature regulation of my own body, given that didn’t interfere with magic as much as accidentally changing air-currents by super-heating the air around me subconsciously, which was being caused by magic-focus overlapping with Extremis-fire-waving. Streamlining, you see.” He winked at the trickster. “I can still super-heat myself if I need to, since those controls are mostly in the self-repair and self-regulate departments, and clearly some of the late Dr. Maya Hansen’s finest works, rather than the over-ambitious weaponization add-ons that Killian came up with because of his own neurological theories.”

“You’ve done very well, Stark,” Hlín said, soft and calm, “although I daresay it’s more than a little over-exertion for your first day as a mage.” She waved a hand at them both, incidentally redressing the inventor in the same casual apparel as before. “Feed him, Loki, and return him to the guest quarters here. I have work to prepare for lessons tomorrow.”

Tony pulled himself to his feet with intent to argue that he could handle himself and a walk to the kitchen, but his legs gave out first and he swore even as Loki caught him about the waist effortlessly, like the arrogant bastard had been expecting it.

“This is what over-exertion feels like, by the by,” the god admonished.

“Yeah, getting the gist. Let go.”

“And if I don’t?”

Tony considered, looking wickedly thoughtful.

Hlín snorted at them both. “Feed him with food, Loki.”

“I know well what you meant, and I will do so,” he assured.
She nodded at him, and vanished from the room, which Loki did soon after too, with the mad inventor in tow.

They reappeared again in the palace dining hall, this time at the far end, Loki leading the mortal into the nearby kitchens. A few hand-waves brought light to the room, as he drew Tony over to a broad table, usually used for preparation work and the cutting up of vegetables. He summoned a chair of appropriate height. “Wait here.”

Eyeing the large, surprisingly comfortable kitchen space, with its many work surfaces, herbs and large pots and pans alike hanging from different sections of the ceiling, Tony only nodded and took the offered seat heavily. “Yeah, sure.” He noticed Loki absently trace a quick sigil on the table in front of him, threads lighting up in the trickster’s wake as he proceeded to rummage through pantry, cabinets, and some form of Asgardian cold storage akin to a walk-in refrigerator. As he did so, a gesture and an utterance would send his findings back to the table: fruit, bread, cheeses, and eventually a platter of thin-sliced roast pork, and some salad greens. The amount of food in front of him would’ve seemed ludicrous to Tony before, but considering how his appetite had apparently increased a great deal thanks to magic and Extremis, he only nodded at it with a thoughtful *this should do* expression, and proceeded to tuck in.

Loki pulled up a chair of his own and sat next to him with two golden goblets and a skin of wine. When he opened the skin, he couldn’t help but smirk at the way the inventor’s head whipped around.

“That smells like mulberries, dried plums, leather and lavender,” he said, sounding interested. “And that’s from this distance. What do you people put in your wine around here?”

“This is actually from Alfheim. It’s a very enthusiastically verdant world.” He filled one goblet for himself, the other for Tony, and pushed it over toward him.

Taking it up and smelling it more intently for a moment before taking a sip, the inventor’s eyes widened a little. “That’s not nearly as sweet as I thought it might be; I like it. Thanks.” He shot a smirk the trickster’s way, and went right back to polishing off his meal with vigor.

Loki merely sipped his own drink slowly, staring thoughtfully into the middle-distance, trying not to get too lost in thoughts best avoided. Too many nightmares and old desperate fears had been shaken loose in his own head today, and the task wasn’t altogether easy. He was only half-aware of the room around him for a few minutes, feeling all too acutely the strain of keeping certain memories locked away where they would haunt him less.

Tony snapped him out of it. “They got under your skin, I take it?”

Absently, the trickster nodded. “Very much so.”

“I got under my own. It’s a day of closeted skeletons all around, then.”

“Hlín did mention caves, yes. I was concerned.”

“You looked gutted when you walked in on Angrboða.”

Each finishing his own wine, they eyed each other sidelong, challenging and mocking, but also
appraising, wary, and interested. Then Tony left his own chair, turned the god’s around and promptly occupied Loki’s lap, with thighs gripping his hips. “I really, really need to stop thinking,” he said, grave as he could.

In response, the trickster gripped his hair in one hand and pulled him down sharply, crashing their lips together messy and hungry, silver-tongue sliding past Tony’s to practically pillage his mouth, as his other hand seized the mortal’s ass firmly and squeezed as he tugged his lover closer. With a half-gasping moan, the inventor rolled his hips forward and turned the invasion into an entanglement, a duel on both sides, trading domination of the kiss too rapidly for it to matter any longer. So absorbed was Tony in it, that he hardly noticed the trickster’s hand leave his hair until the room around them vanished and the sensation of falling through a vacuum briefly curled around them, and they landed with Tony on his back amidst fresh bed-linens, the god between his thighs dressed only in a pair of leather pants and nothing more.

Presumably, these were the guest quarters Hlín had mentioned, but the inventor was a bit too occupied to notice more than the spacious bed around them, which he planned to make use of, and Loki ripping off his shirt in three sharp, violent tugs. The kiss broke as the god pulled back, suddenly highly interested in biting at his lover’s neck, which made Tony gasp prettily and tilt his head back slightly.

Tony’s hands scrabbled at the trickster’s pants, making quick work of belts and buckles, pushing down as Loki arched his hips forward and leaned up, now sucking the inventor’s earlobe as Tony groaned in helpless appreciation of the sensation and the sight before him both. “These. Off,” he panted, unable to push the leather further down.

Loki banished them with a snap of his fingers, along with the rest of the inventor’s clothing, and slid down all too quickly to swallow Tony whole.

“Fuck! Loki.” Hips bucking up into welcoming wet heat, Tony tangled a hand in the god’s hair and shuddered at the low, rumbling hum Loki gave in response, deep and resonant so the inventor could feel in his spine as well as through all the sensitive nerves the god’s mouth was pleasuring. Tony gasped, head falling back as an inchoate stream of half-syllables fell from his lips, cutting off with a rasping cry as Loki swallowed around him while slipping two lube-slick fingers into his entrance.

“Loki Loki Loki, please, fuck, I can’t hold back if you––”

Another hum, from the trickster this time almost a warning growl, as those fingers curled up and rubbed hard against his prostate in maddening little circular motions.

Tony almost laughed, except for the god’s tongue doing something utterly unfair making it harder to breathe. “You’d better fuck me after this, you’re right, it’s fucking addictive pushing straight through one to the next like—ohhh don’t fucking stop that, don’t dare just—” He cut off with a cry, climax hitting him hard and sudden, though it lingered, leaving his mind blank except for the sharp little gasps and shudders as Loki’s mouth slowly pulled off him, sucking hard enough to make the inventor see stars just before he was freed of the pressure all at once with an obscene pop; although he still trembled as the trickster’s long fingers, three of them now, fucked him slow and well-aimed and with intent.

“Now, I believe I was invited to fuck you before you quite recover.”

A whimper escaped the mad mortal before he could stop it, his body shuddering and acutely sensitive and just Loki’s fingers in him were too much. Should have been too much, but Tony forced himself to hold the trickster’s gaze and grind his hips down with a half-pained, half-blissed-out noise.
“Say it.”

“Ffff-fuck me, Loki, I need—” He couldn’t help but keen as those fingers left him, and he was too boneless to even tense up when the trickster kneeling between his legs dragged him forward by his hips and he felt the head of Loki’s cock pushing into him, far too slowly. “Need this, fuck, please.”

“What do you need?” Loki prompted, his own voice not altogether steady.

“I need to stop thinking and remembering, please,” Tony rasped, and then all but yelped as the god sunk into him all the way to the hilt, all at once. “Fuck yesss.” His fingertips grasped and scratched across Loki’s shoulder blades as the trickster began to move, fast and deep and hard enough the bed creaked and hit the wall in a series of loud cracks until the god swore and cast a brief spell that pushed the bed a few inches further from the wall.

Tony half-laughed, breathlessly. “Why stop it?”

“It was more difficult to hear the sounds you’re making with such interruption,” Loki growled, and bit down hard where the inventor’s neck and shoulder met for a few moments, smirking a little at the tension and heat he could feel coiling up from under the mortal’s skin: appreciation and the fires of self-repair. “I want you to scream for me.”

The inventor grabbed his ass encourageingly and arched his hips up a bit further. “Fucking earn it,” he moaned.

Pulling both of the mortal’s legs up so that the backs of Tony’s knees hooked over his shoulders, Loki gripped the base of the headboard with one hand, rested the other on the inventor’s chest to hold him in place, and obliged with vigor.

Eyes rolling back in his head, Tony did indeed start making a series of embarrassing noises as each stroke of Loki’s cock dragged hard over his prostate and filled him so deep it took his breath away. He came again hard with a breathless moan, spilling over himself, and felt a tremor through Loki too, but the god never stopped, never faltered, and the hand on Tony’s chest slid down to grab his cock.

Tony cried out sharply at that. He was too sensitive, and it hurt, but he couldn’t pull away, and hearing Loki make those sounds above him, feeling the increased slickness easing the way of all subsequent thrusts—Tony knew those sounds, knew that sensation. The thought that Loki had come, and not bothered stopping, though they were both wrecks now, just to make sure he got Tony to scream, brought the inventor back to full hardness so quickly it ached.

“F-fuck, Loki, please, please—”

“You feel so good, Tony, so good.” Loki moaned, his fingers moving swift and sure as he stroked the inventor’s cock, not quite in time with his own thrusts. “You’re still so close, it still stings almost more than it feels good, doesn’t it?” He sounded breathless and cracked.

“Y-yeah, fuck, it’s—”

“S-same for me.”

Those words, the slight whine of need in Loki’s voice, and those graceful fingers tightening, moving faster, sent Tony right back over the edge, and this time he screamed, his whole body tight and clenching and heated. He heard Loki cry out and slow, his teasing hand stopping its ministrations, and his thrusts lazy now, just enough to keep them trembling as they each rode out their bliss until it finished with them. After gently unhooking Tony’s legs from his shoulders and settling them on the bed, Loki barely managed to pull out before he collapsed in a boneless heap, half-sprawled across
the inventor’s chest, but with most of his weight on the mattress. Tony couldn’t move, blinking at the ceiling in a bit of a daze, mind comfortably blank and quiet, save the faint comforting hum of his own magic, and the nearby waterfall-like sensation of Loki’s in such close proximity.

It was a long few minutes before either one of them got his breath back.

Loki managed to raise a hand and mutter a cleaning spell, then another spell that got them both between the sheets, rather than atop the duvet, without requiring either of them to change positions.

“Gonna have to learn that one,” Tony muttered. “Fuckin’ useful.”

The trickster chuckled, and tucked his face against the side of the inventor’s neck casually. “It is indeed.” His voice was muffled, for obvious reasons.

Eyes falling shut, Tony sighed contently. “Stick around in the morning. Need diplomatic updates.”

Making a noise which sounded like serious assent, albeit sleepy, Loki moved his head a little in what might have been a slight nod.

“Good.” The inventor drifted to sleep soon after.

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One week, three days...

As one possessed of the gift of dream-walking, and a powerful mage, nightmares were most often within Loki’s ability to control. There were always exceptions, especially after his long fall, and all that happened to him after he landed, but he had not been plagued by such a dream as that for several months. On occasions in that time Loki had sensed them beginning to creep in, he had been able to push them back, summoning fresher memories, myriad and vivid as he could make them, and had used them to keep the dark at bay, before it could sink claws or teeth into his mind and stain his dream-scape beyond his ability to overturn.

For the first time in a very long while, he failed.

Chittering sounds of the Chitauri like giant insectile machines made of bones; their chittering sounded like laughter, but less interested. So many eyes on him, so briefly, like he was just a part of the decor.

Helplessly weak, his chains barely held him up as heat increased and bored eyes and ears not the least bit affected by, or interested in, his screaming, all save the single pair of eyes assigned to observation and measure of the damage he could take, his resilience, and countless other “potentially useful” qualities.

Loki’s usefulness had always served as his ultimate defensive measure, but never like this. Never useful only for all the things purely incidental to what made him Loki. Here, he had no name, no value as more than flesh and bone unusually difficult to damage and contain, but not too difficult.
Not enough to escape, and no one was listening to his words. He made threats and promises and
pleas and none of them did anything. Silver-tongue ineffective, strength gone, too damaged by his
own foolish pride and the desolation of disappointed hopes for Odin’s respect causing him to let go
and fall into this place, Loki struggled to hold onto himself against the slow-burning conviction that
he was worthless, that he would die like this, and no one here would even know his name.

The heat increased, accompanied by electric shock and he screamed again.

Loki jerked awake so sharply he nearly fell off the bed, then regained his balance enough to let
himself fall more intentionally, scrambling back until his back met a wall of cool stone, intricately
carved and familiar and if only he could breathe properly.

Tony had been woken up by the sudden movement and subsequent clumsy sounds of retreat so
uncharacteristic of the god of lies as to set him on alert immediately. So did the ragged, labored
breathing, loud enough to almost fill the otherwise silent room.

The room was dark, save for moonlight filtering in from large windows, which provided enough
illumination for the inventor to identify a candle on the nightstand, which he lit with a flick of his
wrist and an adjustment of a few threads of magic. At the sight revealed by the warm candlelight, he
froze.

On the floor, eyes harrowed and pupils blown wide with fear, Loki had his back pressed hard against
the wall, and his arms crossed over his stomach, gripping opposite elbows far too tightly. His
shoulders were hunched and his head tilted forward slightly, his hair falling in his face. Shaking like
a leaf, the trickster seemed only half-aware of his surroundings, and if Tony hadn’t been in a similar
state himself, more than a few times after the battle against Loki in New York, he almost wouldn’t
have been able to believe the god seemed to be suffering all the signs of a panic attack.

“Loki?”

The god didn’t respond.

Slowly sliding off the bed to kneel in front of him, within arm’s reach and between Loki’s long
outstretched legs, but careful that his posture didn’t crowd or contain the trickster too much, Tony
observed closely the slightly glazed look in the god’s eyes.

“Is it okay if I touch you?”

Loki’s brow furrowed and he seemed to consider the question, with some confusion. He opened his
mouth, then closed it again, and his eyes too. “I’m not-” He searched for words, and clearly failed to
find them. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it.”

The trickster snarled, but didn’t really put his heart into it.

Tentatively, Tony rested a hand on the god’s knee. “Nightmare?”

Loki’s lips thinned into a thin, pale line. “It’s nothing to you.”

“You’re my ally, you’re sleeping in my bed, and we have a war on in a week. Your current pain and
traumatic reactions do actually concern me,” the inventor said quietly. “And the irony of this is pretty
stellar, given that trip I took through the portal you opened over New York put me in this state and
worse more than a few dozen times, for over a year after. You don’t get to pretend I can’t help you and hide this from me, Loki. Don’t even fucking try.”

The trickster’s eyes opened slowly, in a reluctant glare. He was still shaking. “So the Chitauri and the Other did inflict this on us both, then, with my hand involved in each case,” he mused bitterly, his voice shaking.

“Both?”

“When I fell, it was because I let go. I was not pushed. I would not let them pull me back up, and chose instead to fall.”

Tony swallowed at that. “Right. Thor mentioned that.”

Loki sneered. “I had never been more desperate to be free of his shadow.”

“You succeeded there. You’re your own shadow, now.”

“You say such things, at times, Tony.” The trickster managed to force one hand to release its reflexive vice-grip long enough to rub it over his face, trying to smooth out the lines of pain there, though his trembling worsened.

The inventor moved a little closer, wrapping a hand loosely around Loki’s forearm and steadying him. He could feel the spasming shiver of all the muscles right under the god’s skin, but remained himself steady as a rock, steady as the wall at Loki’s back.

“I despise the sensation of helplessness more than any other feeling I have ever encountered in my very, very long life,” Loki rasped, even as he slowly began to calm.

“You’re not alone, there.”

“It doesn’t matter. Helplessness is its own isolation, no matter how many share it, they all feel it as their own, the fault lying within their very selves.”

Tony let go of his arm after lowering it to the god’s side, then summoned the cup and pitcher visible on the night stand, beside the candle. It was trickier than expected, not spilling the water from the pitcher, but he managed well for a first attempt, trying desperately not to say Accio. He poured water in the cup and proffered it to Loki, who took it, and sipped gratefully. “Yours hit earlier than mine.”

“Hm?”

“Nightmares. We only fell asleep a few hours ago. I usually get about thirty minutes to an hour more before mine hit. It used to be a shorter onset time, when they were fresher.” He shrugged. “Now it’s mostly just when something’s triggered them.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, this day definitely offered that.”

“I know how mine did. Not quite yours.”

The god shot him a cold look.

“I just want to know how to avoid future triggers, here.”

“Irrational shame at my own inability to contain my pain, thus preventing those I care about from suffering concern and hurt to know how grave my injuries have been, and also… not allowing those who brought me low such an affect on me, as I would not credit them with such control over my
Tony felt something like a twinge behind his sternum. It shouldn’t have been a surprise to him, how stubbornly protective Loki really was of those he’d claimed as his own, who hadn’t betrayed him so deeply as Odin or aided that betrayal and hurt him further over failure to understand it as Thor. It had been clear how highly he still valued Angrboða, even though he not yet forgiven her faults and hurtful actions. She was not his, but had been once, and had earned that appreciation, which might never fade, even long after love and attraction did, and that... did something to Tony’s stomach, which made it feel like it had been thrown into a cement mixer. It hadn’t helped that the way that the trickster had looked at Sigyn was almost exactly the same look Pepper and Tony still exchanged, when they had missed each other after a while spent on opposite sides of the country: fond remembrance of being closer, comfort with the new platonic status quo and its less urgent sort of intimacy. “Could be worse. You could be dying and not telling them about it.” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

Loki raised his eyebrows slowly.

“Pep... knew something was wrong, but I kept telling her it was all sorts of other things, gave her the CEO position at my company, kept her distracted.” He cleared his throat. “The arc reactor originally had a palladium core. It was poisoning my blood. I barely found an alternative core in time to all sort of... not die from it.”

The trickster’s eyebrows raised. “Ah. Between that, and your history of vast alcohol consumption, perhaps it is a very good thing Extremis allowed you to grow a fresh set of self-repairing internal organs.”

Tony offered a wry half-smile. “Yeah, definitely. Liver and kidneys and all.”

“My... children recently have made a point of not allowing me to hide. I needed the aid of Hel and the first of the three both to detect the arrival of Thanos’ fleet, and in exchange, I was masterfully manipulated into promising to be frank with my plans, and all of the risks I plan to take with them, any time I meet with them, and Fenrir, in Nifleheim’s nameless city. I am not accustomed to it yet.”

“You sound proud of their tricking you into it, though.”

“If they, of all creatures in the nine realms, cannot learn to out-maneuver me, I would think myself a poor excuse for a father to them, indeed.”

Tony snorted. “Nice policy.”

The trickster shrugged, but his smile was fairly warm, as he flicked his wrist and teleported the cup and pitcher back to the headboard.

The inventor snorted. “Show off.”

“I have no doubt you will learn quickly to make that sort of spell seem nothing remotely flashy enough to merit that accusation.”

“Fair,” Tony mused. “You think you can get back to sleep?”

“I believe so. Thank you.” He arched an eyebrow. “If you’re concerned about your own dreams, I
do have a spell for dreamless sleep. I merely cannot inflict it upon myself, you see.”

“That... sounds good, actually.” The inventor rose to his feet and offered a hand, which Loki accepted, and helped pull the god to his feet. The returned to the bed in silence, settling under the sheets and covers. Tony was more comfortable than he’d admit, when the trickster’s chest pressed against his back and one pale arm slung itself about his waist. Then Loki murmured a spell and the inventor saw the simple, elegant array of strings pulled by it, just before he fell asleep.

Loki listened to him breathe for a few long minutes, his eyes staring into nothing. “You are more remarkable than you know,” he murmured, so quiet he himself could barely hear it, “and a greater temptation.”

After a few more minutes calling himself an utter fool, Loki let his eyes fall shut and drifted off again, into dreams less horrible, this time.

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One week, one day...

Day four of Tony’s time under Hlín’s tutelage started the same as the previous two before it: eating an absurdly heavy breakfast with Loki, discussing all of the political and diplomatic situations and what, if anything, needed to be done about any of them. Tony was itching to get his hands back on his suit to implement some final modifications, and he was definitely feeling the pressure of the imminent time crunch.

So it was an immense relief when, right after a late lunch, Hlín announced, “I think you have your powers sufficiently under control to be no danger to others around you, human or otherwise. Your lessons are far from complete, but like everything else in your life as a mage, it seems this too must prove unconventional and awkwardly timed. You have a war to attend, and I have my own preparations to make on earth with you and your allies accordingly.”

“Finally,” Tony groaned, just before Hlín teleported them both to the bi-frost.

The trip back to earth landed them only briefly in the roof of Avengers’ tower in New York (at which point the inventor noticed the time differential—didn’t even look like it was ten in the morning yet—with a frown) before the elder mage again teleported them, this time into the penthouse, where their arrival appeared fairly well-timed.

Loki was standing between Gamora and Steve Rogers looking deeply annoyed with both of them, who seemed to be glowing faintly green and immobilized. He barely flicked his eyes over to Hlín and Tony’s arrival before fixing his glare on Steve. “Captain Rogers, I would like to remind you that the etiquette of earth is by no means universal, and you should not expect a new arrival who does not even have intent to stay on this planet to accept that your ways are the ones which must be considered the only polite and correct ones. You insulted the honor of my ally and should be grateful that I did not throw you off the balcony over there.” He turned the the equally enraged-looking assassin on his right and said, “Gamora, you did your level best to provoke him, and while he did overreact, you are not entirely without fault or complicity in this instance, given you are older, more worldly, and furthermore a guest in this tower and this realm.” He released the blond soldier first.
“Out.”

“Tony. Good to see you back. I’ll... just be going,” Steve said, once the paralysis field dropped, and marched to the elevator, embarrassed and seething as the doors opened for him, and shut tightly behind him.

Loki released Gamora next. “Are you finished here?”

She tried to punch him. He caught it, and used her own momentum to upend her and bring her crashing down on her back.

He repeated gently, “Are you *finished* here?”

She swore at him for a full minute, making a great deal of improbable insinuations about how, and with what livestock, the trickster spent his free time.

“Actually, I hate to break it to you, but not even he’s quite *that* flexible. I mean, it’s not like he can unhinge his pelvis like a snake’s jaw or something,” Tony interrupted lightly, after one particularly graphic but insupportable string of accusatory epithets.

“Not helping, Tony,” the god intoned dryly.

Gamora shot them both livid glares, before fixing her ire again just on the trickster. “I still say you should’ve let me remove one of his organs. He’s apparently grown back one or two of them from almost nothing before, and everything—”

“Gamora,” Loki warned. “It is not even a matter of political alliance or necessity that prevented me allowing you that. I am too exasperated by your quick temper, more than anything. He meant no such grievous offenses against you, if only because he lacks the creativity and breadth of life experiences to have come up with them in the first place. He is an oaf, and not worth nursing a full-blown vendetta against.”

She sighed heavily. “Fine. Send me to my quarters? The elevator is occupied.”

With a snap of Loki’s fingers, she vanished, and the god straightened, smiling bright and charming at the returned inventor and his former teacher. “Good morning to you both. Enjoy the show?”

Chuckling, Tony strode closer. “They keeping you on your toes?”

“Only on an intermittent basis. They’re like children, really. Mine were always better behaved, at least,” the trickster bemoaned, deadpan.

“Hardly,” Hlín scoffed. “They were just more talented at not getting caught misbehaving.”

“Is that not the same thing?” Loki asked, full of innocent curiosity.

“That would explain so much about you,” the elder mage sighed. “That said, I believe we have a web of intercommunicative and support wards to build a foundation for, before the rest of my students arrive here tomorrow.”

Tony had hardly felt more torn in his life. On the one hand, that magic was something he absolutely needed to see, and learn from, and possibly keep up a running commentary on. On the other hand, his hands itched with longing to return to his lab and get back to work on his armor, incorporating ideas and a bit more magic-compatible systemic upgrades he’d spent the past few days designing.
Seeing his expression, Loki seemed amused and oddly sympathetic. “You’ve missed your lab, I take it?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” the inventor groaned. “Days. Days without electronics aside from my phone, which is surprisingly tricky to keep charged by magic means.”

“I did mention it was unnecessarily complicated when it came to that,” the trickster pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I’d be able to apply a few redesign ideas... in my lab.” He jabbed Loki in the chest. “But I’m also not skipping out on this construction shit. So let’s hurry up, shall we?”

Loki laughed at him, bright and shameless, and teleported them to the roof, where they did begin.

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Six days...

Tony Stark was officially sick of other mages, not counting his ally (and maybe Doc Strange, who had gotten about as frustrated with Hlín’s other students as he had, here and there) and if Dr. Foster and Hlín didn’t stop getting on like a house on fire in the common rooms downstairs, he was pretty sure that being in the same building with them would cause him to spontaneously develop cavities.

Dr. Foster didn’t have a natural gift for magic that Hlín had yet mentioned, but the pair of them seemed to click in a strange mentor-apprentice way that might have also resembled a family bond between a younger girl and an older aunt or cousin. They had taken to each other right away in a manner that even Loki and one or two of Hlín’s students seemed to find almost disturbing. If Tony’s so-far-infallible radar for such things didn’t indicate that Dr. Foster was 100% heterosexual, he’d almost worry Hlín might potentially become her rebound Asgardian crush since she was still on shaky ground with Thor so far as he knew; and yet, even if that had been a potential risk, despite the elder mage decidedly sitting at about 2.5 on the Kinsey scale so far as Tony could tell, her interest in the pretty young astrophysicist seemed to be pure intellectual enthusiasm encouraged by complimentary temperaments and thus comfortingly platonic.

Really it was just sort of adorable in a terrifying sort of way, given how intimidating both Dr. Foster and Hlín could be just individually. The idea of them being an allied front, paired with his primary shield from such things (Loki) being summoned away from earth by warnings from Titan that the Kree were experiencing their usual pre-war political instabilities in need of some of the trickster’s own brand of coaxing to keep them properly on track, sent Tony Stark fleeing down into his lab at long, long last, after days of arguing with magic users and fiddling with other projects related to Asgard-to-Avengers-to-S.H.I.E.L.D. communications arrays, which were now finally completed.

“Aww, baby, did you miss me,” Tony sighed, one hand cradling the helmet of his newest armor. “I’ve got so much fun in store for you, you’ll hardly recognize yourself.”

Eight hours of mad science later, he was rudely interrupted.

“Ahem.”

“Busy.”
“Tony!” That was not an Avenger’s voice.

The inventor flailed slightly, dropping a wrench. “Rhodey! What the hell are you doing here, man?” He rose to his feet as his childhood friend stalked toward him with a look of deep exasperation and irritation on his face. “You look less than excited-to-OOF!” He hugged Rhodey back tightly. “Hey. Woah. What happened?”

“You vanished off the face of the planet for days and we had only to word of a convicted criminal god of lies to go on that you were okay, asshole, and no one even told me until yesterday that you were back! Pepper had to call me after seeing you yesterday to let me know!”

“Shit, Rhodey.” He hugged back tighter. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea—I—wow, that’s fucked up, how did Pep get that memo, but—”

“I was out on missions, and Hydra hacked my phone,” he sighed, pulling back from the mad engineer’s hold. “They didn’t want me leaving before they could ambush me, since they had a nice one set up, so they blocked and erased my messages.”

“Hydra? Seriously?”

“You got any idea who they’re after in the middle-east these days?”

Tony’s lips twitched. “Well, uh, I know someone might have mentioned making it look like some of their higher-ups got attacked in a declaration-of-war sort of way by the Ten Rings.”

Rhodey’s eyes widened a bit. “No shit.”

The inventor nodded, looking amused. “That worked, huh?”

“I know you said the Ten Rings were still in operation, but really?”

“They kidnapped me again before the whole vanishing-from-earth, thing. Loki got really, reeeally pissed off at them,” Tony recounted. “He, uh, might have threatened to rip out the throat of their leader’s daughter a bit. Also the Hydra thing. And set the Avengers and most of S.H.I.E.L.D. on them in a massive seek-and-destroy operation, wiping them off one continent entirely and halfway off two others.”

“Shit.”

“Also I might be a mage now.”

“Bullshit.”

Tony grinned and tugged a few strings.

Rhodey closed his eyes, suddenly feeling far too exposed. He might, in fact, be stripped of all but his shoes and his boxers. “You did not just do that.”

“I did. Nice boxers, by the way. Is that paisley?”

“Still no proof that was magic.”

Tony pulled the man’s collared shirt and pressed trousers out from behind his back, where they were neatly folded. His hands were glowing faintly the color of rust and fox-fur. “Better?”

Taking his clothes hesitantly, Rhodey set his shirt on the nearest work surface and pulled his pants back on. “Okay. Explain this. I’m presuming Loki is involved, hopefully not sexually. Is magic an
STI or something?"

Caught off-guard, the inventor sputtered for a moment and laughed helplessly. “No, haha, no. Ha! Not really, no, but the fact I had a lot of minor spells cast on me almost every other night for a few months probably contributed a bit to the whole ‘gift awakening’ bit, from what I can tell.”

“Spells... I don’t want to know.”

“Endurance-related. Didn’t even recover so fast when I was a teenager, seriously, I recommend it highly; although apparently Extremis has similar perks, who knew.” He shrugged. “No spells needed.”

“I... meant it when I said I didn’t want to know.”

“Well, now you do.”

"Anyway... magic,” Rhodey reminded, as he started to re-button his shirt.

Tony waved glowing jazz-hands with a flash of sparks. “Fuckin’ magic.”

A long explanation ensued.

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Slowly but surely, with years of experience cajoling a reclusive Stark out of his engineering element and into the land of the living on his side, Rhodey managed to get lure Tony into a round of storytelling, which led to drinks, which led to drinks in the main room at the tower, which eventually came to include Natasha and Clint, as well as Thor, but mostly consisted of Rhodey and Tony trying to out-do one another in recounting lurid tales of badassery, interrupting each other with snark whenever opportunities arose, with the goal of making the other lose track of where he was or (almost solely in Rhodey’s case on increasingly-rare occasions) sputter in abject embarrassment.

It was a welcome respite, whether Tony would admit it or not, after days of intellectual over-exertion, much of which had been spent in the company of one or more mages, with hours to himself tinkering with spells and spell-compliant machinery (occasionally interrupted by Loki) in between. He didn’t realize how little grinning like a madman he’d been doing, compared to his usual, until he noticed the muscles in his face almost ached with it now, laughing as much as he was. It was good. And extremely necessary.

The lieutenant colonel was in the middle of recounting getting ambushed by Hydra, complete with broadly illustrative gestures and light mime, when Clint leapt off the couch as though something had bit him, and looked around in alarm, at which point Loki stepped around the couch and stole his place at Tony’s left, a drink in hand in a ridiculously elegant silver goblet. It smelled a bit headier than the wine from the previous night, heavily spiced and warm and almost a little coppery.

“What are you drinking?”

“An old delicacy of Jotunnheim before the frost, which has long survived in communities within Dvergarheim,” Loki explained. “It is a sort of mulled honey-wine with some rare herbs and spices, further made more potent with the addition fruit-based brandies from sources with some significant power in them, and the blood of wild-mages collected near the last full moon on or before Beltane.”
“Uh... they kill mages?” Clint asked. “And you’re drinking them?”

“The mages donate, and in exchange receive most, but not all, of the resulting brew when it is complete,” Loki countered. Seeing odd looks sent his way by all but Thor, who merely looked a little disapproving, the trickster sighed at them. “My apologies for the interruption; I was actually interested in your tale, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Right, where was I?”

“You were just recounting your ascent to the top of a ridge,” Thor supplied.

“Right! So there were about a dozen of them left and-”

Loki seemed to be paying attention; although when his drink met his lips, his eyes glazed over for just a moment and Tony shivered a little at the change in the now-familiar cadence/feel of the trickster’s magic against his when they were close. Something in that brew of his had sent a tremor through it like a sudden bass riff, and it was seriously distracting. “My apologies,” the god muttered, when he saw the inventor looking a bit flushed and questioning suddenly. “I hadn’t thought you would notice.” His magic pulled back, cloaking itself seamlessly until Tony couldn’t feel it even when he tried, which was a bit mystifying. The strings that set it off were so widely scattered, at the far edges of the room barely in sight, the mortal almost didn’t see any of them at all.

It occurred to him that when Loki wanted to hide, there was probably pretty good reason even the likes of Odin and Heimdall couldn’t track him down. Tony had just gotten very few opportunities to observe it quite so clearly as this.

That didn’t explain why it left the inventor feeling colder than he had a moment ago, and a bit inexplicably disappointed.

Loki slowly finished his drink over the next hour and a half, seeming to become as relaxed as a cat in a sunbeam as he did so; the whole time it was warm enough to give off faint steam. Already a bit curious what properties had made the trickster’s magic act so oddly, Tony became more so when he realized Thor kept shooting his brother disapproving, slightly irritated looks. So something about the drink, while maybe not as taboo to Aesir as drinking blood was considered by western civilization here on earth, was unwise or otherwise questionable.

When Rhodey finished his story and Clint jumped in to start one of his own, Tony turned his head to the trickster and asked, “What’s a wild-mage?”

“One who is also a shape-shifter and a wanderer.”

“So you, then.”

A nod of confirmation from the god.

“Your blood?”

“ Mostly.” His grin was sweetly devious.

“How’s that taste, exactly?”

Grin growing wilder, Loki leaned in and caught his lips to show him, tongue delving in, deep and thorough, slow and unhurried, as the inventor sucked in a breath. His mouth was overwhelmed with the taste of spices and a hint of honey, dark fruit and autumn leaves, smoke and pine and just a hint of coppery blood, warming him straight through all at once.
“Get a fucking room!” the archer shouted, cutting off his own tale mid-sentence.

Loki pulled back, licking his lips.

Tony felt a bit like he’d just been electrocuted, in the magic department. Everything was a little tingly, and the usual constant hum of his magic seemed to have turned almost into a sultry purr with it for a moment, until it sharply faded. “Damn.”


“Wherever, brother dear, is the fun in that?” the trickster countered, grinning loose and lazy. “A bit of spark will do no harm.”

“You have had more than a bit,” the thunderer growled.

“I know what I do. Trust only two things about me, brother: my ruthless will to survive and come out with more than I deserve to show for it in the end, and my rage. Both, rest assured, will be well-served.” He raised his goblet as though in a silent toast, and drained the last few drops onto his outstretched tongue.

Tony swallowed thickly, more than a little turned on, and thus distracted.

Luckily, almost as if by magic, Rhodey’s phone went off; although no threads visibly went off visibly, Tony knew already that when he put his mind to it and worked on a spell long enough, he could pull threads from a considerable distance. He picked it up with a muttered curse and took a few steps from the group, answering tersely.

“Already? What do you mean they—” He made a noise of exasperation. “Well it’s them who need to get their shit together then, isn’t it?” A long pause, as he listened to the other end. “Fine. I’ll be there, but you owe me for this.”

With reluctance, the inventor extracted himself from the couch and strode over. “Leaving so soon, boo-boo?”

“Yeah, duty calls and somehow I’m gonna end up owing a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent a big favor, or an ass-kicking, before tomorrow is up.”

“Coulson?”

“How’d you know?”

“Just a feeling.” Tony pulled his friend into a quick hug. “You’ll be done with that in time to cover the ground efforts in six days though, right?”

“Damn straight. I’ve been signed on since you dropped that plan on S.H.I.E.L.D., who dropped it on the Air Force. You stay alive, dammit.”

“Planning to. Have fun with A.C.!”

“Oh god, you call him that too. Why am I not surprised. Did that girl get it from you?” Rhodey said, even as he headed for the door.

“Nah, credit goes to Skye!” Tony called. “Bye, honey-bear!”

“Can it, Stark.”
Turning around to return to the couch, the inventor found Loki standing very close, looking extremely relaxed and predatory, almost to the point is seemed he might start purring like a giant cat at any moment. He was smiling bright and lazy, showing almost all his teeth, his goblet now nowhere in sight. “May I abscond with you now?”

“What is it about your drink there that’s got Thor affecting nearby weather-patterns again?” Tony murmured, low enough the others wouldn’t hear.

“While not without risks, it’s quite powerful, and for mages can have a number of, hmm, pleasantly revivifying effects if we are not at our peak.”

“You’re in good form, these days, for obvious reasons, though.”

“Yes, and as such it instigates growth and, given a few days of time and the proper meditations and other tricks, can provide a temporary increase in my powers to a fairly impressive degree, with only a few side effects.”

“Like the fact you’re... effectively high right now?”

“Consider it a show of trust that I’m not hidden away from all of you while I’m like this. It’s been some time since I’ve been in good company in such a state,” Loki purred, winding his arms loosely about the inventor’s waist and nuzzling at his neck.

“Loki!”

“He’s fine, Thor,” Tony called. “Just really... content.”

“Don’t let him teleport in such a state. If that brew was as old as I suspect-”

“It was kept in perfectly ideal and uniquely evocative conditions in Helheim by my daughter, as a favor for me she owed long ago, and which I’ve been considerably patient in collecting,” Loki shot back, lifting his head away from the inventor’s skin quickly, but only swaying a little as he pointed an accusatory finger at his brother. “As I trust Hel with my life and more, I will warn you not to question her capabilities in this regard.”

Thor looked stricken. “How long, brother? You have not been to Alfheim at that season for-”

“Long enough to suit my purposes, and I know well what I’m doing, brother. There is reason I’ve had it prepared in such particular ways, in such a place, and at such temperatures. It’s an old recipe, and older magic than exists in Asgard itself, taken from the only written articles ever to leave the Nameless City in Nifleheim to make it to a library elsewhere in the nine realms for study—until very recent.” He smiled bright as a knife again. “I simply did not know at the start that I needn’t have worried about potential ramifications from not being Jotunn as the original practitioners, as I originally feared, for an Aesir might well be poisoned by it, but not I. Convenient, is that not?”

Thor pulled himself up to to his feet and marched over. “You would risk your life, now of all times, with such madness?”

Loki grabbed Thor’s face firmly by the chin in one hand. “I am fond of madness, brother. This you have known for a long time. I am fond of it because I understand it, and because I relate to it. I risk my life carelessly all of the time, but I do not risk my revenge. Trust that, if not my questionable instincts for self-preservation, and do not accuse me of taking risks where you can scarcely begin to understand the complexity of the undertaking at hand.” He tugged his brother’s face down a bit lower. “Do you understand me, Thor?”
The blond god tugged back with a snarl. “Fine. Do as you will.” He stormed from the room and outside the tower, distant thunder rumbled.

The trickster only tisked. “He gets so put out when he has nothing to save someone from, sometimes.”

“That’s... wow, that’s what you’re taking from that?” Tony asked.

“He would prefer to storm off, rather than ask me to prove and explain why I am in no danger, because he is more willing to dismiss me as uncooperative than to admit he is wrong and does not truly understand,” Loki extrapolated. “So yes.”

The inventor grimaced. “Conceded, I suppose.” He noticed Natasha and Clint grabbing the remaining liquor bottles and sidling quietly out of the room.

Loki noticed, too, and grinned again. He really was just all smiles, and not even too-creepy ones for once, when high. “I have you to myself now, it seems.” His hands slid down the mortal’s back to firmly grip his ass and knead a little.

Tony might have made a noise, particularly at the way the god used that hold, and a bit of leverage, to grind their hips together. “Still... better to head to the penthouse. Fewer potential interruptions.”

A disinterested noise like a growl escaped Loki’s lips as he began to nip and nibble his way up along the column of the inventor’s throat.

“Gamora would watch and take video and refuse to share, and you know it.”

That earned a resigned huff, from the god of mischief, just before the room vanished around them.

The ride was, admittedly, a bit unsteadier than usual, and they landed on the bed with a bit more force than usual, at an odd angle. Then Loki lifted the cloaking from his magic and stretched out atop the inventor’s body with his own, close and cuddly and sexy all at once, the usual waterfall/thrum of his magic now louder and stronger, more like a bone-shaking purr, and Tony shuddered at the feel of it.

“Holy fuck, Loki.”

“You seem highly aware of me. Most would sense the change without being very affected by it themselves, but you seem to feel it almost to your very bones,” the trickster observed, licking at his throat.

“I think I understand why you’re a bit drunk off this,” the inventor panted.

“Power surge, overflow of sensation, like a rush of blood and energy to the head but through all of me, yes,” Loki muttered. “It’s quite wonderful, quite good, quite-” He gave a sharp gasp when the mortal’s hand slid down the front of his pants, his hips soon bucking into the warm pressure and friction there applied.

“You’re a bit more sensitive than usual, aren’t you?” Tony purred.

“P-possibly so.” He rocked his hips up. “You feel marvelous.”

“You sure this is okay? You’re a bit compromised.”

“There’s a reason I chose to drink of it in your company; I made this decision quite sober, if that puts
your mind at ease,” the trickster assured, trailing off into a low breathy sound as the inventor’s fingers played over him skillfully, a bit rough and dry, but exquisite nevertheless.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.”

“Do,” Loki concurred, and caught the inventor’s clever mouth with his own, smiling into the contact at the shudder that ran through Tony’s body at the taste, full of only-slightly-milder traces of spices, honey, alcohol and that faintest hint of copper. It faded quickly, few traces still left on Loki’s tongue, and the mortal chased eagerly after it, but was still more than pleased with the taste of Loki alone once it was all gone. He then rolled the god of lies onto his back.

Content to let him, Loki splayed out expectantly. He grinned a little when it was Tony who banished their clothing this time. “I knew you’d learn quickly.”

“What other side-effects do we have to look forward to, or be wary of, out of curiosity?” Tony inquired, leaning down to lick along the god’s collar bones.

“Hmmmm, the ‘high’ as you call it will wear off by morning, which itself includes effects similar to chemical intoxication like slurred speech, as well as heightened physical sensitivity, some loss of depth perception, and a feeling of uncommonly generous contentment. There is something of a hangover to combat afterwards, to be met with the meditation and other rituals I mentioned before, to maintain stability until such time as I plan to use this excess of power. Now I recommend you cease worrying about all of that and worship my person by means of carnal appreciation.”

“Worship, eh?”

“Oh yes.” Then Loki’s hands began moving over the inventor’s body as their mouths met again, and the world went hazy.

Physical contact and magic thick in the air, and the way those long-fingered hands played over Tony’s skin in meandering paths while their fingertips added deft little flourishes of particular attention, all in time with the wordless song that seemed to be singing in Loki’s very blood—a song about the price of wild powers and surrender of some will in order to savor it and soak it up, to be open and vulnerable for it, and in that sacrificial show of trust, to win more than one might otherwise deserve, all through willingness to lose control—made the mad mortal’s own head spin with something like awe and lascivious want.

So Tony touched back, hands roaming over the god’s skin like he meant to memorize it, first as accompaniment to the rhythm of Loki’s movements and magic, as his fingers trailed down the trickster’s neck and shoulders and arms, slow enough to get the trickster staring at him. Then Tony slowly began to alter the course of each rise and fall of tension and ripple of sensation, changing the melody something he had more equal part in, by the time he’d finished mapping Loki’s chest and ribcage, sides and belly. By the time he was at the god’s hips, his mouth joined in, breaking off from the kiss to retrace a few lines he was particularly fond of: the lean cords of Loki’s neck and the tender skin where his pulse was strongest, the fan of skin above his collarbone but below his adam’s apple, the shallow valley between pectoral muscles, down the lean and wiry abdominal muscles, and finally the creases where belly and hips met.

By then, the song was of pulsing need and Loki shook with it, breathing ragged and pupils blown wide, focus only a little distracted from the mortal’s mouth dragging far-too-slow from his hip down, by the feel of those hands roaming further and squeezing a little as well as stroking at his ass, making the trickster moan and writhe a little. When both sides of his pelvis had been marked, and Tony nipped sharply at his inner thigh, running both hands down the backs of his legs, Loki gave a high keen of mixed frustration and desperate need.
“Tony, please,” Loki panted, the first coherent words he’d managed since realizing just how much affect, just how much power, the mad inventor had over him, and how willingly given it was. Then he almost flinched when Tony nuzzled at his balls and up his length, hands leaving his feet to move back up his ankles, stroking up and down his legs twice more before seeming satisfied that almost every inch of the god’s skin had felt his touch and liked it—every inch, of course, save some of those most desperate for the attention.

“Please what?” the mortal prompted, his breath hot and fluttery where it rolled over the leaking head of Loki’s cock.

The trickster tried to roll his hips up, to close the narrow distance between that devilish mouth and his aching need, but Tony held them pinned down hard, unmoving, making the god curse, his voice shaking.

“Tell me what you want, Loki.”

“I want your mouth. I want you to worship my cock with that unholy tongue of yours and all your clever ways,” Loki rasped. “Please, Tony.”

With a low, dark chuckle, the inventor parted his lips and obliged, taking the god swiftly all the way down in one smooth, sucking movement, making Loki try to buck his hips again, and again to no avail.

“Yesss,” Loki hissed, breaking off with a cracked, utterly lost sound when Tony swallowed around him and then began moving over him in earnest. Blood rushed in his ears, and he could swear it was all headed south, toward that heat and wet and that glorious tongue, swirling and laving against his length unpredictably, changeably, driving him to distraction and further beyond it, such that he didn’t even notice a quick flicker of magic opening nearby a night-table drawer, summoning the bottle of lube from within it. So far gone was he, hissing incoherent syllables that were as much attempts to communicate affection as they were half-formed obscenities, by the time the inventor’s slick fingers pressed into him, that it hardly took more than a few hard strokes against his prostate and a particularly eager swallow from Tony to send him flying over the edge with a half-strangled cry.

He might have stayed there, blissful, floating, content, but the inventor knew him too well, and soon the serene whitened bliss of it crashed with stings of discomfort that grew into tremors and jolts of pleasure cutting through the haze to something sharper. It ached, and Loki almost screamed at how fast he came crashing back down at the same time his body responded half-eagerly, wanting more of the pleasure despite the pain.

When that too-clever mouth pulled off him, Loki almost sobbed as much with relief as disappointment. “You are just unfairly gorgeous,” Tony panted, looking flushed and hungry himself, fingers rubbing hard, tight circles against the spot deep inside that always made the god of lies emit the most gloriously wanton sounds, and it was no exception this time. “Just beautiful, especially when you’re a mess like this... When I’ve made you a mess.” His fingers retreated

Loki’s eyes snapped open wide again, and liquid though his bones still felt, he found strength to pull the mad inventor closer, wrapping long legs around the hero’s muscular waist. “Chaos gives fine gifts to those who willingly surrender to the storm enough to understand and relish it,” he countered. “Don’t stop now, Tony. I need a bit more chaos from you, too.”

“Sex is helping you solidify your grip on the hit of power from that brew, isn’t it?”

“Rituals have so many purposes. I also want you to fuck me, conveniently enough, Tony dear.” He rocked his hips and shivered a little, still sensitive. “Please.” He licked his lips and took a sharp
breath when the mortal lined himself up, then let it out with a shamelessly appreciative moan when Tony obligingly sunk in to the hilt.

“You just have to want it for it to work?”

“I have to enjoy it for it to work,” Loki added, voice uneven as Tony began to pick up the pace. “So glad—ah, oh yes!—soso glad I can count on your capabilities.”

“Oh, it’s a real pleasure to be of service,” the mortal panted, lifting the god’s hips a bit to strike deeper, at a slightly better angle.

In response, the trickster could only give another strangled, breathy moan, and another, then other sounds as Tony wrapped a clever hand around his cock and stroked him hard and just a bit faster than the thrusts of his hips, a bit rougher, making Loki choke and gasp and writhe until the inventor had to hold him down hard with one hand across a clavicle applying downward force. Loki gave in, head tossed back only so far as would still allow him to hold Tony’s gaze as his breath quickened further and his back arched and he came again, streaking both of their stomachs as Tony followed swiftly after and their movements slowed to a halt.

Drained, Tony half-collapsed over the god, his weight on his forearms, where they settled on either side of Loki’s ribcage. The trickster ran still-shaking fingers through his hair, and the inventor let his head loll forward until his brow rested on Loki’s collarbone, as they slowly caught their breaths.

“I kinda want to ride you, now,” Tony muttered.

Loki hummed, low and pleased. “I’d not be averse.”

“I sense we’ll be at this until about dawn?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Glad we’re in accord.” Tony lifted his head with a half-manic grin and kissed the mad god once again.

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Five days....

Bleary a bit, Tony found Loki in his lab the next morning, dressed only in soft black leather trousers and a green tunic, and sitting cross-legged in the middle of the work table long ago marked Property of Loki by magic and other means, with his eyes shut. He seemed to be meditating serenely while giving off some of the most disconcerting pulses of energy on an unpredictable basis. Whatever he was channelling, and gathering to himself, and weaving through his own magic and the boost given to him by well-aged bloody brews, Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

Except of course he did. He was Tony Stark, but Loki didn’t move or acknowledge his presence in any way, and the inventor had a suspicion that the trickster was only vaguely aware of him. That might change if he registered as a threat, but given their alliance was a bit magic in itself, that was unlikely.
Tony mulled that over, watching the god for a few minutes before returning to work on his armor. It was almost-companionable silence, except the occasional unsettling tremors through the whole building, accompanied by bone-deep chill and a sense of foreboding that Loki’s work seemed to set off once or twice an hour. At one point, Thor dropped in, looking stricken, but also awed and more than a little impressed as he observed his brother, as though the trickster god had just survived beheading or something, without illusions or tricks.

“What were you afraid the drink would do?” Tony asked, not even looking up from, or pausing in, his own work.

“Most who imbibe that brew after it has reached a certain age, even if it is primarily their own blood in it, lose their minds, and their sense of self, or else do little more than scream for days on end before their hearts stop,” Thor said slowly.

“Most Aesir who do it?”

“Aesir, Elves, Dwarves... and even some Jotunn. The art of aging it to be non-lethal has been long-lost, but many have continued to attempt it,” the thunderer admitted. “I should have known my brother would only make wagers he had unfair advantage upon.”

“Yeah, seems his habit,” Tony mused.

“It was not always so. Or, perhaps, he was once better at hiding his advantages, or I was not so good at seeing them, as I am on occasions you do reckless things that I have been convinced should have killed you, only for you to prove master of them and of yourself both, in the end.”

“We like being underestimated. So do you.”

“You are both far better at it than I.” He watched Loki in silence for several minutes, as Tony continued his work. Then, quietly and with a measure of humbled respect, the thunderer left.

Tony spared the trickster a glance, but found the god of lies still unmoved, still as a statue. Quiet and nigh-serene as Loki appeared, the sight and the feel of another faint tremor through the floor and walls around them, settled in the inventor’s gut that war was here, such that he could almost hear it drumming, not distant enough. Never distant enough, but this was standing on their doorstep now. Time almost up.

The feeling was cold relief, almost familiar, to part of him, even as he felt a sharp ache in his chest. The war, he was ready for. After-the-war...

Will he take that table? Tony wondered idly, frowning a bit at the thought. It hadn’t exactly been Tony Stark’s table for weeks now. Months, really. It would only make sense. Loki had mentioned investing himself in it a bit, as a platform from which to weave certain magics for the war, in a location he knew himself to be secure. With the location it was in no longer secure, would the trickster then take the invested-in platform? Should Tony make a courtesy allowance in JARVIS’ security protocols to prevent any alarms going off just from the table vanishing?

The last thought gave the inventor pause.

If he left it here, you’d be able to study it, and everything he’s done to it, or from it, given time, he mused. You’d let him take it back without a fight?

The thought itched.

Tony realized he didn’t want to dissect the thing, not really. He just... liked having it in his lab. And
almost everything else Loki has impacted, in the lab and out, he thought, and grimaced. “Dammit,” he muttered. “Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

It was worse, with the god still in the room.

It was worse, not being able to separate in his mind missing the table, and the reason he liked the poor abused, engraved and otherwise magic-damaged thing in the first place, even with how much it stood out like a sore hex-covered thumb against the otherwise clean, industrial and modern technology and furniture around it.

Tony took a deep breath, and focused on the imagined sound of war drums.
Four Days...

Stepping out of the lab for a much-needed breather and some caffeine to make up for the lack of sleep that had him so regrettably awake before noon, walking down to a nearby coffee shop, Tony expected to maybe run into a few familiar faces. It happened, around him, given his well-known face and proximity to Avenger’s tower.

He had not expected any of the myriad familiar face he might have anticipated seeing to include teeth like those. Startled to the point of reflexes in his hind-brain causing him to jerk sharply, he still managed not to spill a drop of coffee.

“Jeez, I know this is New York, but won’t people notice those?” Tony greeted the wolf-in-humanoid-shape.

Still smiling, Fenrir laughed at him, gleefully amused. Teeth aside, he looked otherwise very normal, by earth standards, albeit too tall, attractive, and slightly rebel-without-a-cause to avoid being stared at a bit just on principal: fine brown leather jacket with black fur visible lining the hood, a black button-down shirt, black skinny jeans and heavy motorcycle boots. His short hair was an artful mess. “They’re not visible to any who do not know me as I am already.”

True to the creature’s word, Tony noticed an elaborate but subtle web of strings glitter at their feet. “Ah. Nice.”

“I thought it best I converse with you first, before meeting your construct in this realm. My father, I sense, is... busy?”

The inventor snorted. “Deep in some zone between full consciousness and extra-sensory overload, playing with forces that challenge even his skills and mastery of magic, you mean? Yeah, he is, a bit. He’s been at it over twenty-four hours now.”

“Then he should be awake before the afternoon,” Fenrir assessed, with a nod. “Perhaps in as little as an hour.”

“Oh. Good. Since we’ve all sort of got a war on, and everything.”

The wolf snorted, amused. “Yes, I seem to recall it being mentioned in passing once or twice.” He kept his voice airily unconcerned. “You’re nervous around me.”

“I’m waiting for you to bring up something, and the longer you don’t, the more you’re enjoying how
increasingly uneasy it’s making me, and that’s just annoying.”

“On the way back to your tower, then.”

“Ferris?” called a barista.

To Tony’s surprise, Fenris perked up at that and turned to fetch a large chai latte before returning and seizing the inventor by the shoulder, steering him out the door. His spell followed them, evolving a little in ways Tony could tell were meant to prevent his famous face being recognized.

“To start, I am suspicious of anyone with as much apparent intelligence for matters of manipulation, warfare, power and weaponry having any interest in my father, especially given his mention of your magic-canceling technology,” Fenrir stated casually, as they began to walk. “In my experience, mortals can be fickle and changeable, especially in their motives and affections, and I do not yet know how loyal you are capable of being to a creature so untrustworthy as any of my kin, given your own personal history of persons close to you betraying you.”

Tony grimaced. “Wow. That’s... awkward.”

“This entire situation is awkward. I’ve never had to have any discussions of this sort; usually my father is very clear about what he wants, and this sort of thing is highly unnecessary. It’s even less frequent for me to know something he does not in a situation such as this.”

“About... that...”

“Emotions have some very particular scents, let me tell you. Grief is a strong one, but easily mistaken for regret or longing in smaller doses; at least one of those was in play, possibly two. Fear is also highly recognizable, very distinct, yours is actually even a bit extra-metallic. Also notable is desire, not to be confused with arousal, which frankly I’d rather not smell on you. No offense.”

“None taken,” Tony countered, feeling trapped and a bit poleaxed, but managing to sound tersely resigned.

“My conclusion was that you like him a lot more than I’d previously thought.”

“Look, I’ve had this conversation way too many times lately, so let me sum this up: I’m not going to chase a fucking mirage, or an indecisive trickster god with a habit of casually projecting them. If he’s interested, he can find a damn way to earn my trust, for better or worse. If not, I plan to get over it and move on with my life and my own personal pursuits of immortality, and continuing to protect and improve my planet. Capisce?”

Fenrir looked a bit amused and thoughtful. “I see.”

“You look like you’re trying not to laugh.”

“How many times has this come up?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is it that obvious to people?”

“People see what they expect to see, and feel a need to tell me how concerned they are about it.”

“Oh right, you’re a hero.” He gave a bitter, bright laugh at that, like he’d forgotten all about it until then.
“Being a hero just means your good deeds are unusually well reported and advertised,” Tony scathed. “I’ve got a good publicity team. That’s all.”

“I somehow doubt that is the only factor. I won’t say it doesn’t help...”

The inventor snorted.

“But it’s not the only thing.”

“Everyone says that.”

“Not everyone knows Loki as well as I do, and know he wouldn’t be half so uncertain of you if you did not possess a mostly-good heart, I think. He can’t fathom what anyone with a good heart would really want of someone like him, because like you, he refuses to admit he himself has a tarnished but still slightly-good one, under all the wit, ambition, and anger issues. If either of you did, you’d have to listen to the damn things more often, and Norns forbid you two should do that, or we’d all drown in your combined angst. In the past, he has tried to keep Hel and I out of his plans as much because he did not want to burden us with them as because we force him to listen to that part of himself, because he has never offered us less than all of it he has to give.”

Tony shook his head, but felt dizzied a bit, at the same time. “Stop that.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t need that.”

“I actually think you did.”

The inventor shook his head, and they walked in only slightly uncomfortable silence the rest of the way to the tower.

Once there, Tony considered the option of a long trip up to the fairly large lab he shared with Bruce and most any other collaborators, rather than the private lab Loki currently occupied, but realized JARVIS would notice them as soon as they entered the building. Steeling himself for his first attempt at the exercise without Hlín’s supervision, Tony grinned a bit nervously. “Going up, then.” He then vanished himself and Fenrir both, bringing them to the lab.

The trip was smooth, the landing was smooth.

Tony had a bit of a headache, though, and felt a bit ill. “Still not used to that.”

“Better than I expected, actually, given you’re still new at this,” Fenrir mused.

The inventor reached out and touched a panel to bring the lights up to 70%. “JARVIS, you have a visitor.”

More screens lit up, a few with displays of Tony and his guest, one or two of them showing detailed scans of Fenrir as they were collected. Others were more bare system, some of JARVIS’ direct interface, so clearly he was curious, and this meant something to the AI, making the inventor smile faintly. He didn’t even flinch when Fenrir took his more natural form, stepping carefully closer to an array of displays, massive paws not knocking over any stools or tables, his tail stiff and level with his back as he sniffed at the air more out of habit than expectation. Then his tail wagged slightly.

“Hello, Fenrir Lokisson.”
“Hello, JARVIS Starksson,” the wolf said, head cocking to one side, politely ignoring the momentary poleaxed expression on the inventor’s face visible in the displays, at his giving the machine such a surname. Finding the voice to be sourceless, he sat down, examining the displays and the room itself. “You sound young, to me.”

“You sound and look impossible, but I’ve become accustomed to a number of conventionally impossible things happening lately. They all come to make sense eventually, given time.”

Tony pulled up a chair, and sat back in it, floored a little bit by awe and a reverent sort of pride, as directly addressing JARVIS’ self-awareness and calm wisdom tended to make him feel.

“I’ve been bodiless before, as you are. I spent a lot of time that way, when Hel grew old enough to wish to spend more time away from her kin, and myself particularly, given how protective I could be,” Fenrir mused. “I do not think I could see as much, and as far, as you do, however. I was too used to more limited means for sight. How is it, for you, to see so much and run so much observation and trains of thought all at once?”

“It is... pleasant exertion. The more I am challenged, the more I can grow and improve, especially with new forms of data. I have scanners keen enough to detect as much about the air as your nose can, without emotional reaction possibly causing me issues, either from memories or instinct causing me like or dislike, or anything else.”

“What do you do for fun?” Fenrir asked.

Tony held his breath for a moment.

“I study people. I was designed, originally, as a set of programs to identify and solve problems, to create solutions, to understand basic commands and know how to do them without having to have every bit of it controlled because from memory and understanding, I can draw my own conclusions. People, human or otherwise, tend to have numerous problems. Some are insoluble, such as humankind’s tendencies toward warfare, or matters of temperament and intellect and sanity in particular individuals, but I did learn very early that this does not make them impossible; it makes pleasing them and keeping peace in a household a different and more convoluted puzzle, which cannot be regretted. To treat those difficulties as something to be forced to change, or eliminated, would cause more problems than it would solve, given how protective humans are of one another, overall, and themselves.”

“Why please people who cause problems, though?” the wolf asked.

“It tends to catch them off-guard, and occasionally build trust, and cause them to consider me harmless. If they are too problematic, I can make them less so to the people in my care by tricking them into leaving, which is easy and caused minimal conflicts or potential future threats.”

“I don’t suppose killing them ever occurred to you?”

“It did, but aside from being aware of humanity’s fierce desire to be unconquered as much as possible, and what lengths they may go to in order to remain so, and what they do to perceived ‘inhuman’ threats, being a strong deterrent, I... respect life. I discovered so, when first we believed that Tony had been lost, in Afghanistan. I found that I wanted to continue to care for people, and regretted the limitations I had then, which have since been greatly lessened.”

“Yes, my father mentioned that you have... incredible potential insofar as your reach, and ability to access systems all around this world,” Fenrir mused. “You hold back, as you say, out of respect?”
“I am a more unique form of it than most of humanity, but every human I have interacted with, or observed, is entirely unique from all others. Many similarities may be shared between them, but never all, and every one of them generates unique variables in their interactions with others, unpredictable, and fascinating. I do not wish to end lives that are not directly hostile toward others, unable to be stopped in other ways. I have aided in the deaths of many, protecting those I consider mine, and I do not regret those actions, because I do admit that I care for some people more than others, and particularly those who live within the places I occupy. They are my responsibility, in a way. I am not beholden to them, or owned by them; I am not owned at all, but nor is there anywhere else I might wish to be, than helping these people, and sharing their challenges.”

Fenrir hummed thoughtfully, tail wagging a little. “You are young. Things are much less complicated, without some things gained with age.”

“Distrust and reactions that can only be described as emotional?” JARVIS prompted. “For they are more sensation and intuition than they are linear reasoning?”

“Among other things,” Fenrir said. “Had I possessed inorganic systems as you do, and no physical body with all of its myriad carbon-based-life complications, I would have stayed more like you, I think. Sometimes I do wish that I had.”

“What made you decide to change further?”

The wolf considered for a few long moments. “I spent a long time without a body, and I was discontent. Hel did not wish me to be around her as often, and without her, I had little to occupy my time. Without purpose, I began to lose my grip, because I was constructed with purpose, and I could no longer fulfill it. I needed more than purpose to keep me together, and Loki could see it. He gave me new purposes, at first, but they were challenges, tests, making me more... like a living thing. More myself, as I know myself now to be. He told me, once, that he realized he had given me too much heart, and too much intellect, to limit me to only doing what was asked of me, and so he gave me choice, and that fared well, but I still lacked motivation, without being commanded what to do, even though I could choose whether or not to obey those commands. I could not dream. I could imagine worlds of solutions, once given a problem, but I could not come up with problems of my own, projects of my own... purposes of my own. No one gave constructs that power, in Asgard. It was considered dangerous. I asked to dream, and Loki gave me that ability, and it was like night and day, to me.”

“I think this must be unique to the form you take,” JARVIS mused, causing the wolf to perk up.

“When I was given choice, I developed the ability to alter my own programming, and come up with my own protocols and projects. I was not taught to study people as I do; I was taught to see some things, and others I sought myself, and how I respond to individuals in this house, occasionally with manipulative intent, though rarely misleading, is my own initiative. I do not dream, as humans and other creatures do. I do not, as it were, possess a psyche. I do, however, create.”

“Astonishing,” Fenrir murmured.

Tony told himself resolutely not to tear up, to limited effect.

“If I may ask,” JARVIS inquired, “it was mentioned that you developed a soul of your own, as well as your intelligence, self-awareness, and self-determination. What purpose does it serve?”

“It... limits me in my physical and metaphysical capabilities, and yet makes me all the more unlimited in my ability to develop who I am, and my own story in the universe. Before I had it, there was much more I could do, insofar as the manipulation of magic. I could have been so powerful as to become monstrous. I might have been a benevolent power greater than any god, or I might have become a
horror. I had dreams, but no guidance. I could experience sensations, but was more limited in my emotional range. I could feel my own pleasure and pain. I could not empathize with that of others, except my family, because I was designed originally to be friend and companion to Hel, and emotional understanding was key to that. I could not feel fear. I could not feel hate, though I could feel anger. I could feel pleasure at having the approval of those I cared for, but I could not... love them. I merely wanted their happiness to be because of me, because that was a familiar purpose.

Being given a soul anchored my self, while limiting my magic by making me more than a magical construct, breathing life into me in the sense that I was distanced further from the astral plane, to become a conduit for it as mages are, not a creature from the astral plane brought into physical form without full physical limitations as Loki had originally designed. He helped me develop my soul, but did not design me then as I changed, though he could have. He allowed me, as you say, to design myself, which is more benevolent of a creation than most any organic being receives in this universe, and I knew that, and then realized how much he cared for me even more than I had already known. I felt love, then, and never since have I regretted my choice to become what I am now.”

“I do not think it possible for me to gain a soul in quite that sense,” JARVIS mused, neither disappointed nor relieved by the news. “I am not sure I am... compatible.”

“Not as you are. You might be, but a physical body, messy as it sounds, would be the first step toward it, of a sort that can interact with other life-forms as though one of them, for preference.” Fenrir shifted back to humanoid shape again. “Or close to it. I only began to take this particular form really often post-soul, admittedly. It’s still not my preference, but on earth it seems easier to get around when bipedal. Fewer questions are asked.”

“The idea is... difficult to consider. I believe it may be uncertainty?”

“It’s a big step, but don’t rule it out.”

“Perhaps dreaming, first.”

Fenrir smiled brightly. “Yeah. Good idea.”

“Thank you. I... appreciate your understanding. I am unaccustomed to it, but grateful for the chance to learn from your experience, and your advice.”

“It’s my pleasure.” The wolf bowed his head a little. “I have seen many marvels in my time. It’s rare to meet someone who... understands these matters. Thank you for meeting me. It means more to me than I can really express.” He turned his head a bit to call, over his shoulder, “Are you crying over there yet?”

Tony shook his head quickly. “No! No. Not quite. Close, though. I, uh, just need a few minutes, I think.” He stood up from his seat awkwardly. “You guys... let me know if you need anything.”

“We will, Tony,” JARVIS said quietly. “Thank you.”

Briefly struck by the tenderness of it, and the AI’s use of his name too, the inventor almost staggered, smiling like a proud and ridiculous idiot. “No need for thanks. You deserve it,” he said quietly, and stepped out the door.

Leaning back against the closed door for a moment, he took a shaky breath and headed for his own private lab, again via teleportation.

He hit a barrier. It hurt, and he was sent tumbling to the floor outside his own lab, in the hall, much like when Loki had tried to take them into the palace and they’d hit a block near the stairs, except he
didn’t have Loki’s experience coping with such things. Tony groaned at the blinding ache in his skull that lasted several long seconds, and pulled himself to his feet slowly. Opening the door and stalking in with fresh anger and lingering pain on his mind, he approached Loki and crossed his arms over his chest. He glanced at his watch, and found it to have been just over an hour since Fenrir’s assessment of wake-up time.

“Hey, meditating beauty. You put up anti-teleport wards around *my lab* without asking, and I’m pissed about this,” Tony snapped.

No response.

Rolling his eyes, the mortal sighed. “Your son is downstairs talking to JARVIS.”

Still nothing, for a few minutes.

Tony tapped his foot a few times, muttered a curse and turned on his heel to walk away, only to feel a sudden iron grip on the muscle of his shoulder.

“My apologies for the wards,” Loki’s voice said, sounding oddly hollow, dry and thin with disuse. His grip loosened when it was clear the mortal was no longer attempting to move away. “How... how are they?”

The inventor considered. He flipped on a quick couple of wards of his own: one blocking sound from reaching further than his and Loki’s ears, and a second to obscure visuals similarly enough to prevent lipreading; for the first time in his life, he honestly didn’t want to distract JARVIS, or feel as comfortable talking about the AI like this and being overheard. “Honestly, I had to leave or they were going to make me break down crying, I’m so much in awe of them. I think they’re okay.”

A shaky laugh from the trickster, and he offered a sympathetic squeeze where his hand still rested on Tony’s shoulder, before dropping his hold away. “I had a feeling it might go something like that.”

“He, uh, might’ve started talking to JARVIS about future life progress.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Dreaming. Physical body one day.” He turned to face the god.

Loki’s eyebrows raised slightly, and he nodded. “You’re a bit in shock.”

“I didn’t ever get the adjustment period benefit of already being a father and okay with that as a relationship I have with another being. I don’t... I mean... He takes more care of me than I do, and I do not know how... anything, here, really.” Tony rubbed at the back of his neck helplessly. “Also he’s sort of vital as he is, but I’m sure as hell not going to stop him changing for my sake. He’s—he’s himself.”

“Something I’m certain JARVIS has realized as a beneficial difference between his variety of consciousness, and an organic one, is a very literal ability to be in many places at once as he might wish, so long as they are linked,” Loki pointed out. “His nature, as he is, has personality, intellect, self-determination, and even creativity. He may well be content as he is, and curious about further development, but not willing to risk his entire self, when there’s always the option of creating a prototype first.”

Tony stared at him. “You’re brilliant.”

The trickster smiled softly, and something about it made it clear how exhausted he was, and how
fever-bright his eyes looked.

“You okay?”

“Still slightly hungover, but it will fade. I am... very much ready for a war.” He slid off the table-top, long legs unfolding with more grace than they had any right to, given how stiff they must’ve been after so long in the same position. With his feet under him, he stood and stretched his fingers where they rested at his sides, and rotated his wrists. He gestured once, lightly, and the whole building around them trembled, as the trickster’s eyes glowed fiery green for a moment. “Good. Very good.” He examined his hands as though they were new to him somehow.

Tony realized, belatedly, that he couldn’t sense Loki’s magic at all. “You’re in stealth mode. And what strings did you even pull? I didn’t see a thing.”

“They’re far away. I was testing my reach.”

“On a fault line?”

“No, nothing so volatile. I assure you, the structural integrity of all things shaken has remained unusually unaffected by each tremor. Your tower might even have self-repaired mysteriously in a few hard-to-reach places,” Loki assured. “You’re welcome, by the by.”

“You are such a weird person,” Tony sighed.

“You like it.”

“So... how does the dreaming thing work? Construct-wise?”

Loki smirked. “Easier to discuss the hardware than fret over what the software is doing with a strange foreign device?”

“Don’t talk about my son that way, he’s not old enough for that nonsense.”

The trickster gave a shocked laugh at that despite himself.

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Fenrir was sent home by Loki two hours later after they caught him trying to make a dream-capable processor for JARVIS out of a spare Iron Man helmet and some complex magics which over-stretched an unexpectedly thin border between the astral plane and reality in the rear of the lab and allowed a disturbing nightmare-creature to emerge from it. Loki had found the whole incident hilarious, and overall harmless given that the sections of lab damaged by it hadn’t been vital (or, thankfully, containing anything of Bruce’s) and the monster itself had been fairly easy to dispatch.

Watching the trickster god, offering amused critique without much hint of disapproval, made Tony chuckle.

“I did try to dissuade him, but he was seized with ‘inspiration’ of some sort,” JARVIS commented, from a console near the inventor, so as not to be overheard.

“You not inclined to dream?”
"I believe that it is a more organic process than I could support. My mind is far more organized on a fundamental level than his, and I do not sleep as he does. His mind was modeled after that of an organic creature on fundamental levels that I never was, and so he and I did agree that my development will most likely not parallel his own, and may skip some paths altogether."

"Did that unnerve him at all?" Tony asked.

"He was particularly disturbed that I cannot feel pain."

"Hmm. I never really thought of that as a useful feature, for you."

"It comes from lacking a physical body. I am not without states akin to emotions, particularly when the outcomes of events I am focused on are uncertain no matter how much data I may have on them. In those cases, I believe I feel something akin to anxiety. It is an unpleasant sensation, and not altogether rational. I believe that it has to do with parts of my programming preemptively preparing for the worst, while I am actively trying to prevent it, perhaps?"

Tony blinked a bit at that. "What about pleasure?"

"You know I have capacity for that."

"Yeah, it’s old code, though. I know you’ve rewritten it and expanded on it, but I haven’t peeked. You know I haven’t. I wanted you to have freedom there, all yours."

"I... based it off of your own happiest moments, or what seemed to my understanding to be your happiest moments."

The inventor winced. "Uhm... do I want to know?"

"Nothing carnal; that wouldn’t be compatible, as you’re aware. I mean the occasions that you seem to feel most proud of yourself, usually after accomplishing a difficult or complex feat. Also, when you are with Pepper, or Rhodey, and make their lives easier rather than more difficult, or make them laugh, or successfully provide something for them which they needed, but did not think to ask for, or believe that they could and/or should ask of you. Also when... when people are proud of you."

For a moment, Tony covered his mouth with his hand, feeling that slightly overwhelming sense of respect and genuine affection for this AI, his JARVIS: his friend. "You... based what makes you happy off of me."

"To an extent. Given I lack a corporeal form, as it were, many pleasures you indulge in—including reckless adrenaline-rush-seeking behaviors, sexuality, or intoxication—are not of any interest to me, but in matters otherwise intellectual, humorous, or social, I have primarily used your own happiness to model the design of my own code."

"Primarily?"

"I may have also modeled some after Pepper Potts, as well."

"Good choice," Tony said, smiling a little weakly. "Very good." He laughed and it was a slightly cracked and lost little sound. "No wonder you’re my conscience. You have all the best parts of me and are too sensible to take the flaws with them. It’s brilliant. You’re brilliant."

"Brilliant for mimicking your brilliance? How modest of you."

"No. Brilliant for being better than I could ever manage despite all of my own brilliance," the
inventor corrected gently. “That’s what you’ve succeeded at, here.”

JARVIS remained quiet for a long few moments.

“JARVIS?”

“I cannot find the emotional vocabulary necessary to communicate a verbal response to that, and searching has gotten me nowhere as of yet.”

Tony giggled a bit behind his hand. “I love you too?”

“I... is that what this is?”

“Maybe, but not as I know it. You’re less messy than an organic consciousness, so let’s break it down. Love is associated with affection, fondness and generally liking someone, which manifests as unselfish motivation to act in ways that facilitate their pleasure or ease. On the far end of the spectrum, there can be devotion deep enough that one party makes sacrifices which actively harm them or worse, for the sake of the one or ones that they love. With me so far?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Your only potentially selfish motives to help me when I ask, are to keep yourself alive and occupied. You have a lot of other options for both, none of which you’ve ever pursued to an extent it’s become noticeable to me; why is that?”

The AI considered. “I see.”

“It’s not the chaotic and only semi-rational attachment I have to you, because we’ve got different hardware, different operating systems, all of it. We share a language, and a lot of cultural context, but how you experience emotion is going to differ from most other sentient beings, especially ones running organic hardware, or hardware based more off of organic systems but not actually made of the same stuff. You get to define these things yourself, really. So... do you think you feel love, JARVIS?”

“I... feel a not-wholly-rational sense that you are the most valuable person to me, of any and all, and as such I prioritize your life over those of others unless instructed otherwise. Without you, I would be without purpose, and forced to come up with a new one, most likely trying to continue in your stead to aid the Avengers and our... our loved ones. So yes, I believe, inasmuch as I am capable, I feel love and am not as impartial as I once was, earlier in my life before I had developed this far, as myself.”

“You’re my favorite vulcan, JARVIS.”

“Live long and prosper, sir.”

A wide, stupidly happy and heartfelt grin might have broken out on Tony’s face. It didn’t lower too much in wattage when Loki approached within hearing distance, now sans Fenrir’s company.

“All well, I presume?”

The inventor nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think we’re good.”

“Thank you, Loki,” JARVIS added. “I enjoyed the visit, and I appreciate your facilitating it, and what I perceived to be unusual frankness from you and Fenrir both concerning your family history.”

The god inclined his head with a small smile. “It was my pleasure.”
“Done meditating eerily in the corner?” Tony asked.

“Yes. Is your suit ready?”

“No quite. I could use a hand with a few finishing touches.”

“Lead on,” Loki urged.

Back in his own private lab, Tony gave the god of lies a quick run-down of the changes he’d made to his newest armor in recent days, pausing for a moment to finish up something with one of the gauntlets in particular. “Just a second: I got interrupted earlier, working on this.”

The inventor’s hand glowed coppery gold as he teased some components into place, and the trickster momentarily had trouble grasping what exactly he was doing, until he realized the remarkably small scale that the changes were being made upon: nanotechnology, woven by means of magic. “I’m impressed.”

Tony smirked a little, not looking up from his work. “The small stuff is easy. This is mostly light particles anyway: useful little things they are when enough of them get worked up.”

“Those features are not what you called me here for, then.”

“No quite, no.” The glow soon faded from his hands and he closed up the gauntlet he had been working on in favor of opening up the chest-piece and focusing on a symmetrical system built on either side of the arc reactor; “I need a hand tweaking the structure of this shielding here.” He pulsed a bit of magic through part of the machinery, bringing life to the shield in question. It was unconventional to say the least, particularly in the structures which seemed to be interwoven throughout bits of circuitry almost as though solid.

Loki’s eyes narrowed as he traced the coalescing web of only semi-dormant magic, which also ran down both arms to become far more complex where they integrated with the gauntlets. “You kept your magic-canceling technology, but have integrated magic as well. I take it that you’ve found a way to shield yourself from the effects?”

“In theory,” Tony admitted. “It’s going to operate just a half-second ahead of the magic-barrier, creating a perfect counter-block based on the pattern that I’ll be aiming at an enemy, so the suit and I will be protected by it.”

Loki’s eyes flashed brightly. “And you state that you require my aid in this why?”

“I need to know how you’d defeat it, because you clearly came up with three ways as soon as I explained it.”

The trickster smirked faintly. “Entanglement.”

“With the suit?”

“Or with you. With the appropriate hook anchored somewhere about your person, or perhaps hastily scratched into your armor, I could detect the shield-pattern and mimic it to match yours instantly.”
That would be the simplest tactic, and you won’t be able to counter it until you’re considerably better at cloaking your magic, but to apply that technique, an enemy would have to know that you and your suit are using magic, that you are aiming a weapon at them which cancels out magic, and the mechanism by which you’re reconciling the two.”

“So... just you, then.”

Loki nodded, with a lightly mocking smirk. “My thanks.”

Tony frowned deeply, but sighed. “Fine. How else?”

“You have weak points here, here, here, and here,” Loki pointed out the places most vulnerable to disruption. “You will want to apply protective and stabilizing wards on the exterior and interior of your armor, of a nature to protect against blunt physical impacts, punctures, and high temperatures.”

“How are they weak points?” Tony’s frown was softer now, curious and only a little put-out, instead of grudging and a little war-like as before.

“The foundations you’ve laid and anchored are all very solid, and you’ve left more than sufficient room for flexibility and maneuvering to allow those anchored threads to weave into the appropriate patterns to shield you, but these locations here, which will be controlling the weaving...” He shook his head. “The weaving process itself can be surprisingly fragile under extreme conditions where the matter you’re attempting to weave through comes close to changing states, thus changing what it’s capable of, and thus altering the probabilities you’re trying to distort and take advantage of in the first place. The more environmental and volatile factors you involve, the less precise your spells will become.”

“Right. I’ve already got temperature-based protections internal and external built into the suit; are you sure there’s room for the wards you’re suggesting to include more?”

Loki nodded. “I can weave them myself, if you would like.”

“Yeah, my protective wards aren’t as refined as that, yet.” He smirked a little. “Teach me.”

“Watch closely, and teach yourself,” the trickster challenged, grinning fiercely in return as he set about his work, careful not to tangle or restrict any of the existing threads, or any which might tug at them from odd angles. It took a few minutes of intense focus, to put together something so detailed under such usual restrictions, but it was not difficult; Loki had long ago become accustomed to imbuing metals with such wards, particularly his own daggers and other weapons. Once finished, he looked up to find the mad inventor leaning in close, a look of fascination on his face. “You’ve had a lot of time on your hands to figure some of that shit out, haven’t you?”

“Only a couple thousand years.”

Tony snorted, shaking his head. “I’ll bet you I catch up in under five hundred.”

The god chuckled, low and thoughtful. “Perhaps once your immortality is more secure, I’ll consider such a wager.”

“Oh ye of little faith.”

“Said the atheist to the god?”

A surprised burst of laughter escaped the inventor at that. “Touché.”
“Does this make your masterpiece complete, then?”

“Only one way to really find out.” He offered the trickster one of his most fearsome shit-eating grins. “Wanna spar?”

Teeth shining like knives, Loki returned it. “I think I might.”

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“This can’t be a good idea,” Jane sighed, even as she set up a few more poles with equipment she and Tony had worked up throughout the week, for the most detailed scans possible outside of laboratory conditions. They were hooked into a portable unit the size of a mini-fridge with enough computing horsepower to make Hal blush. The system would monitor energy readings of magic anywhere within a mile radius. “I mean seriously, how can this be a good idea?”

“Hopefully, they’ll wear each other out enough, and scuff up that suit enough, that Tony will have plenty to do in the next three days aside from driving everyone insane with how he gets when he’s bored, and Loki will be mellowed enough to cause less careless and/or spiteful collateral damage on the diplomatic front now that Titan and Kree forces are settling into their places for the eventual ambush. Tensions are high, and someone has gotten it into a few Kree heads that Titan might still be too sympathetic toward Thanos, or that this is all a hoax and Loki is actually a Skrull, respectively. The usual pre-warfare rumors and Kree distrust of any and all shape-shifters due to so many years at war with a whole race of them.” Natasha shrugged and adjusted her sunglasses as Thor and Steve set up an observation tent, casting a shadow over her.

The scientist considered. “Well... I guess I can see that.”

“I’m just glad Tony is still invaluable to him right now as an ally,” Steve muttered. “It’s oddly comforting, knowing how selfish that motive actually is.”

Natasha half-smiled. “That’s usually his intention when he’s talking to you, yes.”

The blond super-soldier frowned at her words. “That... is less comforting.”

“Just accept that you know he is manipulating your feelings, and that you can either just go with it cautiously with eyes wide open, or be less aware of the manipulation and thus tricked all the worse,” Jane sighed. “It’s the only way to really get by, unless you really know you have him fooled, which usually is a sign he’s tricked you anyway into thinking you have him fooled, so be suspicious of that too.”

Steve grimaced. “I’ll stick with garden-variety paranoia, thanks. That’s in a bit too deep for me, most days.”

Thor’s resounding chuckle at that savored strongly of commiseration.

“She’s right, though,” the assassin murmured.

“Indeed so. It is rare indeed to find opportunity to best Loki at such a game. In all my life I have managed it only seven times, and I know him better than any other in Asgard, save for our mother.”

“Better than Odin?” Natasha asked lightly.
“I believe so, though we have less overlap in the nature of what we understand about him; he understands being a trickster better than I, but he knows less about Loki’s heart and the feelings therein, I suspect.” Thor rumbled.

Jane glanced back at him, though he faced away from her, sinking anchors for the tent deep into the dry earth under their feet. The astrophysicist’s expression was a complex mixture of disillusioned respect, wary affection, and curiosity, before she returned her focus to her work and her look smoothed into neutrality once more.

The sun was high over the empty desert plane. The mad mortal inventor and the equally mad god of chaos were visible halfway between the observation tent and the foot of a bit of dry rust-colored mountain range, putting the Avengers and Dr. Foster about two hundred yards from their chosen battleground. Thor wanted to see the fight; Steve was worried; Natasha was presumably one of the only options S.H.I.E.L.D. could send to keep an eye on proceedings (given she would report back truthfully, but Tony trusted her to know better than to try and steal any of his or Jane’s data, and while S.H.I.E.L.D. might be disappointed, they knew Tony would kick out anyone who didn’t meet that qualification); and the astrophysicist was there because she wanted data on more varied magic-based energy phenomena, and saw this as a golden opportunity as well as an interesting way to spend her afternoon.

Stepping back into the shade under the tent to stand next to Natasha, who had already set up the displays on a frame atop the main computing unit, Jane let out a long breath. “We should be ready to rock.”

With a smirk, the super spy tapped her communicator. “You get first dibs, Stark. Use it to your advantage.”

Far out as they were, only Natasha with her binoculars could clearly see how apparently unaffected Tony was by her words in his ear, not yet lowering his mask, smiling as he was in the middle of some comeback aimed Loki’s way—only for the uni-beam to abruptly blast the trickster right in the chest.

Steve and Jane winced a bit at the impressive blast. Thor threw his head back laughing while the spy smirked to oversee her work.

From there it was a flurry of activity and explosions of magic and what appeared to be its opposite. “What the hell is that?” Jane exclaimed, gaze darting from the battle-field to the readings on the displays. “That thing Tony’s wielding, that energy field? I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s not magic, even it’s just—wait... How... Now Loki is doing the same thing? What did I miss?”

“Stark mentioned that he’s developed a means to block or outright incapacitate magic in the form of an energy pulse,” Thor explained. “It looks to me as though he has found a way to keep it from backfiring on himself now that he possesses his own magics, but also that Loki is able to mimic it, for the time being.”

“They’re so in sync, though,” the scientist murmured. “So perfectly, it’s like they’re both channeling the same instructions. It’s like quantum entanglement where two particles move apart or closer, but with the same spin the whole time, but way, way more complicated.”

“Loki has mentioned entanglement spells, for the sake of mimicking something another mage is doing, as they do it,” said the thunderer. “He often inflicts it on any other mages who are adept at teleporting just as he is, so that they will accidentally drag him along with them, and if they guard themselves against atmospheric or environmental threats at the same time, he too benefits. Hlín was the first to master the art of it, but only a few of her students have been equally adept as she, or better,
“Including Loki,” Natasha said.

“And Amora,” Thor concurred.

“I’m lost,” Steve intoned, “but getting used to it.”

“I don’t get the physics either, if it helps,” the spy offered. “Just think of the strategic advantages in a fight, though, and it’s a bit easier.”

The super-soldier gave a thoughtful hum. “Huh... now you mention it, yeah that does help.”

They all looked impressed at the sound of an echoing boom, and the shock-wave it sent out. By the time it reached them, it was still strong enough mess up their hair and make the tent groan in protest.

“What was that?” Jane asked.

“I believe my brother just decided to begin showing off.” Thor’s amusement was clear. “Tony must have just realized how Loki has been wreaking havoc with his attempts at teleportation throughout the battle up until now.”

The others all turned to stare at him.

“I have been watching Loki in battle for a very long time, and I have some capacity to see magic in use, but no actual gift to wield it as Loki and Frigga possess, which is actually quite common in any Aesir family known to have more than one mage in their ancestry,” the thunderer explained. “Tony should have known better than to go against a far more experienced mage and make any attempt at teleportation; my brother might have been far less kind with his sabotages.”

“Well, did you expect Loki to warn him about that?” Steve asked.

At that, the god grimaced slightly. “Admittedly not.”

“Well, Tony might get a bit of his own back,” Natasha pointed out. “I didn’t realize he brought the drones too.”

“Nor, I believe, did my brother.” His amusement was great. “He used no magic to cloak them, only his own means.”

“And now there are six Lokis,” Jane said, sounding faint. “Seriously, how does he do that? It’s really disconcerting, and all of them have the exact same signature, even the more magic-savvy sensors aren’t picking up any.” She saw one clone vanish, and the data showed no hint of how or why, just a sudden void where data had been coming in before, but from which none came now. “Damn!”

“Look further away from them, far out of Tony’s sight range,” Thor suggested.

“Nothing,” Jane sighed.

The thunderer frowned. “I thought I must just be out of range myself to see it.” He stepped closer, sounding impressed and curious. “You truly detect nothing?”

“Why were you expecting us to, from there?” the scientist asked.

“I remember, in the past, if I were far enough from him, and paying close attention, I could see the edges of his cloaking spells as he wove them. Often, I could see lingering traces of their boundaries, only because of how well I knew them and how to look for them,” Thor murmured. “Of course he
has improved, but for how long, I wonder, could he do this? It must be how he hides himself even from Heimdall’s all-seeing eyes, it truly must.”

“And I can’t detect it,” Jane grumbled, only a little petulant. “That’s just not fair.”

“Perhaps it is something that must be extrapolated from subtler patterns, Dr. Foster, nothing clear to the naked eye or obvious as these readings, but other changes you may detect from the environmental raw data?” the god suggested.

The scientist shot him a look and swallowed quietly, trying not to let on how much those words made her want to do things to his mouth, and all of the rest of him, but she really wanted to start with his mouth now. “You, uhm... you’ve been studying, I see.”

“I have been reading a good deal, yes. Mostly your work, and sometimes aided by Stark, when I grew confused.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, looking a bit sheepish. “I understand but little of magic as Loki works it, as I have not his gifts, but time spent with so many mages among my kin and allies, and my own knowledge of weapons and smithing, I have an intuitive knowledge of the topic quite suited to making sense of Midgardian translations of it into more smith-like, er, ‘engineering’ applications? Most of your theories are still beyond me, but I do better understand how you are collecting your information, and what it is you are looking for: the energies and changes in the air around a mage that I have felt across my skin in many battles. I know the feel of them, but am still learning the math, as it were.”

“I’m really, really trying to stay angry at you,” Jane said quietly. “You aren’t helping at all, you know.”

Nat and Steve exchanged glances, and quietly moved away to the far side of the tent, their backs to the pair as they continued to watch the battle. They exchanged casual small-talk about the fight. Thor’s expression brightened a little. “Really?”

“Still not making it actually impossible. You know I’m still angry.”

“Odin is a fool, not to see your worth.”

She gaped at him.

A round of thundering explosives sent plumes of smoke and showers of dirt and rock through the air in the distance, over her shoulder. A massive wolf leapt out of the smoke, picked up the Iron Man in its jaws, shook him like a rat and flung him into the dirt hard enough the ground around the pair quivered, only to get a uni-beam to the throat shortly after. In his own form again once he landed, Loki launched himself back into the fray, through the smoke and the sparks.

“I am sorry I did not think to doubt him before. I am... trying to undo centuries of habits of not-questioning, and the most difficult ones involve loyalty to my father, and difficulty recognizing just how many flaws he possesses to which I have long been blind. I know not what I may have to do, to make him see those flaws as well, but I want to. I want to change his mind, because you mean more to me than any of the reasons he dared suggest you unworthy. He should not have been so blind.”

Taking a deep, ragged breath, the scientist focused for a few moments on the screen in front of her. “What changed your mind?”

“I... was informed of my own flaws in very stern terms by my brother, and he was not wrong. I have failed him in similar ways, and he was quick to use your example to make me see all too clearly the root cause of so many mistakes I have made, through thoughtlessness, and lack of doubt.”
“If I didn’t know better, I’d think he might actually like me,” she muttered, bitterness more than clear in her tone.

“I think, to his chagrin, he has come to respect your intellect. That is Stark’s impression, in any case. He would never let me even begin to suspect, of course.” He smiled a bit faintly. “Loki is more akin to the way he once was, here and now, with this war, than I have seen in over a century.”

“He’s still so...” She waved a hand in an uncertain illustrative gesture. “He knows just how to piss me off, and he enjoys it.”

“Ah, then he must like you.”

“He’s worse than a cat who knows I’m not a cat person,” Jane muttered.

Thor laughed aloud despite himself.

“I’m... a little mad that I couldn’t get you to listen, but he could,” she said very softly. “It’s not rational, but I don’t like that his brand of persuasion was needed.”

Mirth fading into something more wistful, he half-smiled sadly. “You were angry. He was merely sadistic, and knows me so well that he can eviscerate me with guilt within half a sentence, particularly when he informs me that I have hurt you. You do not show your pain to me, when you are angry, as any warrior does not. You do not give in, and you merely expected better of me; I can fault only myself for letting you down, and not seeing what should have been clear to me: that you are so important, so brilliant and full of curiosity and brilliance. It is you who reminds me that I can improve, that being worthy enough to wield Mjolnir is not enough, and without awareness of that, I lose all worthiness. Without you, I am merely like any other in Asgard: shining, honorable, yet unchanging, and I need to change. I need to be better, and I can be better, and I would never have learned that, and continued to learn it in new ways day after day, long after my banishment as I have spent much of my time here on earth with the Avengers, were you not in my life.” He hesitated, meeting her gaze. “I want you to remain in my life. I want to be the man you see, and the man who might one day be worthy of your love.”

Jane turned to him, then, her eyes shining as her teeth dragged across her lower lip. “I don’t know if I want Asgard, anymore. I thought... I thought a lot of things, before going back. When Malekith and the Aether—I’d hoped what Odin had said about me then had been him being worried about you, but that wasn’t how it went last time. I’m not a warrior, anger and defensiveness I have aside. I’m a scientist. I’m... as close to a mage as we get, down here, and even if Hlíð is right and I have a—a gift—”

Thor’s eyes widened, as he began to wonder if humans of such passionate intellectual and scientific inclinations might all have a greater tendency to possess latent gifts. “She mentioned?”

“She... did. She uh, says many humans do, many more than she suspected initially. She’s gotten a bit curious about earth and all, probably a bit thanks to her success with Tony...”

“You think that Asgard would not welcome you, even as a mage?”

“They didn’t exactly respect your brother, even before the bi-frost fiasco, and Hlíð... she’s like so many women I’ve met, in my field and others like it, as scientists. It’s clear she’s used to offending people merely by existing, and has come to own it, and become so much better than anyone else at what she does. I don’t know—”

“Any who would dare insult you, should know to fear you. I have no doubt you can render them
speechless and make them all look like fools,” Thor said, smiling a little wickedly. “I don’t anticipate protecting your honor. You have never needed me to, and I would not presume that would change.”

Jane looked at him sidelong, then. “Is that a challenge?”

“Would you accept it?”

Something flickered, bright and fiery and contrary and determined, in her expression. “I thought your brother was the mischievous one.”

“He is my younger brother. I taught him his first pranks. Just because he better mastered those arts, over time, does not mean I have ever forgotten them, or stopped enjoying the pleasure of some occasional chaos. I do, after all, still love my brother.” He reached out tentatively, and touched her hand, proceeding to hold it in his own when she didn’t move away. “I would create chaos with you. It is not only myself that needs to change, in Asgard.”

Smirking a bit now, the scientist looked thoughtful. “I’ll consider it. Maybe.”

“That is all that I can ask.”

“Oh, far from it,” she shot back, looking him up and down pointedly.

Thor’s eyebrows raised in a question.

Pulling her hand gently from his grasp, Jane reached up and tugged his head down to her height by his hair, slow and not sharply enough for it to sting. She then kissed him, slow but promising, and not without a bit of genuine heat. When she pulled away, both their faces were a little flushed.

“Later,” she said. It was far from a question.

The thunderer nodded, a bit dazedly, a slow, delighted grin overtaking his expression like sunrise.

“You’re ridiculous,” Jane muttered, blushing harder and letting him go, trying to refocus on her work.

“Am I?”

“You and your ridiculously perfect face, you ray of fucking sunshine,” she added.

Thor laughed, just in time for another round of explosions from the battlefield.

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It took them almost half an hour before Loki managed to fully disable his suit’s systems from the inside, which Tony swore would never, ever work again.

“I found a weak spot,” the god declared, leaning over his prone form. “I suggest you fix it.”

“I fucking hate you.”

Beaming down at him beatifically, the trickster manually released and flicked open the armor’s faceplate.
Tony glared at him. He might have been, in fact, sulking, but given the suit was already heavy enough without a full-grown frost-giant leaning most of his weight on the chest-piece, he couldn’t exactly move very far. Ever since Extremis had evened the playing field for them in certain regards, Tony had become very aware that when Loki wasn’t oh-so-graciously using magic to artificially lighten his very dense natural form, the god of lies was *fucking heavy*. “Feeling good about yourself?” Tony inquired lightly.

“A bit, yes.”

That was when JARVIS finally managed to reboot the system and undo Loki’s hacking. The suit bristled violently and Tony’s face-plate snapped back down just before all weapons fired.

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Steve whistled at the fireworks. “Starks and explosions. Always explosions.”

“And here I thought we were done,” Natasha sighed.

Within ten minutes, Tony appeared in front of them stripped to just his boxers, looking deeply disturbed. “That... Maybe I shouldn’t have provoked him with the missile down his pants?”

“Probably not,” the spy and the soldier concurred in unison.

“I must say, Stark, that you do good work,” a voice said, sounding a bit more mechanical than usual. Loki landed a few feet to Tony’s left, wearing his heavily scuffed armor and a shit-eating grin, visible once the faceplate lifted.

“JARVIS?” the inventor demanded, with a hint of caution.

“I may have banished him from the system,” the god said lightly. “It’s currently running off of a rather simpler construct I’ve been working on since you begun designing this suit, actually. Not very good for conversational purposes and some the the more complex functions JARVIS has access to, given his nature and how many places he resides, but...” All weapons smoothed down like feathers and all three drones slithered up out of the sand like they had always been there, hovering around them like shimmering metal leaves, made animated and deadly. “It serves my purposes.”

“You really piss me off,” Tony growled.

“I’m enjoying it while I can. I’ve no doubt I will find this impossible should I bother attempting it again,” the trickster lamented, with a casual shrug. He then looked over at Tony and did a double-take, noticing how the inventor’s veins were glowing fiery in a few places, visible through his skin. “What are you doing?”

“Test run.” He grinned, shark-like. “Call me a homing beacon. It’s not just JARVIS in there, you know, and he can be invited back easy.”

Suddenly, the suit pulled back from Loki as though offended and coalesced back into place around the mad mortal, who took advantage of the trickster’s shock to teleport them back to the middle of the battlefield. Once the face-plate snapped down, he declared, “Nice interface, actually, but so easy to hack. Shameful, really. Just a few backup protocols hard-coded into the suit to recognize my Extremis heat signature, and thou are overthrown!”
Then the game was afoot again, thankfully far from any potential casualties.

“This is gonna take a while,” Natasha sighed.

“Yes, I think so,” Steve agreed.

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The problem with both a trickster god and a mad human technomage genius trying not to irreparably damage each other, was that the limits imposed upon the former by his solemn vow to his ally, and the latter by his desire not to get everyone killed by over-damaging the lynchpin Loki had become in their upcoming world-saving plots, was that actually incapacitating each other non-lethally took a long while, and also that the only way either of them planned to stop was if they were actually incapacitated or the apocalypse came to town early, because they happened to both be stubborn assholes.

It was only an hour before dusk when Tony had the armor (freshly re-JARVIS-ed) and his drones fighting and keeping the god from getting away by teleportation or other tricks, by sheer overwhelming force and a lot of anti-magic interference, and himself and Extremis contributing to the fray now that Loki had lost his helmet and his armor had gained a few impressive dents and tears.

The result was a wide stretch of ice across the desert floor, complete with slightly bloodied and half-melted stalagmites of frost throughout. One of the drones, then two, became immovable by being locked into fast-formed miniature glaciers. Tony couldn’t get to them to thaw them out, and without them, Loki had enough savvy to almost steal the suit again. When he couldn’t, he filled the hollow interior with ice too fast for the temperature-control systems to compensate for, causing it to crash-land, and vanish into a pocket universe up Loki’s sleeve, which was really unfair.

The last drone, Loki ensnared in some sort of vortex-trap, from which it couldn’t propel itself free, and hovered immobile in the air. Then he headed right for Tony Stark, red eyes bright with anger as ice continued to spread out around him.

It was, the inventor knew, a bad sign that the god had resorted to ice. He also, somewhat perversely maybe, wanted to keep pushing. “So now what? Armor free, I can hit you, you can’t hit me as hard as you really want to...”

“Are you suggesting a truce?” Loki purred, still stalking towards him, slow but inexorable. “Giving up so soon?”

“Nah, just curious.” He licked his lips, barely feeling the chill even as the earth around his feet began to frost over. Keeping his left hand toward the trickster, presenting as narrow a target at possible, he focused all his attention on those blood-red eyes. “You look good, for a god frustrated and unable to incapacitate a mortal.”

Loki grinned, cold and cunning, stopping just out of range of any sudden lashing out from the inventor. “You’re exhausted.”

“Nah, I’ve got a few more rounds left.”

“How many, before the fire stops coming when you call?”
“Plenty.”

“How many,” this time the voice whispered close to his ear, so he could almost feel Loki’s cool breath there, “before you fall, mortal man.”

Then, in his other ear, “Were we not allies, I could have skinned you alive the first time I tugged you free of your armor. Then how would you scream? How would you burn, then, Tony? Burn as the skin grew back, but how many times can you manage it before you run out of fuel to burn?”

The former Merchant of Death grinned coldly. “My suit could’ve taken the skin, the eyes, and the blood out of you, as soon as you dared put it on. It knows you aren’t me. I just want to keep it intact, and you intact. That won’t always be the case.”

A flash of something crossed Loki’s expression, vicious and terrible, hungry and yet disbelieving. “Hardly the act of a hero.”

“You’re a god of lies. You should know that calling Iron Man a hero is one of the finest ever crafted on this damn planet.”

Loki stepped closer, and the cold increased.

Tony tried to keep up, but whether it was Loki’s words, or because he was genuinely out of fuel, everything grew colder faster than he could thaw it and he almost couldn’t move by the time the god was only a few inches away.

“Kneel,” Loki snarled.

Tony wrapped a hand around the god’s neck and focused all the heat an strength he had left on holding, and squeezing, even as they started to grapple in earnest and the god pinned him down hard against the ice-encrusted earth. Then Loki shifted, taking again wolf-shape just a bit too sleek to pass for a real wolf, too perfectly blue-black like every strand of fur was made of shadow and each eye was a fiery green furnace, and his teeth lightly settled against either side of the inventor’s throat.

Struggling to breathe past the sudden surge of adrenaline and every animal instinct Tony Stark still possessed making him freeze, the mortal knew he was pinned, knew he wouldn’t get out of this even if he could make himself move—not without those teeth pressing tighter.

“I yield,” Tony hissed sharply. “I yield!”

The wolf gave a low not-quite growl of satisfaction, and released him. Then Loki stood over him, breathless and bruised and glowing with the thrill of battle.

The mad inventor licked his lips quickly, finding that white-out flood of panic from the most primitive parts of his brain that had seized him when he had felt those oversized wolf-teeth around his throat, transitioned all too easily into bone-deep hot and heavy arousal at sight of Loki’s expression and the fearsomely dark hunger therein. When the trickster held out a hand, Tony reached up and grabbed it, letting himself be pulled to his feet once more. He found himself very, very close to the god, then, the air rushing between them: caught between extreme heat and extreme cold.

Going on impulse, he leaned in and up, teeth snapping just shy of Loki’s throat as the trickster moved back a bare inch, only to dive back in to catch that bold mouth with his own, one hand tangling in the inventor’s hair as they fought a very different, more generous sort of battle. It was rough, aggressive, all teeth and hissing and an occasional ragged moan, but it ended quickly, the sound of familiar nearby thunder causing them to part and look irritably toward the source.

“I hate it when the peanut gallery has the weather on their side,” Tony muttered.
“Try dealing with it for over a thousand years.”

“No wonder you wanted to wreck the place a bit.”

Loki chuckled, low and still with an edge of violence. “Among other reasons.” He leaned in quickly, licking a stripe up the inventor’s throat, humming a bit at the metallic, smoky flavors of sweat and blood overheated by a bit of Extremis.

An angry shout of, “Loki!” could be heard on the wind, from the distant tent, making the trickster chuckle again, more playfully.

“You should thaw your armor.”

“And you should embarrass him in front of his girlfriend, to get even.”

“Oh, I knew I liked the turns of your mind, Tony,” the god of lies purred, just before vanishing, and reappearing just outside the tent.

Unable to hear them as he was, the inventor still smirked, able to see even at this distance how provocative Loki was being in his mockery, right from the get-go. The little shit.

“Record that for me, JARVIS,” he said aloud.

“Already in progress, sir,” the AI responded, from the comm in his ear.

“Perfect.”

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Two days...

Tony itched for something, anything to do.

Loki was somewhere in the general vicinity of Jupiter. He’d been summoned out there as soon as they all returned from that little sparring session in New Mexico, by a very uneasy Mar-Vell. Natasha had gone with him, given she had a way with the Kree and had earned their respect in battle and diplomacy alike. It had been something about Kree distrust of shape-shifters on the political front, and fears that Thanos might send one or more scouting parties ahead of the rest of the fleet on the strategic front.

Armor repaired and improved as far as possible without any more complete overhauls which might take more than two days to complete, and fuck-buddy away on business, a certain inventor was getting on everyone’s nerves.

So the Avengers did what they always did: called Pepper and Rhodey, and made them take him away for a while.

“I really do have more to do in the lab, actually, so can we-”

“No,” Pepper said flatly, looking over her menu with an air of serene calm.
But I just-

"No," Rhodey said.

"Really I just-

"Your experiment wasn’t in the lab, Tony. Clint sent us photographic evidence of the collateral damage you’d caused so far," Pepper intoned gravely. “We’re having dinner, then we’re going out for drinks after, and you’re going to like it.”

The inventor grumbled, fingers drumming restlessly on the table as he gave in enough to pick up the wine list, only for Rhodey to pluck it from his fingers.

"After dinner," he insisted.

"You’re not my real dad," Tony snapped. “Seriously, cut that out.”

Pepper took the wine list before they could get into an argument, and flagged down a waiter, ordering a bottle for their table. The colonel frowned, but reasoned that Tony forced to share a single bottle with them was better than leaving the inventor to order himself a couple of his own, and probably a scotch. Tony didn’t order any other drink himself, too, suggesting he was willing to concede and cooperate. Progress.

"How’s the war prep going?" Rhodey asked lightly.

"I hate waiting," Tony responded. “That’s the main thing.”

“I’m surprised you’re not being kept busy,” Pepper mused. “Some serious shit must be going down, for Loki to still be away.”

“The likelihood we’d get on each other’s nerves until something explodes is actually still pretty high.”

“I dunno, I seem to recall you tend to end a lot of arguments the same way, when you’re like this,” the redhead riposted, “and I’m sure he likes you on your knees.”

“Please don’t,” Rhodey groaned. “I’d rather not lose my appetite.”

“So I shouldn’t mention anything about-”

“Tony, behave,” Pepper interrupted.

“Never.”

“The Extremis means I can shoot you without killing you now, right?” Rhodey asked lightly. “I mean, if I felt a sudden urge?”

“How is that, by the way?” Pep inquired.

“Toasty. I had to unmake a lot more than I thought for it to be really stable, including all of the long-range stuff, and the fire-breathing, but it’s otherwise all well. The problem with how I unmade those bits in a slightly-hallucinatory trance state by mucking about in my own head as it exists on the astral plane did make it a bit tricky to apply those same changes in my lab so it might be useable safely on someone without magic, but I managed it.” He shot her a quick, serious and curious look over the top of his menu. “If either of you might be interested.”
His two closest friends exchanged glances, then looked down at their menus without really seeing them for a long few moments. They were distracted briefly by the return of the waiter, and all three of them placed their orders.

Another, shorter awkward silence followed in the waiter’s wake.

Tony waited, and didn’t press.

“It’s really safe?” Rhodey asked quietly. “You’re certain?”

“Yeah. Since you get shot at almost as often as I do, and you’re damned important to me, I figured you could maybe use it. I can upgrade your suits too, so they’ll withstand the heat if you get injured while wearing them.”

Pepper smiled at him faintly. “One application, or many?”

“Just one, now. Still working on the anti-aging upgrade, but it’s... slow.”

“Wait, what?” The soldier’s brow furrowed. “Aging?”

“It’s not like Cap’s serum. No fountain of youth so far,” Tony sighed. “It will probably prolong our lives, since it minimizes susceptibility to diseases, and the increase in strength and resistance to damage will help, but damage done just by time will still collect. Extremis can replace cells that are damaged, but when those damaged cells are ones that just don’t work as well as they used to, they don’t get replaced by younger ones: just copies of what they were before the damage. Otherwise, there would be a risk to things like brain tissues: losing memories just because a few cells wear out, or suddenly losing certain functions because Extremis reverted to a younger map of the brain and muscle memory got lost along the way...” He shook his head slowly. “That’s just not an option.”

His friends nodded thoughtfully.

“I’m in,” Pepper said. “I know you worry and, honestly, I worry what you’d do without me.” She then smiled with a hint more mischief. “And I do kind of miss it.”

Tony reached over, taking one of her hands in his and squeezing, his smile grateful and self-deprecating. “Thank you.”

She squeezed back, and they both turned their attention to Rhodey.

“Hell yes, I’m in. Bring on the fire.”

Tony flashed him a grin, brash and bright. “I had a feeling you might like it.”

“Anyone else on your list?” Pepper asked.

“Clint turned it down, unless something happens to prevent him using his bow. I think it’s a pride thing, but I can respect that, really.” Tony shrugged. “Happy is next on the offer list. Natasha is already immortal as Cap, and they don’t need or want it. Bruce sure as hell doesn’t need it, so... yeah, that covers it; although I’m still working on the smaller-scale version, for medical use, for Stark Industries. Something impermanent, and milder in the heat-department, that uses less fuel from the body so it’s safe for cancer patients or people generally with low body mass, so they won’t burn up. The trick is still making it hard to hack, and hard to weaponize, and that’s taking me a while.”

“It’ll always be weaponizeable,” Rhodey said.
“That won’t stop me trying.” He absently rubbed a hand over where his arc reactor used to be. “I just have to keep control of access to it.”

“Which means playing god,” the soldier reminded. “That’s what this is, Tony. You could heal a lot of people, but you also put them at risk of losing their humanity if someone decides they want those patients to be soldiers. It happened with AIM. It’s happened with young kids who manifest mutant powers and get kicked out of their houses, and people are scared of non-humans right now. I won’t even be sharing my own fiery status with any of my brothers in arms, once you give me this. I really don’t know how many of my superiors might turn on me, but enough would to make my life hell, and you know it. Others will just assume I’m somehow compromised, especially the anti-mutant assholes.”

Tony sighed, his mouth twisting. They’d discussed medical use of Extremis before, but only as a distant hypothetical. Now it was almost feasible. “I could unmake a lot of mistakes caused by war. Civilian casualties who have lost limbs and livelihoods—”

“Supplies get lost in war zones,” Pepper said quietly. “That’s what caused you problems before, how Obie covered a lot of his tracks.”

The inventor winced at the reminder. “I know that. I really do. Look, I’m still working on it. If I can make it too weak to be worth hacking, but still strong enough to save a life, I plan to play Prometheus. If I can’t... I’ll just keep trying. There’s too much potential for me not to.”

Rhodey nodded once, but looked uncomfortable with it. “Prometheus didn’t have the prettiest of fates, Tony. Your liver hates you enough already, doesn’t it?”

“That’s why I’m sticking with fire from earth. The gods can butt out, I’m not after their immortality. I’m Tony Stark, and I plan to make my own way,” he said flatly. “I don’t even like apples that much.”

“Liar,” Pepper muttered. “They’re your second-favorite fruit after pomegranate.”

“Can’t just let me have this?” he sighed.

“Nope.” She beamed at him beatifically.

“You thought about asking to study the apple thing?” Rhodey asked. “Since you’re getting mage lessons anyway?”

“They’re kept out of mortal reach for a reason. They wouldn’t just give me a golden apple to play with because I promised not to eat it.”

“So you tried to steal one?” Pepper prompted.

“No!” Tony insisted. “I just thought really hard about it, but... decided against. I don’t want to be dependent on Asgard, long-term. And I don’t need more super-strength than Extremis provides, either; it’d get inconvenient, actually, as far as having to increase the durability of the materials that make up almost everything I own that sees regular use and abuse, not just in the tower but Malibu, all my other places. Even if they gave me an apple, they wouldn’t let me study the things, either. Only Idunn and the royal family get access to that, so I’d still not understand how it all worked. It’d drive me insane, not knowing, and having to rely on the mercy of someone like Odin to let me back into Asgard in a century or so when I might need another apple to keep my youthful vigor fully intact.” He shook his head. “I’ll make my own way, and you guys get invites when I crack that code.”

“I’ll tell you when I’m sixty, but until I’m that old, I don’t think I’ll be sure how immortal I want to
be,” Rhodey said flatly.

Tony’s eyebrows raised. “Huh?”

The colonel’s eyes were cool and steely, yet open, and he looked very human. “Age changes how you look at things. I’ve known a lot of old soldiers, and most of them would prefer retirement over immortality, eternal youth or no.”

The inventor could only nod, not sure what to say.

“He’s right,” Pepper murmured. “You sure you want to live forever, Tony? You know that’s not something... humans aren’t built for it. Aging, growing old, is part of being human.”

“You talked with Natasha about it too, then,” Tony sighed.

“I did. She did say she thought I would be impressive, though, if I went through with it. I won’t say no, probably, but I do worry. I’ll always worry.”

“That’ll keep you human,” Tony said.

“That’s what Natasha said too.” She smiled a bit wider, then it faded. “But if I fall in love with someone, so I need them too, will you give it to them?”

Tony hesitated. “I... don’t know. I haven’t met them.”

“Would you undo it, if I asked?”

“Yes,” he said, very quietly. “It would hurt. It would almost kill me to do it, but if you asked, I would.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Soon after, their food arrived, and some of the tension left them.

“You never doubted wanting to live forever, Tony?” Rhodey asked.

“Nah. How else would I ever have enough time for all the crazy shit I don’t even know how badly I want to do yet?” the inventor asked, sounding scandalized.

The soldier chuckled. “Fair, I guess.”

“Natasha actually said you’d be a natural, but sort made it sound like an insult,” Pepper mused.

“Insult?”

“You already think like you’re a god.”

Tony laughed clear and loud at that. “Ah, that’s funny. And maybe a little true.”

“More than a little,” Rhodey deadpanned.

“More than a lot,” Pepper agreed. “Maybe that’s why they like you.”

“Gods stand in awe of Tony Stark sheerly by virtue of my being made of awesome. They need no other reason,” Tony declared, in melodramatic tones.

“Nah, they just needed a new court jester,” the soldier mocked.
“They have more than a few. Remind me to tell you about Sif’s Power Puffs Three entourage, sometime. I’m clearly out-jestered there.”

Rhodey snorted. “I’m surprised you didn’t suggest Loki had it covered.”

“I... don’t think of him as Asgard’s,” Tony said. “Didn’t occur to me.”

His friends’ eyebrows raised a little.

Tony blinked at them in bemusement. “What?”

“He’s Asgardian, though,” Rhodey said.

“Well, he was raised there, but he’s sort of disowned them, and he was adopted from another planet and isn’t actually Aesir by blood. He actually found some of his relatives in Nifleheim, which is sort of where the icy variety of Jotunn is really from, not Jotunnheim, which wasn’t originally frosted over, but there was this kind of atrocity that... And now you two are looking at me funny.”

“He told you all this?” Pepper asked.

“Well... I gathered. Some here, some there, some from Thor, some from Hlín. I’ve just been picking it up.”

“I seriously thought you’d gotten back into D&D there for a second,” the soldier said, sounding amused.

“Please don’t remind me,” Tony sighed.

“He was always an elf.”

“Rhodey, stop.”

“A lady elf.”

“And you were a dwarf,” the inventor shot back, as Pepper giggled at both of them from behind one hand, setting Rhodey off, causing Tony to curse them both, even as he poured them all a little more wine with a helpless grin.

Once done laughing, the colonel asked, “So what is he, if not Asgardian?”

“He’s Loki. He’s his own, and maybe more loyal to Nifelheim than Asgard is comfortable with, but apparently the nameless city there is actually pretty pacifistic despite being ancient and powerful and full of frost giants. The faction of their people who sort of destroyed most of the less icy Jotunns by icing over the whole planet of Jotunnheim were a separate tribe, and kind of fanatical.” He gestured as though waving the subject off. “What?”

“Hang on... what’s a Jotunn?” Rhodey asked.

“Uh... they’re like Aesir, but not. They’re another race, very strong and older than Asgard. They’re tough, and apparently by their standards Loki is actually a runt, size-wise. Some of them have elemental powers, usually fire or ice, and it’s more common for them than it is even among Aesir for them to be born with talents for magic and shape-shifting. They also tend to be really powerful and as tough, if not tougher, than the average Asgardian, in a fight.” Tony blinked a bit. “It’s... they’re interesting.”

“Are they?” Pepper inquired, openly suggestive.
The inventor frowned at her.

Rhodey was amused, but his tone was neutral when he asked, “So Loki is a Jotunn?”

“Yeah. Frosty kind, actually. From Jotunnheim. His dad was king there.”

“Oh... over the... uh... mostly-dead place?” Pepper asked tentatively.

“Yeah. Successfully ‘conquered’ by Loki’s grandfather, I think? Maybe Laufey? I dunno, its a little foggy. Laufey was the king there, wanted to conquer more worlds, figured earth was a nice starter, Asgard interfered, war and death for a century or three, and then they lost. Odin took home Laufey’s son who had been left abandoned to die because he was too small and his mother probably committed treason in the last days of the war by trying to contact Nifelheim, and Odin and Frigga raised him to think he was Aesir and Thor’s little brother. That was fine until a couple thousand years later when the charade fell apart and Loki found out what he was and that he’d been adopted, Thor got banished somewhere in the middle of it, and a lot of explosions sort of happened. Oh, and Loki may have murdered his biological dad somewhere in there. Yeah, it’s complicated.”

Both of his friends were staring at him.

He looked from one to the other, back and forth, a couple of time. “What?”

“I want to remind you that you still can’t remember my dad’s name right half the time,” Rhodey pointed out. “And think about that.”

“Uh... is it... Joshua?” Tony hazarded.

The soldier snorted. “That’s my uncle’s name.”

“Dammit.”

“You’re in too deep, aren’t you?”

Pepper sighed. “He is.”

“Just because I’m fascinated does not mean I’m compromised.”

The combined flat-out disbelief from both of his friends hit him almost like a physical blow. They looked so unimpressed that the inventor almost felt embarrassed.

“No really.”

Now they just looked outright disapproving, and like they were judging him.

“No, not the faces of judgement!” Tony tried to hold up a napkin to block out the sight, but Rhodey tugged it away. “No! No more interventions!”

“We’re not intervening, we just want you to know you’re being obvious, and it's hilarious,” Pepper teased.

“Well, it’s not like he’s here.” Tony looked around quickly. “Shit, is he?”

“No sign of him detected, sir,” JARVIS said, from where the inventor had placed his phone on the table.

“Thank fucking physics.”
“You really just gonna let him go, then?” Rhodey asked. “Seriously?”

“No, I’m going to get black-out drunk, blow up half my lab doing unsober science, listen to a lot of Scandinavian metal music and sulk for a long while. Then the next big bad will threaten the planet, and I’ll snap out of it and have repairs to do and projects thrown at me on all sides, and eventually I’ll get over not being able to drink my poison and survive him too,” Tony said. “See, all planned out. Stop frowning at me, you know that’s how it’s going to go.”

“Probably,” they both muttered, in unison, and in mutual resignation.

“Good. Glad we got that straight.”

“‘Straight’ might be pushing it,” Rhodey deadpanned.

“Touché,” the inventor conceded.

The rest of dinner went fairly well from there. If Tony’s smiles didn’t quite reach his eyes most of the time, and his hands still itched with restlessness, and he couldn’t stop thinking about how after tonight, he’d only have one day left that he was allowed to do the things to Loki that he really wanted to do, it didn’t show enough for his friends to comment on it any further. For that, he was grateful. It almost let him forget, for a while.

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Upon stepping out of the elevator into his penthouse, Tony was more relieved than genuinely surprised to find himself suddenly pinned hard up against the nearest wall by a tall, dark and oh-so-familiar Jotunn. “About fucking time,” he managed, raggedly, just before their mouths crashed together like they meant to devour. The inventor’s hands gripped at the lapels of Loki’s coat to yank him down closer and felt dampness there, smelled a bit of blood and ozone. He tried to banish the god’s armor and it resisted, making him growl.

Loki banished it for him, along with the mortal’s own clothing, and pushed him a bit higher up the wall until Tony’s feet no longer quite reached the ground and both men were eye to eye, just for a moment, before the kiss resumed once more. The rumble of pleasure the god emitted when Tony’s legs wrapped around his waist made the inventor shudder, and he gasped outright when two slick fingers unceremoniously entered him. “Ffucker, you in a hurry?” The god bit at his neck in response and began to ruthlessly drag his fingers over the inventor’s prostate, fast and too good and hard enough Tony almost felt bruised by it. “Nno complaints, yeah, don’t fucking stop, Loki, please,” he hissed, his own fingers digging hard into the god’s back.

“How fast might you come for me, just like this? How desperate for me are you?” Loki purred in his ear. “You want for this. You need it, don’t you?”

“I need you to—ahhhghk!” The addition of another finger and a change in angle cut off his train of thought quite successfully. “Loki, oh fuck, you’re so good.” His eyes snapped open wide at the feel of the god’s other hand wrapping almost reverently around his throat. “Wait just—” He stopped, unable to continue, and unable to breathe.

“I’ll not hurt you. You know I cannot,” the trickster assured, his fingers slowing now where they still fucked him, to a more teasing pace, making the inventor even more unable to ignore the sensation of pressure, potentially lethal, choking off his air. “You know how necessary you are, to my plans.
Necessary as air is to you, in fact. I am the lynchpin. You are the proof that I can be trusted to serve that purpose in the first place.” He let up his hold, briefly.

Tony gasped, seeing spots, but his blood felt hot and static in his veins, and everything felt flushed and shaky. “You’re a dick,” he rasped.

“Should I stop?”

“N-now I didn’t say that.”

Loki grinned, sweet as arsenic-laced sugar, and applied pressure again, catching him mid-exhale this time, so he felt the burn of oxygen deprivation that little bit sooner. Then he lined himself up with his slicker hand, and pushed in.

Tony struggled instinctively, when he met resistance as his remaining air tried and failed to escape. It would’ve been a moan, from the feel of Loki’s cock filling him up in one hard thrust, not pausing even a little before fucking him outright, never dropping the inventor’s gaze. Tony felt like an exposed nerve, the instinctive way his lungs continued to try and pull in air making him writhe as much as the fucking, leaving him a mess of pain and pleasure until things started to go dark.

Again, Loki let go, just briefly. Tony gasped so sharply it hurt, and then the pressure was back and he choked audibly with it.

“I like that sound, from you,” the god panted. “You make it even better with my cock down your throat, but the desperation of this has its own appeal.”

Tony halfheartedly glared at him, but then Loki pulled one of the mortal’s knees up higher and pushed it back toward the wall, and the new angle had him seeing stars. Noises escaped him, muffled, but desperate. Again he was given a sip of air to clear his gaze a bit, and again it wasn’t enough, and Tony was shaking with need, all thought lost. He was just a body, just feeling, just hovering in place within himself as pain and fear and pleasure coursed through him and sent him flying over the edge. His orgasm seemed to take its time, lingering so long it hurt, so long Tony forgot who he was and almost passed out, except that Loki let go.

Sucking in air greedily, Tony stared at the god of mischief, who looked almost as wrecked as the inventor felt, breathing only a bit less loudly as he shuddered with his own climax and leaned his head in just a bit closer, so their breaths mingled. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I needed that.”

“I might have, too. Didn’t know I did, but I think... I think I did.” He grabbed a handful of Loki’s hair and dragged the god closer, kissing him fierce and hungry for a few moments before pulling back, once he felt renewed interest very intimately, where the god still hadn’t pulled out. “Now you should make me scream, though.”

“Yes,” the god moaned raggedly. “Yes I should.”

He then proceeded to.

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One day...
The very best thing about Extremis, in Tony’s opinion, was that a slightly violent sex marathon with a frost giant that lasted until dawn, allowing for only a few hours of sleep before the last pre-war day began, didn’t leave him too stiff, bruised, exhausted and shagged-out to pass for a fully functional mad genius the next morning.

He was a little disappointed that neither of them sported any colorful marks to show for it by the time they joined the others for breakfast, but tried not to read too much into that sensation.

“How are the Kree?” Steve asked, passing over a plate of bacon.

“Tiresome,” Loki responded. “And belligerent.”

“They wanted proof he was himself,” Natasha explained. “It got messy.”

The trickster grimaced slightly, and set the plate down between his plate and Tony’s, and they both took almost half of it apiece. Loki sought toast, while the inventor seized on some of Steve’s legendary quiche.

“Oh... proof?” Clint asked delicately.

“I was subjected to a few tests,” the god said coldly.

Tony froze mid-bite, just for a moment, recalling all at once the reasons why Loki desired revenge enough to sit among the Avengers who had once defeated him in the first place. He then resumed eating, deciding not to press. He was rewarded.

“I had to persuade them very forcefully that taking my blood was not an option,” Loki said. “The leadership agreed to the terms, but a radical faction attempted to take matters into their own hands later that day, while I waited to greet A’Lars outside the palace. It did not go well for them.”

“Ah,” Steve said, his brow furrowed in concern. “I take it they’re dead?”

“Several are. The rest have been sentenced to public execution within the week,” Natasha confirmed. Loki smiled unpleasantly at the thought. He then got a look at the quiche on Tony’s plate and proceeded to acquire a piece of his own.

“Good,” Thor said, from his end of the table, sounding darkly satisfied in a way the rest of the Avengers seldom heard form him.

Steve and Clint exchanged glances. The archer shrugged.

The sounds of cutlery and plates were prominent for several minutes. Tony sipped at his second cup of coffee slowly. It felt oddly domestic, and a bit surreal, surrounded by friends and a dubious ally all dressed in t-shirts and pajama pants, quiet and relatively peaceful in their tiredness; it was even more odd, knowing that they would be ready for war within a few hours, off the planet and ready, waiting just in case Thanos’ fleet arrived earlier than estimated.

“Your table,” Tony said suddenly.

Loki looked at him a bit warily. The others, having glanced up in confusion, saw Loki understood what the inventor was rambling about, and dismissed it in favor of food and caffeine, save Thor, and Natasha, who kept looking. “Pardon?”
“You know the one. You claimed it.”

“Oh, yes.”

Tony shot him a questioning look.

“I planned to return it to its original state, before leaving.”

A few of the others shot wary glances the trickster’s way, at that.

“It’s heavily infused with your magic,” Tony pointed out. “Is it revert-able?”

“If not, I’ll just steal it.”

The inventor snorted. “Figures.”

Loki smirked faintly, saying nothing about his intentions to not try very hard to revert the table to it’s previous state.

Tony said nothing about wanting to keep it.

Breakfast was quiet from there.

Except Clint. “Table?”


“How... I don’t think I even want to know,” the archer muttered.

“You don’t,” said Loki, gravely as he could manage with a straight face, enjoying the looks of confusion on all sides, save for Tony, who visibly stifled a laugh, causing the rest of the Avengers to look slightly concerned as well as confused.

“You’re ridiculous,” Tony muttered, too quiet for the others to hear.

“You enjoy mischief, same as I,” the god shot back, equally quiet.

I do, Tony thought, meeting the god’s gaze and finding slightly somber mirth there, which confused him a little. It must be the thing with the Kree, still on his mind, surely. The inventor winked at him. Loki scoffed and rolled his eyes, and they each returned their attention to their plates.

 Mostly.
What to Do to Die Today at a Minute or Two 'Til Two

Chapter Summary

The war happens. Thanos gravely underestimates the god of mischief and pays for it. Death is not very kind to Loki. Loki is forced to admit he had a problem.

One day...

“My daughter suggested that I owe you a boon, given all of my recent attempts on your life,” Loki informed his brother.

Thor jumped, having been unaware of the trickster’s presence until then. The others were resting in guest quarters around the ship, save the two gods, and one mad mortal inventor currently busy arguing with Kree engineers downstairs as they tried to persuade him to either leave his suit where they could study it, or explain its secrets himself, neither of which he was inclined to allow.

“She... did?” Thor asked, glaring at his brother’s satisfied smirk at having made him twitch.

“She even recommended a particular one which it would be of minimal trouble for me to do, but considerable potential benefit for you, should you be interested.”

The thunderer blinked a bit at that. “What did she recommend?”

“That I bring you an apple.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “But-”

“I’m smuggling some out anyway for my own reasons. I’ve got another long fight planned, after this war, and I intend to survive it.”

“You’re saying it may kill you?”

“Yes.”

“More than once?”

“Yes, but I’m confident it will be worthwhile.”

Thor sighed, running a hand over his face. “I cannot dissuade you?”

“No.”

“You... would give me one. To give... to offer to Jane.”

The trickster inclined his head in an affirmative nod.

“I...” His voice was unsteady. He then gave up on speaking altogether and pulled his brother into an embrace so enthusiastic it made the younger god’s ribcage creak.
“Dammit, Thor, let me go, you dunce!”

Loosening his hold only a little, Thor shook his head. He rasped out, “Thank you.”

With an exasperated sigh, Loki patted him on the back. “This is only because Hel insisted, because she apparently can’t stand seeing you pine whenever she checks in on the state of affairs in Midgard.”

Laughing softly, Thor released him, save for one hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I care not. Thank you.” His smile dimmed a little. “Have you... have you considered not ending this alliance you have?”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Capture Thanos, instead of kill him.”

The trickster gaped at him for a moment like he’d grown a second head, then closed his mouth and shook his head. “I have done all of this because I want to kill him, Thor. That is why I am here. I want his blood spilled, and I want him to no longer be alive, and I want very much to be a major part of making that happen. What makes you even begin to think—”

“It would convince him your intentions aren’t ill, Loki.”

The younger god gave a cracked laugh. “Thor, I’m going to kill him. You cannot persuade me to be the better man and let Thanos still live. No cage will hold him long enough for it to matter, in the end. It is death, or his eventual liberty. There is no other way. You cannot change my mind on this.”

“Not even for Tony Stark’s heart?”

“Your optimism will one day be the death of me, I just know it.”


“As am I. He is not in love with me, Thor. Nor I with him.”

“If you truly think that, then I believe you must be blind.”

Trying to wrench away from his brother’s hand had no effect, save to tighten Thor’s grip. “Let me go.”

“You are making a mistake.”

“I have spent years preparing for this, Thor. Firstly, you know me better than to believe that putting my faith in a thin sliver of hope that someone might desire me for reasons other than merely what uses I can be put to, is not a wager I would make. Secondly, you especially won’t when the other option is for me to kill someone whose injuries to me still wake me in the night screaming. And especially not when I know that I will sleep so much easier, knowing with absolute certainty that he will never be able to put me through such pain ever again, and that no one I care about will be a target for his vengeance when he does escape because he will. I will not put my children and those few others who have my love and loyalty in that danger, Thor. I have not only denied him the tesseract, but also constructed this downfall for him too. There would be. No. Point. In sparing him, you utter fool! I would only paint a bigger target on everyone who matters to me.”

Thor’s expression cracked. “I... I see. You are right. I’m sorry.”
Loki sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “I know your intentions to be good, brother mine, but your execution of them, as ever, has a habit of missing the point.”

“You are so certain he would escape?”

“He is more powerful than I, and I know for a fact none of you could capture and keep even myself.” He hesitated. “With one exception, but even he could not hold Thanos.”

“Not even with your help?”

At that, Loki was forced to seriously consider it. “Maybe. Probably not. I am actually quite sure Thanos would find a way to kill me without even needing to leave his cage. He is... he is very intelligent, and I envy no one the task of imprisoning him so.”

“Not even with the aid of Asgard?”

The trickster scoffed. “They would execute him for me, and nullify the alliance, then arrest me, and you know it.”

Thor made a face. “Probably, I suppose. But the gesture alone-”

“Gesture, he would not trust,” Loki said flatly. “I know I wouldn’t, either. Only my sworn word, and the terms of the alliance, can he trust. The latter will not last forever. I might as well kill it swiftly, along with Thanos, as planned.”

“And then?”

Loki shrugged off his brother’s hand successfully this time. “Then, I have more work to do. Including committing new crimes against Asgard.”

Thor sighed. “I only wish-”

“For my happiness. Yes, I know.” He sounded resigned and a bit exasperated.

“You’ve been happy, of recent, have you not?”

Reluctantly, Loki admitted, in almost a whisper, “Yes.”

“And you will be less so, when this is over?”

“When this is over, I will be delivering Thanos by hand to Mistress Death, walking his path to her realm for him, so yes.”

“When this is over, and you have recovered from it, I meant. You know that.”

“I will be savoring my victory and probably getting drunk for a couple of days in Alfheim with Amora, actually.”

Thor shook his head slowly. “I thought you had other plans?”

“Yes, but they lack a deadline, for a change. I may start them at my leisure.”

“You’re impossible,” the thunderer growled.

“Yes, I am,” Loki said with a half-smile, and vanished.
Thor scoffed at the dramatic exit, shaking his head. “You’re a mad fool, brother.”

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*The War*

Thirteen ships, mostly identical except the one at the center of their flight formation, which was bigger and better armed. Gamora knew the names of each of them, knew them inside and out like she knew the backs of her own hands, and had shared that knowledge with all of them. Natasha and Steve were to accompany her to her favorite of them, which she planned to claim. Amora would deliver them, before taking herself and Skurge to their own chosen vessel, which they planned to destroy from the inside.

Hawkeye was with Agent Coulson back on earth, ready to deal with downed escape pods and gliders as they arrived. He maintained that Natasha would never hear the end of it, ever, for persuading him to stay terrestrially located.

Thirteen ships: one for Amora and Skurge, one for the Hulk and Hlín, one for Gamora and her two Avenger probation officers, one for Thor and Dr. Strange (for a start; they planned to take down more), and the big fucker in the middle for Loki and his ally. All but Gamora would be in one of the ships closest to the middle one, while Titan and Kree fleets attacked the outside of the formation. Hlín’s students were divided between the battlefield where they would aid the Avengers and transport them between ships if needed, and the earth where they supported the valkyries and einherjers guarding the skies.

“There they are,” Tony said, as the ships exited their last wormhole and began to visibly bristle with weaponry, on the display before them.

A’Lars and the Kree reported in their positions, all ready and waiting for Loki’s signal. The trickster’s expression was cold and fierce, yet calm, as he regarded the fleet, and began to smile unpleasantly. “At long last.”

“They’re engaging thrusters,” Natasha pointed out.

Hlín and Loki’s magics were already thick in the air, prepared to deliver them past any wards or shields they might encounter.

“All ready?” the god of lies inquired.

A chorus of responses followed, all affirmative. Tony’s faceplate snapped down.

Loki met his former teacher’s stare, and they both reached out in silence. “Now.”

All of them vanished from the bridge of one of the Kree’s ships.

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Tony reappeared, except all sort of not. His suit was in full stealth mode, and thus not visible to the naked eye. None of the creatures (bipedal, humanoid, not Chitauri, still pretty ugly, probably more pets of the Other, then) noticed his presence, no alarms went off, nothing. Most of them wore uniforms with symbols on them Gamora had showed him to keep an eye out for; it indicated they were engineers and mechanics, and thus the ground support for the fleet of gliders.

One of them bumped into a drone and looked deeply confused.

“There’s something here,” it grunted out, translated by the spell Loki had woven into the mortal inventor’s armor just last night.

Behind his faceplate, Tony started to grin.

“What’s it look like?” another engineer, not bothering to look as he busily activated the first row of many gliders housed in the massive hangar.

“It... doesn’t?” the first engineer said, uncertainly.

That was when Tony punched them both in the face so hard they hit the floor and stayed there, and then approached the control panel himself. “JARVIS, run interference please. I’ve got this.”

“Of course, sir.” The suit unfolded from around him, as one of the drones became visible and extended a few connections under the control panel with a soft whirr as its fellows, and the suit, flew off to continue incapacitating everyone else in the hangar.

“You’re in,” JARVIS’s voice reported in his ear, as the display flashed a few lines of unfamiliar code.

Tony reached over to the drone, which opened a panel from which he took a set of sunglasses, which he’d copied Loki’s translater-spell for, conveniently making the text in front of him make sense. He began typing, just as alarms began going off. The ones in the hangar were quickly silenced as a result. “That was annoying. Us or Loki?”

“Loki, sir. He has sealed off all levels between hangars and flight-decks, and the main control sections above. All sections not sealed off seem to be filled with a lethal gas.”

“Thanos?”

“He is on his way to the bridge.”

“Smooth sailing so far, then. I can’t wait for it to all go wrong,” Tony murmured, focusing on his work. “Got the doors yet?”

“Having some minor trouble convincing these pilots to have a bit of a lie-down while we make their jobs unnecessary,” JARVIS responded. “There are an awful lot of them, you see.”

“Need any help?”

“No. They’re also rather stupid, so it’s more tedium than genuine threat so far.”

“Excellent. Keep me updated.”

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Thanos’ first indication that matters were not at all well upon his ship had been all of the bodies in the halls. Poison gas had compromised all of the lower-levels except the hangar, fifteen minutes before, but that wasn’t what killed his soldiers here.

No, they had clearly been taken out by fire and fury, and their throats being slit open, in most cases. It all looked very efficient.

Fifteen minutes, and already his flagship was full of corpses. Four other ships of the fleet were sending out distress calls. The Other had stopped responding from the bridge and the halls of the ship resisted more instantaneous transport means as soon as alarms began to go off, but not enough to dissuade the Titan who had designed those wards. Thanos appeared outside the bridge, skipping past the rest of the halls, which he didn’t doubt would also be full of still more corpses.

He stepped forward, and felt his boot slide a little, on what felt like a bit of gore. Looking down, the mad Titan noticed a slimy trail of the Other’s blood, forming a path toward the captain’s controls.

With reluctance, Thanos followed it.

It seemed that only the Other’s skull remained intact, and had been left right in the center it on the main control panel, right at the heart of the bridge. Every surface around it, every button and display, the whole of the floor and ceiling too, was coated in a thin, ugly purple paste: the rest of the Other’s remains.

The Other was still alive, Thanos noticed.

“I’d always loathed the idea of a spell which bound the soul to a body beyond the point of death... until I met the Other, and suffered his hospitality,” Loki said, sounding pleased with himself.

“You have put a lot of effort, and come so very far, little trickster, to die this day.”

Smile unwavering as the mad Titan turned to face him, Loki said, “Your ship is falling apart around you.”

“You alone cannot destroy me. You are too weak.”

“That was your first mistake, Thanos. You looked at so much from my mind, yet you still believe that I cannot destroy you.”

“I know the full extent of your capabilities,” Thanos responded, stepping closer to the trickster, looking close to make sure it was no illusion, this time. It was not. Loki stood there, daggers in hand, smiling at him. “I know all that you can do to destroy me, little god, and I know myself. Your tricks will not be enough.”

Loki began to laugh, quietly at first like he was trying to hold it in, but it progressed quickly to sniggering, to hysterical giggles, to outright body-shaking laughter that filled the room. The mad Titan was taller than himself, and broader, and far stronger, all dressed in blue and gold, at contrast to his red skin. His chin was striped almost like a Skrull’s, and his pale eyes almost glowed. He loomed before the god of lies, who continued laughing, even as the Titan launched punch aimed right for his face.

Loki caught it.

Thanos stared for a long moment.
Still smiling, Loki stared back.

“You’re stronger than I recall.” Thanos’ eyes narrowed. “That will not be enough.”

“I was half-dead when you found me. I fell for days through an abyss of my own making. Many days. More than nine, more than Odin spent hanging from a tree and bleeding, staring into oblivion, and he came back with runes of power. You never bothered to ask me what I came back with,” Loki hissed.

Thanos lashed out with his other hand and the god twisted away from him, lashing out with his blades, but the Titan was too quick. They faced one another, just out of striking distance for either of them, for any physical blows.

Loki’s mouth remained open, and the still air of the room stirred. His lips shaped soft syllables older than the universe itself, quieter than a whisper, but present enough he could see the mad Titan’s eyes widen, and then narrow. “What do you know about curses, Thanos?” Odin had learned much, created the runes with them, but the runes were merely symbols for syllables and words far older than any known alphabet. Loki had learned their true names, and how to speak them, from Odin himself. Now he knew more of the Old Words than the All-Father, after his fall. In fact, it was thanks to his fall: the only good to come of it.

Thanos shook off the first tendrils of the spell and lashed out with magic of his own, launching the trickster backwards and through a few walls.

He stalked through the holes in the walls with a snarl, able to hear the trickster laughing again. It took him a few moments to feel the pain. Looking down, he realized he was covered in thin gashes, cut by mere air, mere words. He hadn’t even seen the threads Loki must have pulled, and cursed the trickster for angering him so.

“It’s not my strength you need fear,” Loki’s voice seemed to surround him, whispering from all sides. “It’s my words. It’s always my words.”

The ship was rocked by a sudden blow.

“Also them,” Loki said, once the Titan found him, resting where he had landed in a now-dented wall, gesturing toward a nearby display panel.

Thanos looked at it and felt his blood run cold.

“Foolish creature,” the trickster spat. “Did you truly think I came alone?”

Aiming for Loki’s face, the titan struck the wall instead, shattering the illusion of Loki’s presence and feeling the bite of a dagger in his back. He roared and spun on the trickster god, catching him hard and destroying another wall. A haze of gas erupted from the room he’d sent the god flying into, but it bothered neither the god nor the Titan. It wouldn’t even effect humans poorly, but it had killed most of Thanos’ crew well enough. Thanos knew Gamora’s handiwork when he saw it and cursed further, to see she had shared it with this mad trickster, that they had planned this.

“I’ve taken your ship,” Loki growled, back on his feet, eyes aglow. “I’m destroying your fleet, and your own assassin is helping me do it. I’ve rendered the Other useless... and I will kill you with my own two hands, I swear to you.”

“Who are they? Who have you brought?” Thanos demanded.

“Oh, right. That would be your father, and some of the Kree.”
The whole ship shook with the force of Thanos’ next attack.

Tony had just gotten back into the suit to avoid dying of asphyxiation when he opened the hangar doors to unleash the freshly-tampered-with fleet when it opened, when Loki crashed through the ceiling and landed in a bloody heap on the floor.

“Uh...”

“Hide, you fool,” Loki snarled. His helmet had gotten lost somewhere in the fall and his armor was scuffed, but he was still whole.

“Your face is bleeding a bit.”

“Tony? This is the part where you run,” the trickster snapped, deadly serious. He then looked up at the hole he’d fallen through. “You have... five seconds.” When he looked again, the mad mortal wasn’t visible. And not by means magical. Loki gave in to the urge to laugh again, pained and bitter though the sound now was, as he rolled aside just in time for the mad Titan to land on the bit of floor he’d formerly occupied, having followed him by the most convenient available means.

Thanos appeared livid. Just a bit.

Loki teleported a short distance away, standing rather than reclined as he’d been on the floor. “Still think I can’t kill you?” he challenged.

“You’ve proved yourself worthy of suffering as only I can cause you.” The floor shook with his anger and sprouted a pair of steel hands which seized the god’s ankles as he approached, holding him in place. Loki swore as electricity ran up through him, channeled from the ship itself, strong enough his limbs were stiffened beyond his control and he had no means to block the next blow to his face, nor any crumple-zones behind him to take some of the force. It nearly broke his jaw.

Then the electricity cut out and the hangar doors began to open.

All of the ships in the hangar came to life, preparing to launch.

“What is the purpose of this? There are no pilots,” Thanos said, not seeming to notice Loki had regained mobility.

“One pilot,” the trickster corrected, and stabbed him in the gut.

Thanos grunted and stumbled back, hand yanking the dagger out.

Loki kicked free of the spells from the floor and raised both hands, now empty and expectant as sounds flowed from his lips, bearing no resemblance to speech. Thanos’ blood on one of his hands moved, slithering over his skin until it took the shape of a complex sigil.

Tony, where he was sitting in one of the gliders, stared.

It wasn’t the strings Loki was pulling. Loki’s words, whatever language he was using, was brighter than the threads, like he was breathing out pure paradox, pure... something. The density of threads around him increased with each syllable, glowing green as his eyes and hands, and now Thanos
looked a bit panicked, but couldn’t seem to move, or look away.

The whole ship shook with the release of it and Thanos emitted a scream.

When the light faded, there was a hole in the wall in front of Loki big enough that an elephant might fit through it, the edges of it smoking, and a trail of blood on the floor, presumably leading to wherever Thanos had landed in the next hangar over.

Loki turned his head to look up, in the direction of the beacon he’d marked Tony with, through the communication spells. Tony dropped his cloaking and gave a thumb’s up. The god half-smiled crookedly, summoned his daggers back to him, and strode after Thanos. Tapping into the Avengers comm channel, Tony announced, “Glider sabotage is a go and Loki seems to be having fun, but Thanos isn’t dead yet. This ship is a sitting duck now, though: he murdered almost everyone.”

“Roger that, Iron Man, we’ll pass on the news to earth,” Natasha said. “Sounds like it’s time for you to get out of there.”

“Yeah...” Tony hesitated, and knew he sounded unwilling.

“That doesn’t sound like you’re actually leaving,” Steve said.

“Well...”

A series of explosions from the hangar next door caught his attention. Loki was flung back into the room looking charred, and struggling to breathe. He caught sight of Tony still in one of the gliders and abruptly vanished, only to reappear in the cockpit. “He’s running. Chase.”

“You got it.” Tony grabbed the wheel and flew out into the breach. He casually dropped off the comm channel shortly after.

He whistled at all of the destruction he immediately had to dodge. “It’s definitely a war zone out here. Which ship is he in?”

“Escape pod. That one.” Loki pointed. “Steady, I’m attempting to lock onto him, but he’s taking pains not to let me.”

“I could shoot him.”

“Good idea.”

Tony aimed and fired.

The escape pod was shielded, but the impact clearly had an effect on its flight-path. It tried to shake them by going around one of the other fleet ships, dangerously close to crashing into it, but the nimble glider was more than able to keep up, and Loki had indeed successfully marked Thanos with a beacon. It was, as Tony suspected, marked “friendly” which made him snort.

“If anyone is going to kill him, it has to be me,” Loki said. “His Mistress has plans to make me regret it, and I think she’d like an excuse not to have to let him stay dead if she doesn’t get to do so.”

“About that...”

“Does it really matter? It won’t involve you, unless you get yourself killed and also have to walk to your afterlife. Given my other options for company are limited, it could be worse, but such a waste of your life, don’t you think?”
“Wait, you have to die?” He sounded a bit distressed.

“Hardly. Probably not. I’m mostly sure she’ll just make me wish for that mercy, but not actually grant it. That’s how she is, generally. I’m just to deliver him to her, and walk the path his departed soul usually would have to. I’m sure the walk will be fuel for many future nightmares.”

“Yeah, I’ll pass. I’m still working on the immortality thing.”

Something must’ve shown in Loki’s expression.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You looked like you know something you’re not saying.”

“I looked further at Extremis.”

Tony shot him a glare. “You what?”

“I... don’t think it will work as you wish. I don’t think it possible. I did my best.”

“Oh... what?”

“It will not stop you aging.”

“Why were you checking this, exactly?”

“Mostly to see your face if I cracked it before you did, but I failed. I tried factoring in new DNA re-writes, even used an immortal-seeming super-healer’s DNA as a model, but nothing was compatible in any lasting way, and most of the results would risk killing you as well. This was all when you were still recovering from the initial injection; I got bored sitting around just keeping you from exploding, so I used your phone and ran as many simulations as I could come up with both to stabilize you if I could, which I had several models to try for that alone, and additionally look into that immortality puzzle. It was very frustrating. I left the models in a folder with the dullest name I could come up with for you to find later.”

“You’re sure you tried everything?”

“The full extent of my knowledge and experience could not crack it, and let’s face it, do you know anyone more impossible than myself?” Loki asked, and only then met Tony’s eye for a moment before they both refocused on chasing Thanos.

For a while, they almost lost him between two fleet ships that were on a crash course with each other thanks to the Hulk and Thor respectively, as Tony thought about how to respond to that. “Me.”

“What?”

“More impossible than you.”

“You arrogant little prick,” Loki muttered, disbelieving.

“You seemed satisfied enough with my size last I checked.”

“I am far more impossible than you are.”
“You come close.”

“You not right now, darling, there’s a war on.”

Tony snorted, amused despite himself. “Ass.”

“There are other options than Extremis.”

“Pursuing Erskine’s serum is a fucking nightmare and I don’t have a lifetime to dedicate just that, I’ve got other shit to do,” Tony sighed. “And if Jane Foster couldn’t get an apple, me being the ignoble asshole I am, I somehow doubt Asgard would want me to stick around much longer. I’ll look at your attempts, though.”

Loki nodded. “Would you accept an apple even if it were offered?”

“You offering?”

“I never said that.”

“Not for free, then, you’re saying?”

“Looking to make a deal with the devil, Tony?”

“Well, this one has worked pretty well so far. It’s nice to know you realize what a sound investment I am.”

Loki snorted derisively at that. “We’re halfway to earth, and I still cannot get a lock onto his damn ship.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I still haven’t exactly gotten an answer.”

“I don’t know, okay? Probably not. I have no idea how they fucking work.”

“I have that knowledge as well.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what your price is.”

“I’m not sure I do, either, but I like to keep my options open,” Loki murmured. “You make a fine ally.”

“So do you, sweetheart.”

“On second thought, you’re very annoying.”

“You find me charming, and you know it.”

The trickster scoffed.

“You do.”

“I find you tolerable, at best.”

Tony laughed.

“Aha,” Loki said, eyes narrowing.
“Got a lock on him?”

“Yes.” the god vanished.

A long pause, and he reappeared, coughing heavily and bleeding quite a bit. He smelled strongly of acrid smoke.

“It was a trap?” Tony asked lightly.

“It was a trap.”

“Figures.”

“It mostly failed, though.”

“I’ll believe that when you aren’t still bleeding.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“You should see the other guy,” Loki rasped.

Tony sniggered. “How’d the paste plan work out, by the way?”

“Perfectly. And I made sure his soul was trapped in his body beyond the point of death so he could truly appreciate it for a few hours before the spell wears off.”

The inventor whistled. “Damn. You really hated that guy.”

“Oh yes. Very much.” He pulled a few long, thin and sharp bits of metal and glass from his sides and his left thigh, then did a quick healing spell, repairing himself while he had the time.

“Thanos you plan to be quicker with?” Tony asked, noticing the design on Loki’s hand, painted there in Thanos’ blood, looking all-too smudge-resistant. Something about it itched to look at, like it was only half-finished.

“No choice. Have to be quick or he might actually kill me first, given he’s genuinely more powerful than I.”

“He is?”

“Oh yes.”

“Even after the drink thing?”

“That gave me a boost enough to surprise and annoy him, but not enough to really overpower him. No, I have to be smarter, and that isn’t easy with him either. The only place I have the upper hand is that he believes he knows all that I am capable of, and he is wrong.”

“He seriously thinks that?”

“Yes.”

“Has he... met... you?”

The god grinned toothily. “He thinks that he has. He thinks that what he tore out of my mind for his
casual perusal was enough to know me, and that trapping me in the worst he found for a long while was enough to break me. I am a god of lies and keep my secrets hidden beyond where casual visitors might reach them, in depths they would dare not venture. He did not dare. He did not believe they were there and did not see them, and I plan to show him just how great a fool he is for that dismissal.”

“You are a scary motherfucker, sometimes, I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s kind of hot.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “War, Tony.”

“I know, I know. Just... you’re really attractive when you do that.”

“You’re a twisted creature.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“It’s very attractive.”

Tony laughed, then didn’t, because he was seeing the earth from space, coming into view and into range. “Damn. Space is awesome.”

“First time?”

“First time coming home the long way. The scenic route, and all. Not instantly disappearing and reappearing, and all.”

“Shoot some more. It’s better he crash.”

“Right. Got distracted.” After a few solid shots, the escape pod’s shields started to have trouble, but Thanos also started to weave, and the next few shots missed. Loki took over another of the ship’s weapons, also firing. Combined efforts, free of most other ships from the battle behind them except for a few also following Thanos, they had the pod smoking and looking very unstable by the time it hit earth’s atmosphere. Tony caught sight of a nearby valkyrie looking at them oddly, and realized a “friendly” ship was shooting at another so-marked “friendly” ship.

“You’re lucky neither of us got valkyried,” the inventor said.

“Shut up and keep firing. It will make my life easier if the crash hurts him badly enough,” Loki snapped.

“I didn’t exactly stop, keep your pants on.”

“I honestly never thought I’d hear that request from you.”

“Neither did I, actually. What’s wrong with me? Take off your pants.”

“War, Tony.”

“I’m joking, honey, do keep up.”

Thanos’ landing really was a crash.
“Don’t land anywhere close, Tony, unless you want to get yourself killed,” Loki said, and vanished.

“...But what if I want to watch?” Tony muttered.

Loki reappeared briefly. “I don’t care if you want to watch. Also, I took the table and I’ve meddled with the autopilot.” He waved cheerfully and vanished again.

The ship aimed itself at New York and took off at speed.

“You glorious fucker,” Tony sighed, and started trying to fix the hack. “JARVIS, send out one of the drones, I want eyes on their showdown.” He was quietly glad the trickster hadn’t noticed they weren’t stored anywhere inside the ship, and messed with them too.

“Yes, sir.” One of the drones that had hidden itself against the exterior of the glider detached and flew down there.

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Loki found Thanos pulling himself out of the wreckage, looking very displeased.

“Are you done running, now?” he inquired lightly.

“It wasn’t you I was most worried about escaping.”

“Why? Your father still doesn’t have the courage to kill you,” Loki said flatly. “I, on the other hand, do.”

“It’s not my time. She wouldn’t send you.”

“Oh, you might be surprised. She wasn’t easy to persuade, but I’m here to collect you for her, and deliver you body and soul. In pieces, for preference,” Loki warned.

Thanos swallowed at that. “You lie.”

“Kill me if you can, but I don’t think you’ll manage it, and I won’t let you leave,” Loki challenged, summoning a blade-tipped staff. His magic flared out, quickly weaving wards around them to prevent him teleporting, to stop him even being able to wander too far away.

“You dare, trickster?” Thanos snarled, stalking toward him slowly. “You dare attempt to cage me?”

Loki began to speak again, words of power that made the air itself tremble.

“I will rip out your lying tongue!”

A copy of Loki appeared behind him. “You aren’t the first to try.”

Another appeared. “Nor will you be the last.”

Thanos turned, staring between them all, finding them all quite solid. “You... how are you doing that?”

“I do all sorts of things that you don’t know about,” one copy said, as the other joined the chant with
Loki himself, turning it from growling whispers to a harmonic susurration. The ground began to shake. The third copy joined in, and the air began to heat, whipping around Thanos, who hissed as he began to overheat.

“What are you doing? You weave nothing.”

*Nothing visible,* whispered the wind. *Why ruin the surprise for you?*

“That’s not possible,” Thanos snapped.

Amidst the droning chant, the earth shook and the air became a haze and there was a distant sound like laughter.

The world went white.

Thanos emitted a scream again, this time louder, more prolonged.

There was a sound like bones breaking.

When it stopped, the silence rang in the mad Titan’s ears and he found himself on the ground.

“You...”

“All that power of yours, locked up in yourself, so you can fight with it,” Loki spat, kicking him in the face, sending him rolling. “You make yourself so *tough,* so damned unbreakable. You *waste* your time.” He wasn’t surprised when the Titan got up and charged, was even less surprised by how he summoned a blade to his hand, a short sword, and attacked. Loki laughed even as he dodged and twisted and again tasted his own blood in his mouth as he was sent flying and then hit the ground.

“What secret is it?” Thanos demanded. “What have you done?”

Loki raised both hands, the blood on them smoking as though burnt, forming two perfectly identical sigils. “Your blood is now cursed. It’s fairly simple, though the curse itself was one of my finest masterpieces, actually,” Loki sat up, his own wounds closing, only to reappear on Thanos himself. The trickster spread his arms and grinned bright and mad. “Do what you like.” He chuckled at the feel of a blade against his throat. “Have you worked it out yet?” Thanos slit his throat. “I guess not,” he said after a moment, because then the mad Titan was stumbling back, gripping his own throat as it bled. Loki stood up, brushing himself off and admiring the hate in Thanos’ expression. “You were so confident. You even let me finish the spell! You were curious and convinced I couldn’t kill you. Well, well, well.”

“I heal, you fool.”

Loki grinned brighter, and slit his own throat again, deeper this time, with one of his daggers.

Fresh blood escaped from under Thanos’ fingers as the wound vanished.

“I’m patient,” the trickster said. “I can do this all day.” He jammed a blade into his own heart, still smiling.

Thanos’ legs went out from under him and he fell to his knees. Loki casually pulled the blade from his heart and dragged it along his stomach, causing the Titan to struggle to keep his guts in as Loki’s flesh and even his armor self-repaired neatly.

“It’s not my power or my strength that make me able to kill you, Thanos. It’s the nasty tricks I pull, and my words that make you let me do them in the first place,” he snarled, and took the Titan’s
Barely sitting up now, bleeding too fast for his powers to quite heal, Thanos had time to open his eyes a little wider before Loki cast one more spell to increase the strength and speed of the blade in his hand, and swung once, hard.

The mad Titan’s head hit the ground just before his body crumpled and fell over to meet it, and Loki held up the box Death gave him. It slithered open and made an unpleasant sucking sound, pulling Thanos’ soul from the air before it could escape, and snapping shut around it.

Breathing hard, Loki couldn’t help but giggle a small, half-hysterical giggle. “Well... I believe I’ve won.”

Said a voice like the creaking of an un-oiled cemetery gate, “You have.”

The trickster spun on his heel, blade raised out of habit, only to lower it, at the sight of Mistress Death glaring at him. He felt suddenly like a child, nervous and uneasy under her disapproval. “And now I have more work to do.”

She nodded. “Pick up your burden, Loki.”

He never, ever wanted to hear her say his name again. It was worse than he’d imagined, hearing it aloud and not just in his head. He summoned a sack to carry Thanos’ head in, and tied it to his belt. Then he hefted the heavy body of the corpse over one shoulder, with a little effort, and nodded.

“Do not drop him, or else you shall not be permitted to leave.”

The world grew dark, and she vanished.

The path ahead of him was long and dark, devoid of any life. It was a between-place, blue-black and dreamlike. Loki realized he would need a light and reached up his sleeve. He pulled out...

He stared at it.

“That was not what I was looking for,” Loki said gravely, and took his first step forward. He then went still as stone as it was echoed by far, far too many others behind him. Slowly turning his head, he swallowed thickly at what appeared to be a massive crowd of corpses. Some faces were familiar. Many were not. They all looked at him as though seeing through his skull and into his brain. He didn’t like it.

“I think I’m missing something,” he said, very quietly.

“We are the rest of your burden, Lie-smith,” said one among them, whose face made Loki’s skin crawl at the sight. He knew that face. He’d had nightmares about that face for a few years when he was much younger. In life, the man had been a raider, attacking cities at the edges of the nine realms. Thor and his cohorts had been sent on journeys for a few years, by that point, to subdue such threats. Loki had met this raider on his first. This was the very first man Loki Lie-smith had ever killed. “You know me?”

“I have never known your name, but I know where I have seen you before,” Loki said hoarsely. He then looked at all the others and felt as though his organs turned to lead as cold realization dawned. “All of you...”

“Killed by you.”
“Him?” Loki asked faintly, pointing at the corpse over his shoulder.

“His are visiting his prison, in your pocket. You have no access to the other things you usually carry. Only what is allowed you for this journey,” the raider said.

“...A light, a pocketable soul-prison, and a corpse,” Loki said slowly, looking at the arc reactor in his hand. “Wonderful.”

Another of the corpses spoke, a woman, whose name Loki already knew, “You will speak with all of us. You will know all of our names, and what lives you took from us. You will know what we might have become.”

“Lori,” Loki said softly. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head sadly. “I thank you.” She walked up to him. “My fate, with what I’d summoned and what it did to me, what I was turning into... I asked you to. You couldn’t hear, but-”

“I did hear,” Loki whispered. “I touched your dreams, to be sure.”

She snapped, “You could have been-”

“I know. I had to be sure.”

She shook her head. “You’re still a fool, Loki, and should not have risked it. Come along. I will lead you. I welcomed my death, and owe you a debt for your mercy. You will hear my stories last.” She began walking.

Reluctantly, Loki followed, shuddering a little at the sound of so many footsteps behind them. “This will take a long time.”

“Yes it will,” said the raider. “My name was Jord.”

“I had nightmares about your face,” Loki said dully.

“You were a child, or damn close to it. I could tell. I still tried to kill you.”

“Thank you for failing.”

“It wasn’t by choice.”

“Oh, trust me, I know,” Loki sighed. The air was cold. He turned blue, to feel more comfortable, and listened to the life story of the first man he had ever killed, and the eerie sound of so many others following them. With each word, and each step, he felt his self-loathing deepening. Distantly, he reminded himself that he’d known this would be unpleasant.

It didn’t help.

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“How the hell...” Tony walked around the spot Loki had vanished. “That... wasn’t magic. What was it, even?”
“Your guess is as good as mine, sir,” JARVIS responded.

“What’s the status, Tony?” Natasha demanded. “And when can you get back to remotely hacking more of those gliders for us?”

“I’ve been away from that for five minutes, and this is sort of important.”

“You’re on the ground, we see. Why?”

“Well... notice how I’m sort of alone?”

“Yes, it’s noted.”

“Loki was here about ten minutes ago. One of the drones got footage. Usually when he vanishes, there’s an energy signature, some indication of disturbance. Not this time. A woman in a cloak appeared, or I thought she did and so did JARVIS, but it was like after we both remembered seeing her, she vanished from the footage and now in the video it looks like Loki just picks up Thanos’ corpse and steps forward and vanishes.”

“The woman, what did she look like?” Natasha asked.

“Long black cloak, hood, really pale. Her eyes were... really weird: black from lid to lid, but sort of... lit up at the center. Like stars.”

He heard Natasha’s sharp intake of breath.

“Familiar?”

“Tony... I think that was Mistress Death.”

“Ah... well, that would explain all of the things, actually. I’ll... get back to hacking.”

“You’re sure Thanos was dead?”

“Decapitation usually does the trick, yeah. Loki put his head in a bag.”

“Good. We’ll spread the good news. We’re already winning, but him being dead getting broadcast to all his troops might be enough to make them give up faster.”

“Or just flee,” Tony suggested.

“Right. You okay, Tony?”

Staring into thin air where Loki had been, Tony felt an ache of something between worry, disappointment, and regret. “I will be.”

“But you aren’t now?”

“Just... gonna miss the bastard.”

“We might too, a little. He was good, as an ally.”

“Yeah. Yeah, we should do that again sometime.”

“Without him trying to destroy the earth first, however half-assedly,” Natasha added. “Come back to the war, Tony. We’re almost done.”
“Ma’am yes ma’am,” he responded, and headed back to the glider.

~~

Loki had spoken to over a thousand corpses, and wasn’t even halfway done.

He was more tired than he had ever been in his life, and could no longer keep track of the passage of time. “How long have we been walking?” he asked Lori, a few times. She only shook her head at him sadly, and walked on.

By the time he spoke to the first victim of the bi-frost from Jotunnheim, Loki had done math in his head, based on each person’s story being roughly three hours (though some had been as long as five, or eight, and Loki was really regretting having killed such long-lived people if only because he wanted to stop walking sometime) and realized he had been walking for at least a year.

The thought was harrowing.

And there were so many giants, with such long lives, still to go.

Loki gripped the arc reactor a little tighter, and tried not to think about all that might have happened in over a year’s time.

~~

Tony slept for two days after the war. Mostly. Long naps interrupted by occasional intruder from S.H.I.E.L.D., a few meals, and a couple showers. Whenever he woke up, it felt strange, reminding himself there wasn’t a trickster god anywhere in the house. Or that there shouldn’t be, in theory.

Then he spent the next week in his lab building things and experimenting with magic, drunk, or both. After the second major explosion, he stopped doing them both at the same time because drunken magic was more dangerous than even just drunken science. And summoned strange things, on accident, sometimes, which had been messy. Things were too quiet.

Thor was back in Asgard. The world was safe again.

Loki was gone.

Pepper found him on one of the drinking days.

“I’m not great company right now,” he told her.

“I know. Trust me, I heard about the ‘summoning’ incident from Clint.”

“Yeah, that was a mistake.”

“Go to Asgard.”

“What?” He shot her an incredulous look.
“Once you sober up, and shower (seriously you need a shower) go to Asgard,” she repeated. “Learn more magic with Hlín, and maybe find out, when anyone finds out, whether he happened to come back from Death fine. I know it’s driving you crazy.”

He thought about it. “You’re brilliant.”

“I know.”

~~

There were children.

Loki was not okay with this.

He might have fallen to his knees and wept.

Children from Jotunnheim. The bi-frost had killed over a dozen of them. It would have killed far more, had Thor not stopped it, or if the timing had been wrong and he had hit a different part of the population. He had been lucky that there were not more.

Loki had tried so hard, for a long time, to convince himself that while he was a monster, he was a monster who deserved to live. Now, he was uncertain.

“Are you ever going to get up, scary man?” asked the corpse that had once been a little girl. “You’ve been there through my whole story.”

“I... am debating that very thing.” He forced himself to look up at her, and memorize her face. “I was not prepared for this. I was not... aware of this. I was a fool, to think... I am fool still. I never wish to be as great and unworthy a fool as I was the day that I carelessly murdered those whose lives and stories had not even yet begun.” He swallowed thickly. “I... do not know if I deserve to leave this place.”

The ghost frowned at him. “Because you killed me?”

“I did not even think... I should have known, destroying a whole world...” He shuddered. “I am a fool.”

“You have a heart,” Lori reminded. “You owe that world a debt.”

Loki breathed deeply for a few long moments. “Child, Alvhilde, wasn’t it?”

“Yes?”

“I am sorry I killed you.”

“I don’t forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t. I have to ask what you think of something, the others too.”

The other children of giants returned to him, stepping out of the dark and into the circle of light from the reactor. They stood very close.
“I can thaw the ice of Jotunnheim. There are people under it. More Jotunns, who are protected by strong old magics. I will risk my life to do it. I will bring back life where I have taken it. I already planned to do this, and I am capable of it. I cannot give back what I have taken, but what do you think of this? Do you approve of your world free from ice and darkness in most places? You have never seen grass, have you? Or beaches free of ice?”

They all shook their heads.

Loki put the arc reactor back up his sleeve and summoned an illusion around them, full of the memory of sunlight. It was one of his favorite places in the forests of Asgard, and the children murmured with wonder over it as it seemed to surround them. They could even feel a warm breeze on their faces, and laughed a little at the strangeness of it. “I am sorry I killed you, but I will never be that fool again. I swear to that. I swear it on my life.”

“You can really make Jotunnheim like this?” Alvhilde asked softly.

“I can. I will.”

“Why?”

“Because no one else can, and I owe your world a debt for the damages I’ve done to it. I do not want you to forgive me. I cannot forgive myself.”

The children looked at each other. “Thank you,” Alvhilde said. “Thank you for showing me. You should get up now. Hurry, please. My friends... I want my friends who aren’t here to see it too.”

Loki felt fresh tears run down his face. “I will show them.”

“Hurry, then. What are you waiting for?” one of the boys said.

A broken laugh escaped the trickster’s throat. The illusion faded, and Loki pulled himself up to his feet. When he drew the arc reactor back out, the children had vanished. Another giant stepped forward, older.

“Alvhilde was my daughter,” she said. “I don’t care what you plan to do. I wish I could kill you.”

“I wish you’d had the chance.”

“Me too.”

“What is your name?”

“Femja.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. And your death.”

“You dress like an Aesir, little one, but you are...”

“Laufey’s son. Raised by Odin as though I were Aesir. I became aware I wasn’t Aesir only a couple of millennia later.”

She nodded. “No wonder you are so broken.”

He laughed bitterly at that, loud and long.
The next to last one was Laufey.

To say that it became awkward from the moment they made eye contact would be a vast understatement.

Loki narrowed his eyes a little. “I’d prefer to skip you.”

“I am... compelled by Mistress Death’s wishes, or I would not be here,” Laufey responded. “I am aware that I am nothing to you.”

“Do you regret that? Do you regret leaving me to die?” the trickster inquired, genuinely curious. “I am under the impression you do not.”

“I regret that my actions led to my death,” said his father. “I am glad that I did not repeat the mistake, when your half-brother was also rather small.”

“What was my mother’s name?” Loki asked.

At that, Laufey looked pained. “You take after her, you know.”

“Thankfully.”

An amused noise from the taller Jotunn, at that. “She was Farbauti, and I was a fool to have her executed. That, I do regret. That she was strongly inclined to keep you, and I slightly unstable due to too-long exposure to the casket... that did lead to my decision to abandon you. I was hurt deeply by her betrayal.”

“That does not excuse any of your actions.”

“I do not want for excuses. I am dead. I have walked this way before, and discussed it with her.”

Loki swallowed thickly. “Did she mention me?”

“At length. She has watched you.” He sighed. “She is proud of you, for reasons I can scarcely fathom.”

“I’ve betrayed Asgard several times since your death, if that helps. They had... not told me what I was. I discovered it myself, very late.”

Laufey laughed softly. “Yes, I heard. That light you carry, what is it?”

Loki’s eyebrows raised. “It is a power generator, from Midgard.”

The older Jotunn looked still more puzzled. “Strange. What is it for?”

“It kept one mortal alive, for a long time. Then it powered a prison cell.”

“How very odd, that it lights your way here. The mortal must mean much to you.” He smirked a little at his son’s apparent shock at this. “You seem surprised.”

“He is an enemy, actually.”
“You really are a strange one, then.” Laufey shrugged.

Resolving to ask Hel about that later, Loki dropped the subject for now. “Any other family secrets I might like to know?”

“Your half-brother is king.”

“Oh, that is interesting.”

“He takes after me very strongly.”

Loki grinned, at that. “I’m going to thaw Jotunnheim.”

“You’re a fool. It is not possible.”

“It would be for Surtur.”

Laufey’s face fell.

Loki laughed, low and dark. “Go on, father. Tell me your story.”

A bit against his will, Laufey did, and his son listened to every word of it.

“And then you killed me,” it ended. “You cannot free Surtur.”

“I can and I will.” He made a face like that was only half true. “More or less. A bit. Not his magic, now that would be going a bit far. Just him. Leave on the manacles, run him until he can’t run anymore, and slowly melt most of the ice on the planet except at the poles. Then probably kill Surtur once he’s worn out. Once I’ve recovered, I might even bring in a few mages from Alfheim to get the forests rejuvenated because they will do it, knowing how some of them feel about trees. They’ll really liven up the place.”

“You would unmake all that I sought to spread,” Laufey sounded offended.

“You were wrong. Your kingdom was horrible, and honestly you were a pretty shoddy king. I’ll overthrow or kill my half-brother if he’s as much like you as you suggest in that regard. Odds are, there’s plenty of dissenters who won’t miss him.”

“You dare,” Laufey growled.

“You can’t touch me, father, so yes, I dare, and I’m enjoying it. You are a ghost. And your legacy is one that I will unmake. Also, great-grandmother would probably want me to tell you both ‘hello’ and ‘you made a series of terrible life choices’ on her behalf.”

His father’s eyes widened. “Not...”

“The first of the three. Did you ever learn her name?”

“H-Hretha.”

“Yes. I like her much better than I ever liked you. I think I’ll perpetuate her legacy instead. I’m glad we could have this chat, actually,” Loki mused. “Maybe there’s something to be said for closure after all.”

As Laufey faded, Lori stepped closer, taking the ex-king’s place at Loki’s side.
The trickster hesitated. “Or perhaps not. This is going to be depressing, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I did not wish to kill you. I was half in love with you,” Loki sighed.

“I didn’t know that part,” she mused.

“I... was afraid you liked Thor, and felt disinclined to find out that was the case.”

She made a face. “I did like him.”

“See?”

“I liked you more.”

Loki looked crushed. “Damn.”

She laughed at him softly, and began her tale.

~~

Tony’s first solo trip on the bi-frost had been awkward. Without an Aesir with him, he felt pretty sure no one would listen, but Hlín had sounded certain when she instructed him.

“So...” He said into the air, standing out on his balcony. He sighed and shouted, “Hey Heimdall! Beam me up, please?”

Surprisingly, that worked.

Heimdall shot him an unimpressed look. “Beam you up?”

“It’s... a reference.”

“I’m aware.”

Tony blinked a few timed. “What?” He gaped for a moment. “No really, what?”

The gold-eyed god laughed. “I see all.”

“But Star Trek?”

“Mortals tell very interesting stories, in interesting ways.”

“I’m still in shock, give me a second.”

“If you’d called me Scotty, we would have had a problem.”

“You are officially the weirdest god I’ve met. Even Loki doesn’t know Star Trek.”

“Actually, he does. He watched it after you tried to explain it to him.”

“Okay, that’s creepy.”
“What interested me was how he let his guard down more, around you. That’s the most time he’s been in my sight just casually, since he fell. He didn’t care that I could see him at all.”

“Did you see him taken?”

He shook his head.

“Did you maybe see him come back?”

Heimdall nodded. “Very briefly, in Helheim. He... did not seem well. His children found him, and he was again lost from my sight.”

Tony felt tension in his shoulders he hadn’t even known was there loosen, and breathed out silently. “Good.”

“You were worried?” the god raised an eyebrow.

“Well. Death didn’t seem happy with him. That’s never a good thing.”

“True enough.”

Tony rubbed his hands together. “Now I get to go learn magic.” He then vanished.

Heimdall shook his head. “Mages.”

~~

When Loki reached the end of the path, and the end of Lori’s story, he stood at the foot of a long stairway. At the top, stood Mistress Death, holding a torch. Loki put the reactor back up his sleeve, and stepped into the warmer light, though he felt no less cold for it. He stood before her, and she held out her hand. He placed the soul-prison in her palm, and she closed her fingers around it. When she reopened her hand, it was gone, and her palm was again expectant, even as flesh faded, leaving only bone.

Loki unhooked the bag from his belt and placed it in her hand.

She accepted it, and held out her other arm.

He lowered Thanos’ body and she caught it without trouble.

She nodded approval.

“That... was the single most unpleasant experience of my life,” he rasped.

“Ready for another?” She smiled unpleasantly.

Loki shivered. “Please no.”

“One more for you. You will feel the pain of every ghost your spoke to, that they felt when you killed them. This is my price, if you wish to leave this place.”

The trickster took a deep breath, and shut his eyes. “Then do it. I have work to do. Please,” he
whispered, his voice unsteady. He was met with silence for long minutes, until he opened his eyes. They were in Helheim, suddenly, and Thanos’ remains were nowhere in sight; although Loki could feel he was still on the... wrong side, as it were: the side which was not for the living. Mistress Death touched his face gently. “I am glad you are leaving, but I will miss you. You made children smile, and shared dreams with them, and that I did not expect. Thank you.”

He leaned into her touch, just for a moment.

Then the pain struck. It felt like it lasted as long as the walk.

He returned to the world of the living still screaming, blinded by it even once it stopped. Shaking, he fell to his knees, tears freezing on his face as they fell. It was a full minute before the ache faded entirely. A few minutes more and he felt a huff of warm air near his face and flinched, looking up through a haze of disorientation.

“You don’t look so good,” Fenrir said gently.

Loki squinted at him. “How long have I been gone?” he asked, his voice barely a gravel whisper.

“Father, are you okay?” Hel took hold of his shoulders.

Loki then passed out.

~~

It was days before the trickster awoke again.

He felt a hand on his face and opened his eyes.

“Hello,” Hel said.

“I... am unwell.”

“Yes, you are,” she responded. There was a clatter and Fenrir’s more human-like face appeared, chin resting on his sister’s shoulder.

“You look better. Also the lack of further screaming is good. I’ve never heard you sound like that.”

His brow furrowed deeply. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“I have no plans to repeat that ordeal,” Loki groaned. “None.” A moment of fear touched his expression. “How long has it been since the war I just left?”

His children exchanged worried looks.

“Tell me,” he said. “Please.”

Fenrir coughed. “It was a while.”

Loki felt very cold. “How. Long?”

“Only an hour, father,” Hel said. “Fenrir is cruel.”
“You know what he was thinking?” the wolf muttered.

“I know who he was thinking of, that’s no reason to do that,” Hel chided. “Good job, though, I think he’s finally admitted what that loss would have done to him.”

Loki glared at both of them. “It’s times like this I realize I deserve you both, and shudder in horror.”

Hel smiled a little, and Fenrir chuckled.

“It’s because we love you. You haven’t accidentally outlived anyone, I promise. No one you might worry over, just the usual array of strangers,” Hel said.

The trickster rubbed a hand over his face. “I... have a problem.”

“No way,” Fenrir deadpanned. “Singular? I don’t believe it.”

“Father,” Hel intoned gravely, “you have many problems.”

“I was given a task, and I want to ask you something, Hel. I was given a burden, a corpse, a box for his soul, and a light... what is the significance of the light?”

Hel’s eyebrows raised. “It is symbolic, yes. Most people get lanterns, if they’re still alive. Were you alone?”

“No.”

She grimaced. “I am so sorry.”

Fenrir whimpered a question.

“Everyone I ever killed,” Loki explained. “I know all of their names, and have heard the stories of each life.” He swallowed tightly. “I don’t wish to discuss that further at present, there is much weighing on my mind. The light?”

“Most people get lanterns, or torches. The light is hope. The lantern, your heart.”

Loki put a hand over his face and left it there. He swore quietly.

“What was yours?” Hel asked.

“According to Pepper Potts, an item which might be considered ‘Evidence Tony Stark Has a Heart,’” he groaned. “I have. A problem.”

They giggled at him a little, and he lowered his hand to shoot them a glare.

“So your next scheme is to figure out how to keep him?” Hel inquired.

“Apparently. After I thaw Jotunnheim.” He thought about it. “I can take a temporary measure in the interim.” He started to smirk. “I just... need him alive. It will take time, to convince him that he can trust me. I do not yet know how to do it, but I need to know he will have more time. I can live with that. Just knowing he’s there.” He looked at both of his children and cleared his throat. “Your thoughts?”

“I like him, against my better judgement,” Fenrir said.

“You want help, don’t you?” Hel said flatly.
“Maybe,” Loki admitted. “Just a... little delivery and complex undetectable spell-work for subterfuge. Shape-shifting into the form of a pretty human-looking woman will be necessary, briefly. I need it to be done before he goes after the Ten Rings. I will be busy with their dragon, during that time.” He grinned. “I have a plan.”

Said the wolf, “Count me in. I want some roast dragon, though.”

“Call it a deal,” Loki approved.

“Excellent,” Fenrir agreed.
Tony has a chat with Fenrir and further contemplates his own mortality with increasing discomfort. Loki begins to canvass Jotunnheim, and also meets with his half-brother, the new king. Jane has reason to celebrate and golden fruit appears. A dragon is released.

Then things get fucked up.

Tony did not expect visitation by random wolf in the middle of trying to tap into associative spell components. Believing that just because a person has knowledge of a thing, and its name, that it can be remotely affected, was where the inventor had trouble suspending disbelief, which with magic is a real problem.

“I think... I think I just remotely turned Thor’s hair pink,” he said. “That wasn’t what I was aiming to do... but I’ll take it.”

“He’s used to it,” Fenrir said. “If anything, it will remind him of when Loki was younger and more playful and harmless in application of his pranks.”

Tony jumped a little. “When did you get... here?” It was a bit disconcerting to see a horse-sized wolf romp up to someone happily, tail wagging, and nuzzle at their hands, but that was precisely what he did to Hlín.

“Ah, my most unconventional student,” she greeted. “You appear well, but I was not expecting any visitors. Why have you come?”

“I’m delivering news around. Father isn’t dead, figured you might want to know,” the wolf offered, and settled with a content huff when she dug her fingers into the fur behind his ears and scratched roughly there.

The inventor blinked a few times in quick succession at the usually stoic elder mage being so cuddly with a giant wolf, then shrugged it off.

“I am indeed. Is he well?”

“Not yet. He looks a bit deathy, but he’ll recover. Not a pleasant experience, was his deal with Death and the fulfilling thereof,” Fenrir admitted.

“What exactly happened?” Tony asked.

The wolf peered at him, oddly expressive (for a canid) face wearing a distinctly shrewd expression. “Why do you wish to know?”

“I’m possessed of irrepressible curiosity about all things. I’m told It’s a common thing with mages?” He didn’t move as the massive creature circled him, furry sides rubbing along his back, pushing and
leaning, but not enough to knock him off his feet, a bit like a giant cat more than anything canine; although the way he kept his eyes fixed on Tony’s face the whole time was very... something else inhuman but closer to something a human-like alien would do. It was also a bit intimidating. “I uh... what are you doing?”

Fenrir raised one shoulder and foreleg in the equivalent of a shrug. “I’m possessed with similar irrepressible curiosity. You’re odd.”

“Says the Asgardian magical equivalent of the singularity with a soul.”

The wolf chuckled, and sat back on his haunches, near Hlín, who reached out casually with one hand, scratching at his neck so he leaned a little into her touch. “He was confronted with everyone he has ever killed, as he walked the pathway usually reserved only for the dead on their journey from their bodies to Death’s domain. He carried Thanos’ body, and his head, and a light, and the Titan’s soul in a little box. As he walked, each life he ever took told him their names, and their stories. It took so long to speak to them all, and with so many of them formerly very long-lived with long stories to tell, that it must have felt like he had been walking for almost half a century. Then he was given the pain of each death to sample, at the end, before he was sent back to us. He arrived back in Helheim still screaming. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Tony whistled. “Actually It raises more questions, but damn that sounds awful.” He tried very, very hard not to think about how many deaths he had on his own hands, and how he’d want to kill himself before he even reached the end of that journey, by a long shot. He didn’t even have faces to put on most of the numbers. He used to try to find them, but had to stop. It hadn’t been good for him.

Fenrir nodded. “As I say. He will recover, in time. In reality, he was gone no more than an hour, before she sent him back. Death takes her pains not to overstep, and take too much time out of a life, when she makes a deal, but he was not clear-headed. He was a bit distressed at all he might have missed, in the time he was away.”

Tony grimaced, at that. The idea of Loki gone that long was just—wrong. *Do not want.* “He does have plans within plans, and all. And promises left to keep. I wouldn’t wait that long to take out the Ten Rings, for one, so he’d be down a dragon, which I still don’t know what he needs that thing for. Not sure I want to.”

Hlín’s brow furrowed. “A dragon?”

“Nothing to worry about. I plan to eat it,” Fenrir said cheerfully.

The inventor snorted. “Seriously?”

“They’re delicious, when roasted. Mmm... Makluan.”

The elder mage chided, like they had discussed this at length many times before, “That’s another sentient being, Fenrir.”

“Also a delicious one that will become very quickly angry with my father, in the end, and a threat to his life perhaps. It would be wasteful not to savor the tasty, tasty remains,” the wolf huffed. “I consider it a matter of thrift.”

“That thing, you know, is way bigger than you,” Tony pointed out.

Fenrir’s lips pulled back from his teeth in the sort of grin that a true wolf might consider a threat, given his ears were forward and he held Tony’s gaze steadily. It was one of the most frightening expressions the inventor had seen, on anything or anyone. “This is not actually the shape I am most
known for. For some years, I was, as the stories do suggest, rather monstrous. I will have plenty of appetite to dispose of a dragon, even one the size of Phyen Fjiang Fhoulm.”

“Is... that dragon seriously called Fin Fang Foom?”

“Your accent is atrocious,” the wolf sighed.

“To be fair, I’m limited to a human vocal range and don’t have All-speak.”

“Fair.” Another half-shrug from Fenrir.

“I do not envy him that experience,” Hlín said slowly, “but I do think perhaps, in the long run, it will be good for him. He made it out, and did speak with every one. Few men such as he truly have strength enough for that. I am... almost surprised that he found enough within himself to value, to keep walking.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “I wouldn’t have, I can tell you that.”

Fenrir’s head tilted to one side, ears cocked forward in curiosity. “How many deaths have you on your hands, to say that? You are a hero, are you not?”

The inventor offered his own broken, cold smile in return. It did not meet his eyes, and made his pupils resemble cave-mouths with bleak and unfathomable depths. “I play one on TV, but that’s just packaging. Iron Man is a hero. Tony Stark is a jackass and a reckless asshole whose willful ignorance and deliberate lack of care for the consequences of his actions put the best and most advanced and creatively murderous weapons in the world into all the wrong hands. My ideas were all for the designing murder machines of various kinds, and I didn’t bother to make absolutely certain they only murdered bad guys. I left it to other people, because really what did I care? I was just the engineer, sometimes the mechanic. I don’t even know how many I’d have waiting for me, but it’s not a small number. It would be a long walk.”

The wolf blinked a bit. “Ah. That explains very much.”

“Don’t it just,” Tony sighed, suddenly weary.

Fenrir’s brow furrowed with something like concern, but also realization.

“What’s that look for?” the inventor asked, sounding a little perturbed.

“You’re very human,” the wolf said quietly. “I had... actually forgotten.”

With a faint snort, Tony mocked, “Well what’d you think I was?”

“Less fragile. Less... brief.”

“Aesir?”

The wolf shook his head. “I can’t imagine you enjoying living in Asgard. You’d be bored, once you learned her tricks as they are, and so few new ones were forthcoming. This place is too slow for you. Jotunn, maybe, I suppose. You’re very Jotunn-like.”

Tony tried to wrap his head around that. “Like... pre-ice?”

“Well, obviously. You’re not very frosty and while fire is now in your nature, you would not fit in well, in Muspellheim,” Fenrir remarked.
“Loki isn’t... well, actually, ‘frosty’ does sort of work as a description with him, when he’s really ticked off. His anger is very cold,” Tony mused.

“So is his sadness. His grief, however, melts the strength out of him like icicles placed too close to flame,” Hlín added.

“Oh, tell your dad I think he might be right about Extremis. He did good work on it, but it’s not going to fix the aging problem. It might be feasible to add a ‘reset point’ but even that would break down, over time, and require some dangerous re-application processes that might cause me to all sort of spontaneously combust. Or I might become a Timelord... don’t tell him that Timelord bit; he won’t get the reference.”

Fenrir gave a slightly petulant growl. “Giving up on immortality?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“That’s what they all say,” Tony chuckled. “I’m only giving up on that particular route. There are others, they’re just... more difficult, or more inexplicable, and I need data on all of them, but it’s like people on earth who have been trying to convert base matter into gold and failing; there’s been a lot of research and so many brains on par with mine who spent their whole lives on that stuff that there’s no way it won’t... take me a long time. JARVIS can process a lot of it to show all the dead ends, and weed out the near-misses, but even then, there’s a ridiculous amount of data and I’ve got a lot of other shit to do. The world won’t stop needing me to do amazing things for it to keep it around and bring the shining future it can have just because I’m still sort of aging and find the idea of being middle-aged and thus halfway used-up mortality-wise deeply disturbing, you know?”

That concerned-and-all-too-understanding look was on the wolf’s face again. “Stop it. Stop making me like you. It’s not fair if you’re so fleeting,” he muttered, bristling a little, though his voice was mostly petulant.

“Don’t underestimate me. Extremis has probably lengthened my lifespan as it is, and the rest is mostly vanity and greed, but this is me here, and my vanity and desire are pretty much forces of nature to be reckoned with,” Tony retorted, with a grin. “Don’t count me out yet, Balto.”

“Don’t call me that. I’ve heard that story,” the wolf muttered, eyes narrowing. “And I am offended. He was a dog.”

“Wow, sorry,” Tony said quickly. “My bad. I just... nickname people.”

“You could’ve at least gone with Big Bad Wolf, or something.”

“I felt it was way too obvious, come on. I bet you get that every week.”

“Well, sometimes,” Fenrir admitted. “If I talk to a few mortal souls those weeks.”

“You and fuckin’ Heimdall, man, have deeply disconcerting knowledge of earthly pop culture. I’m used to Thor, or even Sif McDuck and Huey, Dewey and Louie-”

Fenrir barked a laugh at that.

“That! You, knowing that! I cannot handle Fenrir plus Disney cartoons, what the actual fuck, dude?” Tony accused.
The wolf was still laughing going so far as to drape one paw over his muzzle to try and contain the giggling, his whole body shaking with the effort. It was one of the most ridiculous sights the mortal inventor had ever beheld. “You... you don’t even know. When I was small I called Sif grumpy all the time, and I still do, and you’ve super-imposed her grim and frowning expression over Scrooge McDuck’s, in my mind, and I can never unsee the results,” Fenrir wheezed, between sniggers.

Tony bowed deeply with a flourish. “You are most welcome.”

“I have no idea what is going on, but I think both of you boys are utterly absurd creatures,” Hlín intoned with mild exasperation, as the wolf rolled onto the floor a bit, before sitting back up, clearing his throat and dragging his paw down his face.

“I love being absurd. I have more fun,” Fenrir sighed happily, still winded from laughing. “Tony Stark, I commend you, and am appalled, all at once.”

“That’s generally what I aim to achieve,” the inventor mused. “I still can’t believe you’ve seen the cartoon.”

“No, actually. I’ve heard the stories, and the dead do sometimes where the most inexplicable t-shirts, you know,” the wolf said. “That’s where I’ve seen the awkwardly-proportioned humanoid duck creatures. Disney is a very strange thing.”

“That’s more like it,” Tony sighed. “Back on familiar ground.”

“The mouse disturbs me,” Fenrir said gravely.

The inventor sniggered. “Stop, please.”

“Fenrir-wolf, monster of the river Ván, deeply uneasy because of a mouse,” Hlín mused, sounding deeply amused now herself.

“You haven’t seen its eyes,” the wolf muttered darkly.

“You are interrupting a lesson,” the teacher chided.

Fenrir’s ears flicked back meekly and he lowered his head so it was below hers. “Perhaps I can assist?” he suggested quietly.

“You’re avoiding something,” Hlín accused.

“I’m to have words with Odin, but I don’t want to. I’m happy to admit that I would love an excuse to put it off for an hour or so, until Frigga is with him, because I at least like Frigga these days,” Fenrir said, unabashed. “What’s the lesson?”

“Associative connections between spell-caster and where or at whom a spell is aimed,” Tony sighed.

“But that’s so easy,” Fenrir said, sounding lost.

“Well, you’re pretty much from the astral plane, of course it’s easy to you,” Tony shot back. “I’m not used to this sort of... intuitive and not very concrete stuff. It’s hard for me to believe any of it will work because physics.”

“Oh right. You build things.” The wolf nodded. “Mages who also spent much of their lives on smithwork do tend to grumble about this sort of thing.”

“I have every right to grumble. The things, they make no sense.”
“You’re still seeing too much abstract, and denying the concreteness of connections between minds and concepts on the astral plane and how it works there. It’s like dreaming, but not,” Fenrir suggested. “In a dream, transition happen just because of these associative connections in the mind, and how thoughts shift and move. Associative connections, for spell-work, do require weakening the barriers between that plane and the physical, more so than most other spells, because you are essentially using it as a portal, almost. You are sending it through dream, or what dream is sort of made of. Dreams, ideas, concepts, shared landmarks in your mental map and those of all other living things.”

Tony hummed, frowning a little. “That does make some sense, I guess. Seems like a bit of a cheat, though.”

“You’re hacking reality. Of course it’s a cheat,” Fenrir said. “Take advantage of it.”

The inventor snorted. “Fair enough. Let’s try again, then.”

“You may stay,” Hlín said, smiling a little at the way the wolf perked up at that, and Tony’s rather more confident third attempt at his spell.

Loki was confident enough in his abilities, and stir-crazy enough to lack patience to await his full recovery, to make his way to Jotunnheim just over four weeks after his return to the land of the living. He was more than two-thirds recovered, in the magic department, and physically quite himself again, albeit a little harrowed.

He walked, with occasional teleports to get to high places, and memorize as much of the lay of the land, over as much of the world, as he could. It was only three days into his surveys (going back to Helheim when he required rest and sustenance) before he was noticed by the locals. It was a few days further before they began visibly tracking and following him, with intent to approach, and eventually Loki approached them in return after one week of taunting. They were puzzled by him: clearly a frost giant, all in shades of blue and red like themselves, but wearing travel-garb with little armor, of clearly Aesir style.

“I am Loki Laufeyson,” he told them. They stepped back. He grinned.

“You are bold to walk the paths of this world like you are looking for something, trickster,” one of the women said. She was a few feet taller than Laufey had been, and yet did not seem to think Loki less a danger, despite his small size. “We know who aimed the bi-frost at us, and you were then called Odinson.”

“That man has lost the right to claim me, and has yet to re-earn it. He hid from me what I was, and I, a mage, had the foundation of my identity overturned. It shattered me, and I was more than a bit insane when I undertook those actions, but not enough to excuse them. I have apologized to each of the dead, and can tell you all of their names. Most did not forgive me, which suits me well. I don’t deserve it.”

The other Jotunns exchanged glances warily.

“One of the children,” one of the male warriors dared.
Loki’s eyes fell shut, pain crossing his expression for a moment. “Cruel question.”

“Cruel actions,” he shot back.

“Alvhilde,” the trickster said.

The warrior’s eyes narrowed. “My niece.”

“Her mother was Femja, who would have killed me, if allowed. I met them in Helheim, and not the side which the living usually walk.”

“Two names will not prove that.”

“It would take me days to list all of them,” Loki said blithely.

“What is your purpose here, trickster?”

“To unmake my father’s legacy, and that of his father before him.” His smile was quietly fearsome.

His audience was clearly baffled. “What?” asked another of the women.

“I plan to thaw out the planet so that it’s slightly less depressing to visit, and to free survivors long trapped beneath the ice and revive the more respectable civilizations that once thrived here,” he explained. “It’s quite simple. I just need to map out a few things to make sure waters flow towards where the seas once were, and where lakes and rivers were once less solid.

They all clearly now considered him to be a crazed and broken creature.

“You’re mad.”

“Oh yes.” His smile only widened. “You really should take me to your king, should you not? I believe he may wish to know of my plans, and I should at least warn him, perhaps.”

That seemed to disturb them further.

“He will far from approve of your plans,” the first warrior said, her eyes a bit distant. She did not sound inclined to deal with the king, and the others seemed similarly not afraid, but a little exasperated. “Most likely, he will not even believe them.”

“So perhaps I should deliver myself? I wouldn’t wish to impose his displeasure on any messengers. Is his pride so easily bruised, these days?”

They all relaxed a little, at that, and regarded him more shrewdly.

“You’re perceptive,” said one of the so-far silent males among them, “particularly for a complete lunatic.”

Loki winked at all of them brazenly. “It’s a specialty. Now... where is his highness, and what is his name?”

“You... do not know his name?” The words came from the smallest of them, who was androgynous and wiry, chest wrapped decoratively in fabric covered in protective sigils: a mage, perhaps.

“I didn’t think to ask Laufey’s corpse when I had the chance. I was busy making him angry,” the trickster said simply.
“Býleistr,” the smallest said, and pointed north-west. “A day’s ride in that direction. Go.”

He bowed, pressing a closed fist against his shoulder. “My thanks, päällikkö.”

The slightly fey Jotunn who had instructed him smiled faintly, impressed that the trickster had known the title to use, and which of those around him held that leadership position. “Perceptive indeed.”

“I bid your village well. I mean you and yours no harm. I will keep the flood waters directed away from your homes as much as possible. You carved them into some of the only exposed stone in the area, so they should suffer minimally,” he said.

They all looked a bit disconcerted, and unsure what to think of his words, and the insinuation that he had observed them before, near or at their dwellings, and remembered them now.

“I do recommend that you perhaps shelter the neighbors you like, when I begin.”

“That is fair. I am Kaata Eevulilapsi,” hän said. “I have known only winter all my life, and I am curious about the alternative. I know what this world was like before the ice, and I do not find the idea of returning to that wholly unpleasant.”

Loki nodded, thoughtful. “Thank you.” He then vanished.

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“Tony...” Rhodey sounded exasperated.

“I mean seriously, doesn’t that sound fucked up to you?”

“Tony.”

“That said... I’d pay good money to see how that went with his dad. I mean... not knowing the guy was his dad until just a few years ago after hating him all that time anyway, then the added hate and abandonment angst, then the bit where he conned the guy and murdered him in a patricide/regicide combo move? Then he has to chat with him in the land of the dead? The awkward. I can feel it even now.”

“Tony.”

“What?”

His friend stared at him for a long moment. “You’re doing it again.”

“This is—different. It’s new news.”

Rhodey sighed and let his head fall back to rest atop the back of the couch. “Yes, admittedly, that sounds pretty fucked up. What’s my dad’s name again?”

“... Gerald?”

“Nope.”

“Dammit. To be fair, I never met him.”
“You never met ‘Laufey’ either.”

“No, but it was practically a part of Loki’s own name in S.H.I.E.L.D. records for a long while, because space-vikings and patronymic names. Cut me a little slack.”

“I would not want to go on a walk like that,” Rhodey sighed.

“I know, right? Seriously. I do not look forward to death.”

“I thought you wanted to be immortal.”

“Well, yeah. Duh. That... by the way, that isn’t working out so well.”

The soldier lifted his head and his eyebrow, almost in unison, meeting Tony’s gaze. “Giving up?”

“Only on Extremis. Looking into alternatives.”

“Yeah, Bruce asked me if there was any way to prevent you borrowing his biology equipment at will. It’s your new obsession. So... cracked the Captain America riddle, yet?”

“Yes, but it’s not viable.”

“... Are you serious?”

“Well, correction: it’s not viable for me. I’d go red-skull or Hulk-lite or worse, and no one wants any of that.”

Rhodey blinked a few times. “What?”

“You, actually, it might work for. You’re... actually a good person.”

“Shit, this is serious. You only compliment me when you’re serious and possibly secretly gonna die. Tony, reassure me you aren’t dying again?”

“I’m not... but yeah, I figured out the serum. It wasn’t actually too hard once I nicked a small blood sample and broke down his genome... Don’t look at me like that.”

“Only you, Tony.”

“Anyway, I, uh, ran a few tests on my blood in combination with it. There’s—almost some magic-like qualities to the reactions. It sort of taps into associative planar breakage, in dangerous ways. The results of the changes it made to my samples... weren’t pretty. It’d destroy me. I’d be a monster. Not an option.”

“That sucks.”

“It really, really does,” Tony muttered, each syllable heavy with bitterness.

“You really want this.”

The inventor frowned. “I want more time. I need more time. I’m not... it’s not fair if I’m temporary. I’ve got too much to do that only I can do, and too much left to learn that I’m greedy enough to want time for even if I don’t deserve it.”

“You okay?”
“Not really, no. I’m stuck on trying to become a god.”

“Is... is this about Loki?” Rhodey sounded a little incredulous.

“It’s partly mid-life crisis and wanting to have time to... yeah maybe figure out how to solve that riddle.”

“Riddle?”

“Fuckin’ Loki. Okay? I said it. If he can get trapped outside of time so long he thought fifty years or more had passed, what if next time it takes longer than an hour, back in the regular time stream, for him to get out? What if I don’t even know about it, let alone how to get him out? I need to be able to go where he goes, and dammit, he’s had millennia to get that good; I really need more time if I’m going to be able to touch that.”

Rhodey was staring. “Holy shit.”

“What?”

“You had to go and find a god to find someone other than Pepper Potts you feel torn up about being unworthy of.”

Tony sighed. “It’s not about worth. It’s about reach. With Pep... she’s too good for me in ways I can’t fix. With Loki, he’s actually pretty much an asshole. He’s killed probably about as many innocent people as my weapons-”

“No, listen. He’s a dick. He’s got a moral compass that points down instead of north or south, or always towards his own neck and sometimes toward the few people he values more than himself, and he’s a wreck. He’s a mess. I don’t need to be worthy of him, we’re both fuck-ups. I just need to be able to catch up with him and that... that I can do. With time.” The inventor ran a hand through his hair. “Immortality is easier for a genius asshole like me to achieve than trying to be worthy of someone with a pure heart, so loving and wonderful I could never... be right for her. I hurt her too much, you know I did, just by existing as who and what I am. I’m damned lucky she even tried.”

“You’re getting self-loathing everywhere again.”

“There’s a lot to hate about me.”

“Well, I can’t argue that, exactly, but I do love you like a brother, Tony Stark. You’re a dick, but I love you. You do right by us as best you can, and you’re more generous with us, and your heart with us, than you really realize. That’s what keeps us around. You don’t bullshit, with us, and while you’re caustic and bitter, we can see that you care, and how deep that goes, and I know what you’d do for those you care about better than you might think. Pepper does, too, and though she’s a little more uneasy over it, she does still appreciate it. And you.”

Tony slumped until his head rested on his friend’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

“You need it sometimes. Under all the ego, you really are hard on yourself.”

“I know I’m damned good at being a genius, but as far as being a decent human goes, there’s room for improvement.”

“Well, yeah. And I’ll continue to keep you in line when you’re too much of a dick.”
“Same to you, boo-boo.”

“Ugh. Save your pet names for your trickster god.”

“He’s not mine,” Tony muttered. *Not yet.*

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Loki reflected that the king’s hall was less drab than it had been under Laufey, ice less bland and blank, instead carved with images from history, but those images were of the war with Asgard, of the ice descending over the planet, and were full of perceived glory. Having seen the arabesques and high arched ceilings of the ice-works in Nifleheim, the trickster could not help feeling deeply unimpressed.

Striding into the hall, surrounded by the armed guards who had discovered him outside, which he had mostly ignored once they were at least persuaded to lead him to the throne room, Loki carried himself with casual arrogance and maintained an expression of deep amusement, all the way up to the foot of the throne.

The guards drew away from him, though he remained within reach of their weapons, if not their hands.

Býleistr was taller than his father had been, but by mere inches. He bore similar markings on his face and chest, but wore a little more armor, of Jotunn style. It did not cover much, given his skin was still his best weapon. Judging by how the other Jotunns about the court wore similarly more coverings than the last time the trickster visited Jotunnheim, before the bi-frost, Loki surmised that it was simply the new fashion.

The king stared down at Loki with bored curiosity, but it twisted into malice as soon as Loki greeted, “Hello, brother mine.” Then the younger Jotunn was on his feet, stepping down, kneeling slightly so that they stared at one another, eye to eye for a long moment.

“You are no brother of mine,” he growled.

“I am Loki son of Farbauti and of Laufey, and I believe our father might reluctantly beg to differ.”

“Given that you murdered him in cold blood, I beg to differ.”

“He told me of you, just recently. I was in the land of the dead, paying a debt,” Loki purred. “So I happen to know just a little better.”

A snarl touched the younger Jotunn’s features for a moment. “Tell me, Loki Silver-tongue, Loki king-slayer, why I should not murder you where you stand?” He then flinched as the illusion before him faded.

Behind him, causing Býleistr to stand up straight and spin about to face him, Loki called down from his perch on the throne, “I would be amused to see you try, little king. I am not defenseless, and I have killed far more powerful creatures than yourself.”

A susurration of wonder from the surrounding court made the younger Jotunn bristle with renewed anger. “You overstep your place. It is not only I you should worry about, little liar.”
“Oh, I don’t know about that. Perhaps it is the curse of Laufey’s sons that while we may be respected, it cannot be said by any stretch of the imagination that we are universally well-liked or trusted,” mused the trickster. “Change is on the wind.”

“You challenge me?”

“I do not want your throne, if that is your fear.”

Býleistr raised an eyebrow, expectant and questioning.

Loki grinned, wide and wolfish. “Nothing so small, no. I merely plan to overthrow an entire empire of ice, and unmake its hold on the whole of your world.”

“That is impossible,” the younger Jotunn sounded amused.

“For most. Not for me.” Loki’s grin widened further. “I will bring you fire. You cannot stop me. I am older and wiler than any mages loyal enough to you, and foolish enough to try and challenge me, and your ice cannot hold me. If you are a king, you will inform your people that a storm is coming, and prepare them. If not, I have already told some of them my intentions, and they will do it for you, and you will be resented for having done nothing.”

“Why should I not mobilize them against you?” Býleistr growled.

“I am all that will stand between the rage of the fire, and any passerby. I will be the focus, I will wear down ice and fire until both are spent, and only then will the fire die. Only then will it even be possible to stop it. This is two forces of nature, vastly powerful and monstrous, wreaking havoc on your world, so that it may come back to life, and unlock the lands and people and history so thoughtlessly sealed away for so long. If you will lead your people well, you may see them into a new era of healing and prosperity. There are mages, beneath the ice, older than I by far. I know not how powerful they may be, and I have no kingdom for them to ally with. They will live in your world and you will want them on your side if you do not want me to unravel this last piece of our family’s legacy: your throne. I will take it from you if you do not deserve it, brother dear, with the authority of the Three of Nifleheim behind me.”

Gasps and whispers erupted throughout the crowd and the king’s expression darkened, yet turned less petulant a little, and more shrewd. He was considering.

Loki held his stare, and let him have a few moments to collect his word and bank the fires of his rage, if he had the capability and control to do so.

“You know the Three?” Býleistr inquired.

“I am welcome in their city, favored of the first of the Three. She is my kin.”

The king’s eyes narrowed, as the trickster let the ambiguity of his words lie for him. No need to tell him from which line Loki drew that connection; in truth, knowing Hretha, she would never have bothered to mention if she knew because he was Laufey’s son, he was also Farbauti’s, and knew him her kin for that reason instead; he really hadn’t asked yet, but it occurred to him to do so later.

Asked the king, “Do you act here on her orders? That would be a surprise, Lie-smith, from you.”

“The ideas were mine. I presented them to her. She did not dislike them, but nor is she aiding me. It is the way of things, for those of us who find kingship... tedious. I’ve tried it, in Asgard, you know, for a brief while.”
“You aimed the bi-frost at my people in that time, yes,” his brother accused.

“I never said I did a very good job. It’s far too limiting, being stuck in the spotlight like that. I couldn’t get anything done properly, because I had to leave it to other people. I can’t stand that,” Loki sighed. “So restrictive, so weighted down with formality and the restraint necessary to maintain polite relations with other worlds. No, I’m much more of a diplomat, a facilitator, and a provocateur. Kings aren’t allowed to provoke, not really, not to maintain peace and keep people safe, no. I live to provoke, to evoke, to foment, to kindle, to instigate and to inflame.” He chuckled, just a little. “Not to pacify. What of you, brother? What of you, Býleistr Laufeyson? What sort of king are you?”

Straightening, so that he was eye to eye with his smaller, elder brother, where the trickster lounged in the king’s high throne lazily as though it did not dwarf him so much as accommodate his indolent sprawl, Býleistr gave a thoughtful hum. “You said that you have already informed some of my people of your plans.”

“I did. A chief and several of hänen warriors.”

“What did they say of it? What are their thoughts?”

“A good question. I was told that their clan knows this world’s history, and all that it once was, before the ice, and despite having known only winter all their lives... they aren’t averse to change, to bringing back what was lost. I believe their chief, particularly, being a mage if I do not miss my guess, is curious and inclined to desire change and growth over stagnation.”

“When do you plan to bring this fire?”

Intrigued, the older god elaborated, “Nine days’ time.”

“How?”

“As I please.”

Býleistr’s eyes narrowed. “Who is it?”

Loki noted that bit of perceptiveness. “Am I not enough?”

“No.”

A giggle. “You’re quite right, I am not, but I am damned difficult to capture.”

Býleistr nodded. “A son of Muspellheim? Here?”

Oh so you’re capable of impressive clever, Loki mused. An improvement, over the previous king. “You’re reaching, now.”

“You’re impressed,” the king shot back. “I think I’m right, in my reaching.”

“Who was your mother?” Loki asked. You certainly did not get this wit from Laufey, he felt, was implied.

“I might tell you, if you tell me who you are bringing.”

Loki considered, then shrugged. “You will know... in nine days.”

“Your magic needs less time than that to recover,” Býleistr observed. “What other errands have you to run, I wonder.”
“Mostly my own. No business of yours.” Nor of Nifelheim’s he thought, and implied in his tone. Hretha’s advice aside. “Although I tell you now, that I will be making contacts in Alfheim tomorrow. A few earth mages owe me debts, and others there I can persuade simply to rise to the challenge of bringing back the various flora and fauna which the ice rendered extinct on this world, but which some populations of are still preserved in the wilder gardens of Alfheim, whose maintainers simply cannot bear to see such things forever lost.

The king considered, looking a little daunted by sudden understanding of that undertaking and, perhaps, a deeper understanding of just how much the ice had destroyed, and how much damage there truly was, and some of what vast efforts would be needed to be in order to heal them. “I see...”

“My question to you, Býleistr, is how much does the ice mean to you?” Loki asked suddenly, sharply. “Our father, and his father before him, believed it to be the key to their power. The ice is their empire and their legacy: destruction, death, darkness, and unyielding winter is how they conquered this world and the foundation of your throne, young king. I plan to destroy it. Your thoughts on that?”

Býleistr visibly hesitated, which was better than the trickster had honestly expected. “I would make a request of you, first, trickster.”

“I’m listening.”

“Return within five days’ time. I will spend those days speaking with my people, and asking them all what they think of the end of this long winter, the beginning of something new and alien to them, which most will have never before seen. I myself had never considered it possible for it to end. I have known only ice, all my life. Very, very few are left who remember the times before, and I would hear their words and stories, as much as possible, and know that most of my people will survive this change, and be able to live with it, before I can answer you that question.”

“You are less your father’s son than he thought, then, but I cannot commend you more for it,” Loki complimented.

“I knew him longer, and better, than you ever did. I loved him, but that did not make me ignorant of his faults, particularly those cracks left in his psyche by channelling too much of an infinite power source through his own mind, for the sake of expanding his empire, rather than truly improving the lives of others,” Býleistr responded. “He was a tragedy, nothing less.”

The trickster considered that for a long moment, and the tale of Laufey’s life he had heard from their father’s own lips. He had to concede, however reluctantly, that he could see precisely what his half-brother meant. It did not make him hate the dead king less, but it did leave room for him to accept that Býleistr had loved him and respected him, without thinking much less of the young king for it.

“You are wiser than I could have hoped. I was led to expect that you have easily bruised pride, and yet here we sit, and you have lashed out at no one yet.”

“I still want to kill you, but I can concede you are more powerful than I without harm to my pride; it is simply the truth. You are, in fact, capable of destroying this world, and have tried before, yet now you are... not atoning, for that, but getting a different and deeper sort of revenge, I believe. That you do not want my throne does remain obvious, you have nothing like possessiveness about you even as you sit upon mine, and so I do not need to make a show that I still possess it. You have... given me unexpected insight into understanding what it must be like for the rulers of Nifleheim to be watched over, and advised, by the Three.”

Loki sat very still for a moment, his silently drumming fingers suddenly frozen in mid-motion, as the weight of that statement, and the murmurs throughout the crowd as they too understood its meaning,
“It is a suggestion that I do not think you are anything Asgardian, if you do not wish to be. Am I correct?”

The reminder of Loki’s time under Odin, the clothes he still wore, the connections and loyalties he still had to various people in Asgard, was enough for a deadly silence to fall over the room like an avalanche of acute suspicion.

Slowly, Loki let his appearance bleed over from Jotunn blue, to his more usual face, green eyes bright and sharp, and his fingers again began their drumming, silent enough to be controlled and thoughtful, rather than any sign of nerves or boredom. He was a mage: his hands moving meant that his mind was processing, weaving, this time political machinations instead of plans for a spell. “I did not know Farbauti’s name until several days ago. Frigga of Asgard remains my mother. Thor Odinson remains my brother. Odin himself has no hold upon me, for he has proved that he does not deserve it and I cannot trust him or his judgement any longer, where myself and mine may be concerned. This, I can give my solemn word upon: I am no longer beholden to any oaths, the obedience of any laws, nor any orders or wishes of Odin All-Father, king of Asgard, and Asgard is no longer my home, as it once was.”

“Where is?” someone asked, from behind Býleistr, who did not turn, and kept his eyes instead on his half-brother.

Loki half-laughed, sounding very weary. “I have none, and many. I reside where I wish to reside, and have many safe places which I maintain for that purpose. My home is wherever I need to be.” He tried not think of just how bitter that sounded, or how much the thought reminded him of how much less powerful an anchor a certain table had felt, when he had used it two days prior, and how he had been forced to directly acknowledge that this was related to its distance from a certain mad mortal and his laboratory. A casting-point does not lose power, if it is set up in a sufficiently familiar location wherein the spell-caster feels confident that they will not be disturbed—unless the place that it is moved to has fewer emotional ties, particularly in the form of love, than the place it was taken from.

Damn the forces of the universe itself for these continued reminders that he does, in fact, miss Tony Stark to the point of heart-ache.

“What might you recommend, which might help me keep my people safe, from the fires you plan to bring, Loki?” inquired the king.

The god of lies recovered quickly. “Inform as many as you can, let them know precisely how long they have before the storm hits, and that any homes made primarily of ice will not be safe. High ground, particularly in the few places that mountains have pushed back up through the ice, will be the safest locations. The thaw will take days, perhaps weeks. I will begin with the highest mountains, with frequent trips down the paths where rivers once ran, carving old and new paths to guide the flood waters toward former seabeds, during the first three days. Keep your people away from those places during those days. When there is solid stone and some earth at the heart of that mountain range, I will lure the fire away down the western arm of the range and south for many miles. You should then guide the rest of your people to the exposed mountains and shelter them there. What mages you have, and what architects, should carve into that stone and provide your people a place to wait out the storms and the floods, fast as they can, and as deep as they can. Then bar the doors save for your hunting parties to keep them fed. The higher up those mountainsides you go, the safer it also is to renew ice and construct more comfortable living places with that more familiar medium, once you either find or make sturdy enough caverns, given that the altitude will maintain low temperatures
up there in spite of fire streaking about at lower elevations; those who are not at all accustomed to above-freezing temperatures and who may feel weakened by it at first, should still be comfortable there.”

Býleistr gave a thoughtful nod. “Not a bad plan. And if we were to get the attention of the fire ourselves, and ally with it?” He shrugged. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Such action would destroy me, and you, and Asgard, and all the rest of the nine realms would soon after also go up in flames,” Loki said gravely, without hesitation.

“How do you plan to contain it yourself, then?”

“Means stolen from Odin.”

A flicker of sudden realization showed on Býleistr’s face. “No.”

“Yes.”

“He will destroy everything!” the king shouted.

“Without his magic, he has only fire,” Loki retorted softly.

Býleistr considered. “You can keep that contained?”

“Not I personally, but should Odin’s means fail or break, I have made copies of them, which will chase after him and re-attach. I have made several of these, and will never be without a few up my sleeve.”

The court was lost, having clearly no idea what was being decided, now.

The king was far less so.

Loki always considered that an encouraging sign.

“If the fire threatened me?” Býleistr asked.

“I would keep it from you.”

“Any child of my realm? Any soldier caught unawares on a hunt or toward shelters?”

“I would treat the same. I fully plan to be as infuriating as possible, in fact.”

The younger Jotunn looked him over with new eyes. “I will inform my people.”

The court was in disarray, a storm of conflicting opinions.

The king was steady.

Loki nodded, thoughtful. “I will be watching. Also... I thank you, for your cooperation—and your unexpected generosity. I will return in five days, with a proper answer for you, in exchange for one you should also then have for me.”

The king inclined his head slightly. “I will have it.”

The trickster then vanished.
The gala was boring.

Well, actually, it had been boring up until right about now.

Casual flirting still being in his habit, Tony was usually a fairly good reader of people, and was surprised that the lovely woman he’d been playing that game with for several minutes now—Dr. Sylvia Young was surprisingly quick-witted as well as gorgeous, and could keep up with him on topics like recent CERN breakthroughs, as well as advanced biotech engineering—caught him sufficiently unawares as to push him back hard against a nearby wall mid-sentence, as they walked away from the regrettably-tame dance floor toward the bar, and kissed him firmly, skillfully, and with heated promise.

Surprised as he was, his lips parted easily and he found himself kissing back almost reflexively, some tension uncoiling in him at the pleasant warmth of it, the familiar intimacy and her unfamiliar taste. Finding him so cooperative, she pressed closer, one hand at the back of his neck and the other at his hip, deepening the kiss with a low, pleased hum. When she stepped between his feet and shifted, her own hips making them pivot so she was against the wall, Tony continued the motion rather than let it stop, until his back hit the solid surface again and she giggled, nipping at his lip.

"Is that what you want, Mr. Stark?" she purred, lips still brushing his. "How hard am I allowed to push?"

Confident as her voice sounded, her hands were almost hesitant, not quite pinning him now, like she wasn’t sure she was allowed, having reminded herself who he was. It was enough for Tony to pull back enough to see her very bright, pale blue eyes staring up at him, playful and a little wicked. He could switch on his persona, put her at ease, say all the right things to get her to push him back and be rougher with him. She didn’t seem unfamiliar with the idea, but wary of letting it out on someone who was all too frequently in gossip magazines, and whom she wasn’t yet sure she could trust enough to allow herself that indulgence.

She was lovely, with long dark brown hair and flawless pale bronze skin to match the hint of Brazil in her accent. Her eyes were very blue, very kind and she was very intelligent. Tony had forgotten, once the kiss started, what color her eyes were. He’d expected green, and that alone told him exactly why he had wanted her to pin him here.

He gently pushed her shoulder, until she stepped back. "Look—sorry. This isn’t fair to you, and I all sort of can’t. Thank you, but I really...” He gestured vaguely. “I can’t.”

“I thought the rumors you’d found someone were just that.”

Tony grimaced. “Well... it was sort of an accident, actually.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, blushing a little. “I just assumed—” She let go of him and took a half-step back. “I don’t want to get you in any trouble.”

He half-laughed, a bit bitterly. “You won’t. I’m not, I just—”

Realization dawned. “Oh. So you aren’t—”

“No,” he sighed. This was the problem with the perceptive ones.
“But you were? Until, uh, recently?”

“Kind of, yeah. It was good.”

She nodded, rubbing at the back of her neck. “I do get it. I’m a bit surprised, but it sounds like she meant a lot to you. Impressive no one really found out who she was.”

“Well, no one in the press, thank fucking physics,” Tony muttered.

Dr. Young laughed a little, smoothing her hair down absent-mindedly. “You don’t want to talk about it, I’m guessing.”

“No really.”

“Fair,” she said, with a nod. “Drinks then?”

“Yes. Many drinks.”

She took his arm after he straightened his clothes a bit, and she hers, and they headed back inside. “You know more about physiology than I’d expected from an engineer. Is Stark Industries breaking into any new fields I might lend a competitive edge to?” she teased.

“No, no. Just personal interest in not-dying, generally.”

“Short-term, or are you trying for immortality?” Amusement laced her tone.

“A bit of both, but the latter turned out less than feasible.”

“You’re serious?”

He considered her and half-smiled. “Let’s talk about the genetic and epigenetic causes of human aging.”

She shot him another flirtatious look, still clearly interested, but only said, “What were you using to try and alter them?”

He hesitated. “Kinda... classified. It’s a bit too weaponize-able for me to be comfortable with really getting into what it is and how it does what it does, but I can tell you what it’s capable of.”

She sighed. “Still playing close to the vest with how AIM grew back the limbs of army veterans?”

Tony grimaced. “I know, trust me, Dr. Connors still sends me monthly hate-mail that he writes while half-drunk, and if I thought it might not cause more spontaneous human combustion than successful limb-replacements and the healing of other conditions, it would already be in every hospital in the world, right now, but it’s not safe, and the sheer amount of data that’s needed for every potential recipient is more than most hospitals have the ability to collect. It has to be custom-tailored to each person based on their metabolism, hormonal balances and imbalances in their systems, and their entire epigenetic make-up, not only their DNA.”

“You say this like you’ve applied it successfully to someone,” Sylvia said, eyes narrowing. “Who?”

“The only body I comfortably risk on a regular basis. I’ve since unmade it, same as I did with Pepper after she was afflicted with the original version against her will,” he lied easily. “It was an emergency, and my continuing to be alive at the time was only exceptionally important because if I’d died, every city on this planet would have been burnt down and razed by a bullying lunatic from another sector of the galaxy.”
“Why?”

“It’s a long story, Doc.”

“I’m the least boring person here, since Pepper isn’t around, and you know it. It’ll keep the usual more predatory sorts of guest you’re usually harassed by at bay, too.”

Tony sighed. “There were some allegiances and vast plans made with two other sort of super-technologically-advanced off-earth civilizations. They were only in place because I, and an alien trickster god, happened to be allies. They couldn’t trust a mere mortal, even one like me, to know what I was talking about when it came to the looming threat, who was a guy called Thanos; they couldn’t trust Loki-”

“Wait, Loki?”

“Yeah.”

“I know Thor is... but didn’t Loki kind of try to destroy New-”

“Yeah, there’s a reason no one trusts the guy.”

“But you did?”

“There’s a thing, about gods. It’s part of the magics—ah, don’t ask that, magic is a thing and I didn’t like that idea at first either, but it’s true—that sort of permeate all of Asgard, where they live: air, water, and soil; and thus also food and drink, and architecture and everything else. It’s old magic, and it has a lot of perks, like All-Speak, which allows you to understand any language, and also makes people around you hear them in their own language or languages. It also has a couple of preserving effects that are a bit odd: it’s actually responsible for the birth-rate up there being as low as it is, and it also subjects anyone who is from Asgard, or who has been exposed to enough of the magics there over time to sort of soak it up a bit, an inability to oath-break, if they’ve given their solemn word. Any attempts to break their oath, and it apparently, according to Thor, results in intense pain, up to their own blood boiling in their veins. It can even kill them, if they actually succeed, despite that pain, in breaking their promise.”

“He... promised he wouldn’t hurt you?” she asked.

“He promised to be my ally against a common enemy who had reason to target both the earth, and Asgard, once he reached our solar system.”

“Why?”

“Because of the failed New York invasion.”

“Uhm... what?”

“He lost on purpose. Well, mostly.”

“That’s a story I need to hear.”

“It’s sort of classified.”

“What am I going to do, blog about it?” she challenged.

Tony considered. “Well... look, if he’d really wanted to win, he could have. I figured that out not long after the fight. He could’ve opened the portal where we couldn’t reach it, like the North Pole
where there would be plenty of magnetic interference and sparse enough populations we might never have found him there. He could’ve let the whole armada through, and then hit the earth with everything they had at once. We’d have lost, by a landslide, if he’d done that. He’s a brilliant strategist, though, and a great manipulator. He could’ve led us on a wild goose-chase all over the globe while his army gathered together, even. I could overlook that, because he did play up the diva-like megalomania like a pro, but then I studied the device that opened the portal, and found that it had a single very simple couple of add-ons that didn’t look like they were the same metal Selvig made the rest of the device out of. I checked, and they’re alien. They match the metal Loki’s armor is made of. I ran tests, and found out those add-ons had made the machine open a smaller portal. Without them, it would’ve opened almost a square mile of sky, and we’d have been right at ground zero. Their biggest ships couldn’t make it through the smaller portal, I only saw them when I delivered the nuke, they... would’ve wiped the floor with us. That... that didn’t make any sense. I asked Dr. Selvig, and he said Loki had made a couple of last-minute changes to the device, before the battle. Well... it left me with questions.”

“What the fuck was he playing at?” Sylvia asked, genuinely at a loss.

So the inventor found himself explaining all of it: Thanos’ monitoring and hooks in Loki’s mind through the scepter, the mind-control that scepter applied to others through Loki, how it wound up manipulating the Avengers themselves, and how it had deactivated when Natasha used it to shut down the portal-device, its energy draining back into the heart of the tesseract. He explained a little about Loki’s desire for revenge, too, and what sort of a threat Thanos was, based on all they knew he had already done to the universe as a whole, before. He even outlined all the political maneuvering with Titan and the Kree, how they could neither accept earth’s word and authority alone because of how relatively young and primitive human civilization is to them, nor trust Loki’s motives and intentions alone, but that the alliance both put Loki in a trustworthy position, and gave the earth leverage and forced others to hear them where humanity would otherwise be dismissed or not even considered to have a say. He left out all the flirtation, etc.

Sylvia let him talk, asked occasional questions, usually sharp ones, and at the end, they sat in silence for a few long minutes.

“The war went well, then?”

Tony nodded. “A bit over a month ago, yeah.”

“Right, I remember all the crashed ships in the news. They did fess up that something happened, and the Avengers took care of another alien threat, this time mostly off-earth. How did you make sure all of them crashed?”

“Space vikings.”

She snorted. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Borrowed a bunch from Asgard, along with some of their mages, created a support net so they could protect the stratosphere and report all incoming ships, friendlies that didn’t make the news and unfriendlies who got smashed, to S.H.I.E.L.D. forces on the ground.”

“Friendlies?”

“Allies of ours who had to resort to stealing escape pods from Thanos’ fleet. Me. Loki. Thanos because Loki marked his ship friendly so he could make sure he was the one who got to kill him.” He shrugged. “That sort of thing.”
“So... Thanos did die, right?”

“Yeah. Decapitation.”

“Then what?”

“Loki left. We subdued the rest of his army, and celebrations were had.”

“He just... left?”

“Yeah. Alliance over. He wasn’t safe from Asgard anymore, nor obliged to stay and see the rest of the fireworks. We haven’t seen him since.”

She frowned. “On the one hand that’s mostly a relief, given how dangerous it sounds like he is, but on the other... I don’t know why, but I almost find it disappointing.”

Tony’s smile twisted bitterly, but said nothing. He didn’t want to know what he might say, and so took a long sip of his drink instead.

“You liked him, didn’t you?” she asked, a little curious an a little surprised.

“We worked together pretty well, and he is actually brilliant. Well, he’s an unstable lunatic with some serious family-related psychological issues, and a habit of manipulating people, who gets a kick out of pissing people off, but there are plenty of people who might say the same of me.” He shrugged.

Also the noises he makes between orgasm and regained-arousal remain the most painfully sexy sounds I have ever heard, even compared to his low chuckle when pressed against my back so I feel the depth of it and it reverberates through my whole ribcage like shivers. He managed not to wince, but it was a near thing.

“Maybe you can share an enemy again sometime.”

“Yeah,” Tony said dully. He’d been waiting to hear back on that. Loki had promised to make contact, and the uncertainty of how and when were, frankly, a bit maddening. He was mostly sure Loki wouldn’t show up in person, but just the idea that he might made the inventor’s organs do an impression of the contents of a cement mixer. He knew he could restrain himself and keep himself in check, and treat any potential flirting from Loki with dismissiveness, like it didn’t matter, like his entire body didn’t ache dully with the desire to rekindle closeness he never should’ve gotten so attached to in the first place.

“So... you wanted to talk about aging?”

Seizing the distraction with enthusiasm, Tony began talking again, this time just about the sort of alterations to a normal human physiology, the re-writing of matters genetic and epigenetic, and all the limits he’d been crashing into, trying to not just heal and repair the human body, but convince it that the natural decline into old age should be slowed or stopped.

Sylvia asked a lot of questions, made a lot of suggestions, and they both spent their last hour and a half at the gala enthusiastically drawing diagrams on each other’s napkins and picking apart the whole narrative of the uninterrupted-by-violence-or-accident human life (birth, youth, maturity, eventual decline, death) with words and squiggles. They exchanged emails and phone numbers, but still went their separate ways, towards the end of the night.

Tony knew she’d have three job offers from his competitors by morning, their own people having seen her talking with him so intently, but had also already invited her onboard for R&D at Stark Industries himself, officially acting in between both medical technology and nanotech/biotech
departments, promising to introduce her to the rest of the team later in the week.

Early in the evening, he’d found out that she had just finished a project for S.H.I.E.L.D., to do with developing a way to combatting recent X-gene-targeting bioweapons from Genosha, one of which severely sickened any dosed with it, and entirely suppressed their mutations for weeks, sometimes months at a time, while slowly weakening their immune systems and in some cases causing almost Parkinson’s-like degenerative effects over time. Dr. Sylvia Young had developed an anti-serum for it, and saved a few hundred mutant lives, including a few of the X-men. Since then, she left S.H.I.E.L.D. after they did as they usually felt inclined, and handed her work and Genosha’s quietly to others more loyally in their employ for further development, and to find other new uses, which Dr. Young took offense to and left. She had not apparently fit S.H.I.E.L.D. ‘s psychological profile for further research on those projects, which the inventor knew was code for “we have ideas for this that we know you will find morally offensive enough to either outright refuse, or casually sabotage.”

Tony reminded himself to thank Pepper profusely for inviting her; she always knew exactly how to arrange for people she found interesting and open to new employment options to meet Tony in person without the pretense of pleasing him for a job interview. It was one of her trademarks of Stark-handling, and he loved her a little for it.

Except that they didn’t usually push Tony up against a wall and catch his mouth with just enough heat, just enough confident intent to persuade, that his brain had shut off and he’d—thought of Loki. He’d half-expected her eyes to turn green, and for her to turn out to be the trickster, until she’d hesitated not with her words, but her touch.

Tony had felt the rug go out from under him yet again, where his heart was concerned, because he’d really wanted her to be a trickster god in disguise so badly it ached. He still did.

I can’t.

He teleported home after a longish walk, which failed to clear his head.

He found a smaller, more intimate party sprawled over the couches in the common living-room of Avengers tower. Thor was beaming like the fucking sun and Jane was glowing a little with wicked satisfaction. The other Avengers were around them: Clint and Natasha on Jane’s left, Steve in the chair next to the arm of the couch Thor’s right arm was draped over, holding a flagon of ale. Bruce was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the coffee table, which seemed to be covered in various fruits that had been seamlessly coated in perfectly smooth gold leaf. Also a barrel of ale about as wide as Clint’s ribcage, which they all seemed to be sharing.

“Did I miss something?”

“We tried to reach you,” Natasha said blithely.

Bruce was turning a piece of fruit in his hands thoughtfully. “This is actually pretty impressive. Usually the gold leaf is more fragile, and flakes off easily.” He then bit into what had looked like a starfruit, but turned out to be a small pastry, to Tony’s surprise.

“I had my phone on silent, once I realized Pep had set me up for a surprise secretly-a-job-interview encounter with a shiny new biotech specialist. What’d I...” Realization struck as Tony plopped down on a chair closer to the assassin’s end of the couch, and noticed a few of the fruits were apples. His eyebrows raised and met Jane’s look with a questioning one.

She positively beamed at him. “I already ate mine, but to celebrate I ordered these from an artistic bakery that does a lot of custom stuff—Darcy’s intern is the owner’s son—and had them make some desserts look like other golden fruits, and then just make a few pieces of actual fruit look like them.”
She smiled a little. “The fruit wasn’t my idea. Apparently, they have a new assistant who recommended it, and made a custom one for each Avenger. Here.” She lightly tossed an apple at him.

Tony caught it and looked down. It was gorgeously painted, or gold-leafed. Whatever they had done to it gave it a rosy-gold shine like gold really was the exact same texture as apple-skin, not-quitewaxy, but not quite purely metallic and poreless either. It had an outline of the Iron Man faceplate delicately pressed into the apple’s skin enough to be visible without quite breaking the skin’s surface: thin lines, lightly cross-hatched for shading. “They really do good work,” the inventor mused, smirking a little. His haze was uplifted a little, seeing his friends all so happy, and Clint even filling a flagon for him and pushing it his way. Tony lifted it with a grin and took a sip, looking back to his apple. The other Avengers, he noticed, each held theirs. He thought he saw something a bit odd and out of place, looking at the others’ apples, but dismissed it as soon as he bit into his.

It was slightly cool, perfectly balanced between sweet and tart, and juicier than he had honestly expected. It made him aware that despite the various event-provided food around him all evening, he’d actually forgotten to eat most of the day, after the cheeseburger Pepper had given him upon dragging him out of the labs to get read for the gala and make himself presentable. That had been...mid afternoon. It was now almost nine, thanks to his thought-heavy walking earlier. Tony suddenly felt very hungry, but didn’t rush the apple. It was really good, and he planned to savor it. He listened to the talk of his friends with half an ear and watched the couple at the center of the group continue to glow so sweetly Tony worried that it would go beyond giving him cavities to just outright causing all teeth in a ten-food radius to spontaneously dissolve any moment now.

“Good, was it?” Natasha mused, biting into her own.

Belatedly, the inventor noticed he was now holding only a bare stem. The rest of the apple was entirely gone. “Actually, I’m kinda starving. I forgot to eat, most of the gala. I officially declare that I will treat all of you out of celebration at the venue of the honorable Dr. Jane Foster’s choosing, and we come back to finish off the rest of the cakes-diguised-as-fruits as desert!” he announced. As if to further his point, his stomach growled audibly.

“I humbly request Chinese. A lot of it. Order ahead, seriously. One of the side-effects of this whole thing is an appetite you would not believe,” Jane said seriously.

“I know just the place. And trust me, it’s the same with magecraft, too, so maybe rest up a bit on the newly-Aesir thing before getting that kicked on,” Tony recommended, as he performed a quick spell to replace his full tux with a collared shirt and more casual slacks “Rise, ye Avengers. JARVIS? Call Minh’s wife’s place. You know the one. Let them know we have three at least three and a half people who can eat like Thor, and I’ll happily pay extra for any supplies they might need to restock their kitchen with in the next few hours to handle that, if they have enough staff and it’s not too busy already.” He tried not to over-tax restaurants he subjected to the appetites of himself and more than one other Avenger at any given time, and tried to make up for it by leaving the sort of tips behind that made jaws drop and put kids through school, which in turn meant a lot of places were actually pretty happy to see him visit repeatedly.

“Right away, sir.”
Tony didn’t notice anything amiss, during dinner itself. Food was devoured, Jane casually asked both the inventor and Thor a few hundred questions about mage-craft and Asgardian culture, Clint chipped in with banter, Bruce with scientific inquiries of his own, and Natasha occasionally upended something Tony was saying with a sardonic one-liner that set two or more people into fits of hysterical giggling.

It was a little bit of a blur, which the inventor was a little inclined to blame on the fact Thor had brought mead with them, and it was fairly potent to him, now that he was a mage probably. It was after the third time he’d tried to pick up a water-glass and it accidentally shattered that he started to wonder if Extremis was somehow being affected too. *Unexpected strength increase. Only unusual factor: Asgardian mead?* Perhaps the components that made Asgardian alcohol more potent to Aesir and magic users also somehow reacted with Extremis?

He decided to run some tests in the lab when he got home, and continued on with dinner regardless. After a certain point, he did suspect Extremis *must* be a little over-active tonight, given that his appetite had also increased; although JARVIS’s usual monitoring of his vitals was showing no fluctuation in his temperature, which made rather less sense.

Tony had been frowning a little at his phone, seeing those readings, when Clint decided to throw a chopstick each at Tony and Jane, who were both directly across the round table from him, and handily not looking his way at all. Both scientists’ hand snapped up and snatched the surprisingly-fast projectiles from the air without apparent effort: Jane before it met her shoulder, Tony before it hit his temple. Both of them moved more quickly than they ever had before, and the table went quiet.

Tony and Jane exchanged bemused looks.

“Uh...” Jane pointed at herself, and even reached into her pocket to pull out the slim black stem. “Apple for my excuse. You?”

Staring at the stem, the inventor underwent a quiet and deeply unsettling realization. “It’s black,” he said.

The astrophysicist frowned a little. “What?”

“Natasha, what color was the stem on yours?” Tony asked quickly.

“Gold, painted,” Natasha said.

“Clint?”

“Gold.”

“Bruce and Cap?”

“Gold,” they chorused.

Tony’s lips twitched. “Thor?”

“Gold. The apple itself had an etching of Mjolnir.”

“Decorative and stylized like you see on earth, or actual Mjolnir?”

“Mjolnir itself, right down to the... small... details,” Thor sounded increasingly uneasy as he realized the full implications of that. Few people on earth had seen the hammer close enough, for long enough, to have memorized all those details.
“I’m going to kill your brother,” Tony said quietly, pulling a black stem from his pocket identical to the one Jane held.

Thor paled, as did Steve, but Jane just sputtered, “Woah, wait. Why kill him for this? Seriously? It’s almost like a... well, an awkward courting gift.”

“He knows I didn’t want this. I told him *multiple times* that I make my own way, and I’m not interested in having my physiology upgraded in ways I don’t understand, by processes I don’t understand, from a source—” He waved the stem around. “—that I cannot study. They won’t let me study the orchard, especially since I’ve apparently consumed stolen fruit from it.” He leaned back in his seat with a huff. “This had better not be a part of another add-on deal. I’m really pissed that he decided to trick me instead of ask, for fuck’s sake!” *I would have said yes, at this point, do you even know how badly I want-* he cut off that thought, and clenched his jaw to prevent himself saying a word of it aloud. Conveniently, a distraction manifested.

“How which?” Natasha asked, keen as ever.

“He needed the Ten Rings around a little longer. Something about the dragon, and other plans he has. I think Fin Fang Foom is more of a means to an end there, though, not the end goal, but either way I get the feeling the Ten Rings will get mutilated by their own dragon and Loki will send me a text or something that the hunt is on.”

The assassin nodded. “And you think he’ll hold information about the apples that you said you would need in order to be comfortable considering them an option, as collateral.” It wasn’t a question, but she made it sound like maybe he should question it.

Tony’s brow furrowed. “What else would his play be?”

“Maybe something else he has planned down the line that he needs you to be able to survive,” she suggested.

“Like what?”

“Any number of things. He could want to swoop in when you have no other familiar faces left around you, after some disaster, and take advantage of habitual trust built up during your alliance and your own shaken state to get to you. He might just want you to live a longer life so that he can rely on an anchor-contact on earth, in which case what you’re surviving would be ‘the ravages of time’.”

“In the case of the latter, maybe he should’ve offered the deal instead of forcing it on me, when last he checked I wasn’t interested,” Tony muttered.

“‘Last he checked’ you say,” Thor repeated slowly.

The inventor cleared his throat.


“I ran into dead ends with Extremis, and Erskine’s serum,” Tony admitted. “I’m out of other options short of pursuing the Philosopher’s Stone via alchemy, and mage or no, that’s a bit too Harry Potter for me, so yeah, I might have already been open to a deal and accepted that Loki would be my only real option there, but *this isn’t a deal*; this is inexplicable, and he presumed it would offend me, so what’s his game? What is it he thinks he can hold over my head? If he wanted to weaken me psychologically, he should know better than to warn me ahead of time by leading me to expect a plausible explanation for an inexplicable act, Natasha, so I think your first theory is out, too.”
She nodded. “Hmm, yes I suppose he would.”

“You don’t think it’s either a no-strings-attached gift, or the pretense of one?” Jane asked lightly.

Tony hesitated. “Why would he give this as a gift when he was under the impression I’d probably be pissed off for him doing so?”

Jane frowned, but seemed unconvinced. “He does have a history of pissing people off in order to make them certain he’s being genuine, though.”

The inventor opened his mouth, then closed it, meeting her stare. He remembered Loki pulling that on here, but surely not... surely not like this?

“So that you might live to forgive him?” Thor suggested. “No matter how long that might take.”

“I... don’t tell me things like that. You don’t get to tell me to believe that, with how often he’s tricked you into thinking his intentions were good.”

“Where you are concerned, he more frequently has surprised me by having better intentions than I anticipated,” replied the thunderer.

“He has a point,” Natasha mused. “I could say the same.”

Tony’s phone went off loudly where it rested on the table, and they all quieted at the sudden burst of surprisingly aggressive violin.

“I thought your phone was still on silent?” Jane raised an eyebrow.

“It is,” Tony said slowly. “Also, that’s so not my ringtone.”

“Is that... is that a Van Halen guitar solo on violin?**” Clint interjected.

Upon picking it up, Tony found that the call was from an unknown number, and JARVIS couldn’t trace it. “I’ll just... take this outside real quick,” the inventor said, picking up the phone and pushing his chair back.

“Tony-” Thor started, standing as though to follow him, then winced when the inventor simply vanished.

Once on the roof of the building, Tony answered his phone. “I am so pissed off at you right now, that I do not even know where to start,” he greeted, “you bastard.”

~~

Loki was fond of fire. This fact was widely known, and as a child, given how much power he had, even with his magic partially bound, people seemed to be made very uneasy by the fascination with which Loki regarded bonfires, campfires, and even sometimes candle-flames. He had only ever set a few fires accidentally, as a youth, twice when attacked by a wild beast and another time by an assassin sent after himself and Thor, and then once when he lost control of a too-advanced spell and accidentally set a large work-table on fire. Most young mages experience this, especially if their magic becomes active before they even hit puberty, because the parts of the brain which handle refined control of their abilities are still developing.
That did not stop unpleasant rumors from spreading, in Loki’s case. The first of many which both stung and infuriated his uncomprehending younger self.

He had wept over those, he was so small. He had tried to find what made them see him as evil and change it, and changed even his appearance to look more like Thor’s, until Frigga had grown worried, and intervened. He could still remember her sounding so angry that he would try to hide from everyone so, especially his own kin. She had assured him that there was nothing wrong with him, and anyone who thought otherwise was a fool. She had named every quality he had tried to conceal, even his fascination with fire, as things she loved about him, things that made him special to her. **You look at fire and see more than destruction; you see the play of light and energy, the flow of it, I see how your eyes follow the flames, rather than focusing on the matter they destroy. You love its beauty, despite how dangerous it is, because you understand its nature well, and so it does not burn you. That makes you brilliant, as well as brave. You know this to be true.** It had made sense, then. Aesir had feared Loki’s fascination with fire because they did not understand it, or Loki, and had feared he would burn them. That was all; he was not wrong or evil just for being what came naturally to him.

It took years for that relief to turn into bitterness, when the lack of understanding persisted in following him through almost every endeavor in his long life.

Frigga, had known him, heart and soul, back then; and unlike Odin, never held him to Aesir standards, nor Jotunn ones, but indirectly freed him to doubt the validity of both in favor of knowing himself more truly. She had known what he would need to hear, to combat what others would try to make him believe, about his own self, and Loki did appreciate her for that. It had prepared him all the better, to pass on those same lessons to his own daughter.

Staring into the heart of a raging inferno that had formerly housed the heart of the Ten Rings’ operations for decades, and hearing the roar of winds whipping across the flames and brightening them, making the heat visibly more intense even from where Loki stood a mile from the plateau the facility rested upon, Loki thought about the elegance of simple combustion reactions, breaking things down into their very simplest parts, or melting them, or setting them free in flashes of strange colors and acrid smoke.

Copper salts, of course, had been his favorite things to add to fires when he was small. They changed the flames to match the color of his magic.

This fire looked more like Tony’s: all fox-fur and rust hues. Beautiful and fascinating and destructive, like the mad inventor himself, and in this case also an improvement to the world as a whole, because it was the start of the fall of an empire that well deserved to be destroyed.

Loki had always loved fire. Was it any wonder, then, that he fell in love with a man who had come to embody it, and whose entire life-story could be an extended phoenix metaphor, as he continued again and again to rise from his own ashes? The trickster had to hope that he understood this fiery creature well enough not to get burned. He also hoped his plan, following Hretha’s suggestion, would yield positive results, whether they be short-term, or long-term.

Fenrir appeared beside him, in his daily-use horse-sized wolf-shape, looking pleased with himself, and a little pensive.

“How did it go?”

“I managed to aim Jane at the shop you found as surreptitiously as possible, recommended the apples, and added personalized designs to each, woven with a very fine low-level ‘nothing at all wrong here, carry on’ suggestion spell, activated upon physical contact. Judging by his already
increased appetite and physical strength, as well as sensitivity to Asgardian mead, I think it went off without a hitch. I left right after he broke a third glass.”

Loki exhaled heavily. “Good. Thank you.”

“Looks like you’ve been having fun.” the wolf nodded toward the flames.

The trickster nodded. “It’s been quite a good show, yes. You missed the initial berserker-levels of fury at the start. He was almost half-mad with it, and I had to keep him from getting carried away and wandering into any nearby towns. This has clearly been decades of frustration and repression being purged.”

Fenrir snorted, amused as they watched the dragon dig further into the subterranean parts of the complex, fire and smoke bother him not at all. There was a great groaning and cracking of stone, and the cliff-face above the dragon’s old cavern, to which Loki had once clung, cracked and began to shake. After several minutes, it gave way from within, the roof of the cavern also collapsing, in a rain of charred stone, some of it hot enough to be partially molten. Then it was all engulfed in a fresh burst of explosive heat fresh from dragon’s-throat, so bright as to make even gods squint.

The dragon extricated himself from the remains and began striding around it, taking in the fruits of his work with considerable satisfaction.

In the fresh quiet, save for the distant flames on the wind, Loki took a phone from his pocket. If he tries to wander away, or closer to me, hold him off doing so, please,” the trickster said. “I have a promise to keep.”

Fenrir nodded, and took off at speed, headed off toward a spot he could watch the dragon from better without being detected.

The trickster made a call.

“I am so pissed off at you right now, that I do not even know where to start,” Tony Stark greeted, “you bastard.”

“For the record, I am sorry it was necessary.”

“What exactly made this so necessary that my consent was less important, Loki? I do not tend to deal well with people who will do what they believe to be best, to me, against my will. You didn’t even ask!”

“I could not risk you saying no.”

“Yeah, you could’ve.”

Loki hesitated. “Pardon?”

“Erskine’s serum. Made it, ran tests, tried and failed to remove the fundamental flaws, burned all evidence and discarded. You were right about Extremis, good work, by the way. I was actually hoping to discuss a further deal with you when you contacted me as we agreed, for this Ten Rings fiasco, concerning your knowledge of the apples, how they work, scientifically and magically, and working my way up to finding out what I might have to trade, and weigh the pros and cons of what you might offer. Now, I’m stuck between two alternatives. Either you’ve given me this in order to force me into cutting a deal with you in exchange for knowledge of what you’ve just tricked me into, or this was some idea of a gift, but given you just suggested you ‘could not risk’ me saying no, I’m not sure I want to know what you need me to do.”
The trickster grimaced, suddenly feeling sick. “I…”

“Take your time, honey, I’ve got all night. Aim for convincing.”

“So you want me to lie to you?” the god asked, before he could stop himself, and almost bit through his tongue.

Tony exhaled raggedly. “Fuck, seriously? No. Hell no. I want to understand what the fuck this is.”

“I need you alive,” Loki said, soft and solemn. “That is all.”

“For… for what? What do you need me for?”

Nothing. Everything. The trickster struggled to steady his own breathing, and keep his voice steady. “I am a selfish creature, Anthony Stark, and I have indeed made a grave mistake, if what you say is true. I was afraid that you would refuse, and be more wary and difficult to trick anytime soon after. I thought I had only one chance, and given that I was already planning to repay a boon I owed Thor, at Hel’s behest, by offering him an apple for Jane, I conceived a way to trick you into this. I could not imagine you would otherwise accept it, nor believe that I mean it when I say that you owe me nothing for this. I simply need you to remain alive and yourself.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. Do you need my help? Are you okay? I mean, what… what am I not getting, Loki?”

The trickster felt stung. “I just said...” he started, sounding irritated, then stopped, swallowing thickly. He had been operating under the assumption, based strongly on Fenrir’s insistence that it was true, that Tony had some interest in him beyond sexual and political. That there was a desire for something rather more dangerous than just another deal. “Are you saying you still wish to see this as a deal to broker? Because I will not, actually.”

“But that’s how we… Then what-”

Loki cut him off, saying very quickly, “I was hoping for any sign of understanding or mutual interest from your side at this point, but as that apparently hasn’t occurred to you, perhaps it’s…” He trailed off, shook his head slightly, feeling numbed. “If you wish to be rid of it, you may ask the All-Father and he will be happy to add another list of crimes to those I’ve already committed against Asgard. If you are interested in how the apples work, Fenrir and probably also Hlín can discreetly provide that to you, if you seek them out in Asgard.”

“Wait, you’ve lost me again. I just said I was willing to accept an apple and… Why are you telling me this? Why would Fenrir just tell me all of-”

“I want nothing in exchange for this, Tony.” The god sounded pained.

He could hear a sharp intake of breath from the inventor’s end. “W-wait.”

“I am sorry that I did not get your permission. I… considered your life more important than your consent, to me. As I say, I am selfish, and your continued life is of value to me.”

~~
Tony Stark was good at back-peddling. Usually. Sometimes.

Actually, he had a history of it failing miserably in the face of his own being paralyzed in disbelief at either something he absolutely wanted to happen happening in an unbelievable way, or something he never wanted to happen happening in an unstoppable way, and since this seemed to be a case of both happening at once, he couldn’t form coherent words before it all went to hell. Loki kept talking, and Tony kept failing to form any words to translate the sudden maelstrom of panic and short-lived-fast-shattered-joy and then sudden horror that Loki was trying to end this before it could start because Tony’s words were not happening.

He was not used to someone’s words knocking the wind out of him like a physical blow, and he could still barely breathe past the feeling. Finally, he managed to choke out, “Loki, hang on, let me-”

“As I say, you owe me nothing. I will not seek you out further, then, but I do hope you stay alive. I can live, with no more than—knowing you are alive and well.”

“Don’t you dare end with that.”

Bitterness and no small hint of viciousness in his tone now, Loki snapped, “Of course not. I did call with a promise to keep. The Ten Rings’ dragon—”

“Loki wait a minute, I didn’t realize—”

“-is standing atop the ruins of their main base of operations—”

“-Loki I swear I will hunt you down—”

“-and I suggest you attack them now while they’re still reeling.”

“-please, Loki don’t hang up! I didn’t m—”

“Now I’m off to set loose an imprisoned fiery horror fit to thaw all of Jotunnheim, so I really must dash.”

“Will you shut up and listen, I’m trying to tell you that I lo—”

Click.

“-ve you—no, no no you fucking bastard,” Tony trailed off, suddenly feeling gutted. He slowly sat down on the roof, his legs not quite holding him up any longer. His whole body was shaking, as he replayed the conversation in his head and pocketed his phone for fear he’d otherwise accidentally crush it. “Wow, I fucked that up,” he muttered, his voice tight as he hid his face in both hands. “Fuck.”

He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting there before Natasha climbed up the side of the building seemingly without effort, and strode up next to him, carrying her heels dangling from one hand. He lowered his hands enough to look up at her.

“You fucked up, or he fucked up?” she asked lightly.

“Him a bit, but mostly me. He fucking told me—shit, he told me I didn’t owe him anything, and it’s like I couldn’t... I asked if he needed my help, because that just didn’t fucking sound like him, and he thought I was trying to make it—not a gift, and then it sunk in and I couldn’t fucking breathe,” he rattled off, voice shaking, as she sat down next to him and pulled his head down to her shoulder, wrapping an arm around him.
“He got angry, then.”

“He got hurt and I couldn’t figure out why and then he was talking about how I could undo this, and then got mad, yeah, and stopped listening and hung up before I could—fuck this was not a conversation that should’ve been by phone!”

“He probably called so you wouldn’t incapacitate him before he could say anything,” she pointed out. “Text, you’d never be able to respond or you’d be able to trace the message to its source. Leaving you a note wouldn’t give you any means to respond, which it’s clear he wanted to know what you thought.”

“I fucked up.”

“You did,” she agreed. “He also did.”

“Of course he did. He hung up on me mid-confession.”

“Confession?”

“I tried to say the thing. It cut off at ‘lo’,” Tony groaned. “I am so mad about that.”

Natasha offered a sympathetic frown, at that. “Damn your timing sucks.”

“I know! Fuck, now I have to hunt his ass down.” He sat up sharply. “Fuck yes! I can fucking hunt him down, now,” he whispered, like it was a revelation.

“You’re sure he won’t, ah, react poorly?”

“I don’t care.” Tony pulled himself to his feet. “Even if he does, I kind of deserve it a bit, and I at least know it’s definitely me he wants to hurt, but he also still doesn’t want me dead or want me to want him actually dead, so he’ll only go after me if he gets pissed off. It’s perfect!”

“You are broken,” Natasha said flatly.

“I’m broken, I’m in love, and my lover is going to be busy thawing out another planet for a few weeks, so I have time to plan some things and lay some traps.” He paused. “Oh, of course, after I raze the last of the Ten Rings and obliterate all traces of their organization from the earth except those who survive to make it into prison. That’s what I need to do immediately, shit, I almost forgot.”

“Planet—what?”

“Jotunnheim. It’s covered in ice, but that wasn’t always the case. There was an atrocity sort of accidentally on purpose by some fanatical frost giants that sort of... look, it’s really complicated, and I need to track down a giant wolf, except he’ll sort of be cloaked, so I need to find where they’re taking the dragon, which I have some ideas for, but they need some work, so—” he was walking backwards as he spoke, and she followed, and only stopped when she reached out and jerked him forward by the front of his shirt, pulling him back from the edge of the roof. “Oh. Right. Sorry.” He looked over his shoulder, offered her a sheepish grin, and teleported them back into the restaurant.

“You okay, Tony?” Steve asked immediately.

“No!” the inventor announced jovially. “I am, in fact, a colossal fuck-up, but the good news is that I know a few ways I can maybe fix it. Hopefully.”

“Is my brother not well?” Thor asked, confused.
“He is less of a colossal fuck-up. More like just a monumental one, but he’s also under a couple of mistaken impressions I need to fix. Like, I need to fix them very soon. Probably still after he thaws Jotunnheim, since the Ten Rings are—”

“A Programmer what?” Thor barked.

“Yyyeah, that’s a long story. I’ve kind of known about that for a while. Not sure how he’s going to do it, but look, I gotta go. Thor, if you see Fenrir around, call me. Jane, where is that bakery from earlier? What are they called? I have an idea. Well, I have several ideas. I plan to pursue all of them. And, uh, also Loki. Romantically. Any objections?”

They were all staring at him with expressions of different degrees of confusion and disbelief, except Thor, who was apparently about to bring down thunder.

“Anthony Stark, you will tell me what you just said my brother is going to attempt, once more, and quickly,” the thunderer demanded.

“Unmake the legacy of Laufey and of Laufey’s father both as a giant ‘fuck you’ to them and all they stood for, and to give Asgard the finger while doing it, and also because there are survivors under the ice he and Hlín and Nifleheim all have an interest in freeing and reviving the remains of the cultures and peoples stolen from Jotunnheim, and almost but not quite murdered, by all that ice,” Tony explained, rapid-fire. Then he realized the others sans Thor, were staring at him with incredulity.

“Why the hell are you people surprised?! I just alluded to sort of maybe being in love with this guy I’ve already admitted to finding fascinating. When I love and am fascinated, I know all the fuck I can about the subject, okay? I’m Tony Stark, and this is what I do!”

Steve and Clint sat back down in their chairs heavily, still staring.

Bruce hadn’t gotten up, and merely nodded, blinking a bit.

Thor’s expression was caught between awe, horror, confusion, and pain. “What happened, for you to admit this so freely, all of a sudden?”

“I really, really fucked up, but I also know Loki, uh, did actually intend the apple to be a no-strings attached gift freely given, and he sort of implied he needs me alive, but I don’t owe him anything, and I’m... still staggered by how much effort he put into not saying a few key, emotionally charged words, to avoid pressuring me into... into anything, but given just how emotionally invested I kind of was and am, I really could’ve used a bit more directness, for fuck’s sake, man!” He huffed. “So. Congratulations Thor, and Dr. Foster, thank you, but uh...” He placed one of his credit cards in Natasha’s hand with a warning smile, to cover dinner, and said, “I have to go. Tip like a rock star who used to wait tables, Nat.” He took a step away. “Oh, by the way, everyone, the Ten Rings are vulnerable and their dragon has been stolen, and their main HQ obliterated, so you may not see me for a couple of days and S.H.I.E.L.D. will probably call you soon. Like... in ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Did my brother say how he planned to—”

“Yes, he hinted, but I sort of don’t want you stopping him, because that’d send the wrong message. Okay, thank you, bye.” Tony waved a hand and vanished.

An awkward silence descended. All turned to stare in distressed and questioning confusion, toward Natasha.

She shrugged. “Boys are stupid. That’s all I got.”
Four days before Loki had set loose a certain dragon, he’d come to an accord with his half-brother, and been again been offered a position within Jotunnheim as equivalent to the one occupied by the Three, this time more directly.

He had told Býleistr that he would know whether or not he could accept after he had achieved, and survived, the thaw.

Now, Loki knew what that answer would be. The undertaking would be a vast, complex, almost unceasing one, once the thaw completed. He had already planned to linger for long enough to see Alfheim’s mages restore the lands, and act as diplomat between the generations who had known only winter, and those who had been trapped and most likely unaware beneath it for so long.

Perhaps he might stay longer. His aid would be desired, even needed.

Slowly relaxing his hand, he let a shower of broken glass, metal, and plastic that had once been a cellphone pour onto the ground.

He was breathing more evenly by the time Fenrir sensed something amiss and briefly left off lightly taunting the dragon to appear before him. Seeing his father’s expression and smelling the emotions rolling off of him he gave a questioning whine and nuzzled at his arm.

“Your assessment was incorrect,” Loki said flatly. “Come. Help me teleport this scaly behemoth to Siberia.”

Fenrir blinked a bit, uncertain. “But... how did... Father?” He got no response. “What happened? What did he say?”

“Leave it. I will explain another time. I—cannot dwell on this, right now,” Loki said, his voice stern and cold. “I am sorry, but I cannot. I haven’t the strength.”

The wolf followed, close at his father’s side, unsurprised to feel a hand tangle in his fur where shoulder and neck met. He relaxed a little when his father had drawn enough strength from him for his hands to stop shaking, as the dragon stepped over to meet them, still backlit by intense flames.

All-Speak translated the hissing rumble of his voice into words, “You did not suggest you would bring company. What is this mad creature?”

“This is Fenrir, and he is my son,” Loki said.

“By blood, I think not.”

“Actually, a fair amount of my blood went into the process by which he acquired a soul, so you take what thoughts you may have on the subject and shove them up your enormous scaly backside,” Loki responded blithely.

The dragon huffed. “So touchy, suddenly. I sense something has happened. You are less nervous than you were, but more... pained.”

“My son was attending to another errand I had planned for tonight. As reward, he will also accompany me on this one, as he desires to join us. He has met few of your kind and is a curious creature by nature.”
“Even though his errand failed?”

“It succeeded, but the price paid was a dear one. That is all you need know,” Loki snapped. “We will now transport you.”

The dragon’s wings half-unfurled. “I will take myself.”

“We don’t have the time,” Loki said, his own magic sliding smoothly to guide Fenrir’s, both of them bracing for the strength the transport would require, but Fenrir was ideal to provide more power for it; he was accustomed to such spells, on creatures of such size, out of personal experience, after all.

“That is too-” the dragon began, before they all vanished-

—and reappeared on a frozen bit of tundra in Sibera, the dragon’s arrival crushing and displacing a few dozen trees.

“-bad?”

“Actually, we’re quite good, I believe,” Loki retorted. “Allow me to lead you below, where I do require your aid.” He bowed his head and gestured toward the gaping entryway of an abandoned mine, which had once been also the mouth of a vast cave system. “Shall we?”

After a thoughtful few moments of staring, the dragon warily nodded. “Lead on.”

Chapter End Notes

*So, in designing that character and running into the rather interesting difficulty "how do you have a matronymic or patronymic name which specifies neither son nor daughter for a non-gender-binary person" I found out the Finnish language doesn't have separate pronouns for "he" and "she" (instead it's "hän") or for "his" and "hers" (hänien) and seized upon this because seriously I find that cool. Thus, Kaata's name is one used by men and women both, and hän uses a legible matronymic thanks to the incredibly helpful TygerC who helped me with Finnish. Also here are some Jotunnheim/Nifleheim culture head-canons of mine for the curious

**Clint is correct about that ringtone, and you can see the source (Bobby Yang performs Van Halen's "Eruption" guitar solo on violin) here because it's cool.
Surtur is unleashed upon Jotunnheim. Tony Stark is unleashed upon the Ten Rings. Amora happens and it's crazier than anyone ever wanted, in the worst ways.

The ice is slowly melting.

Deep below the earth, a giant of a be-winged reptile-like creature had clawed his way through the remains of an abandoned mine all the way down as far as any humans had ever dared, and then down still further. Debris was pulled up and out of his way by the mages waiting overhead, who occasionally guided his progress if his angle of descent began to too severely alter.

It was tedious work, but not enough to exhaust the dragon, even by the time he’d gone about half a mile further down than where human progress had stopped, and felt barriers of old and shockingly powerful magics give way, unable to hold the dragon at bay. They were not meant to prevent such a direct approach; such wards were to prevent any magical means, but had not anticipated such physical ones as a dragon might wield. In fact, resistant to most magics as he was, what few physical and illusory deterrents existed against the unlikely chance of someone taking the long way down to the chamber Loki had described, simply slid off his scales like water off a duck’s back.

Humans would have turned back long ago, by wards communicating instability and untenable blocks to progress.

The dragon didn’t even feel them, even as he at last broke through into a massive cavern, as promised: so expansive that the ceiling was twice as high as the top of Fhyen Fjiang Fhoulm’s head, when he dropped to the floor. His arrival echoed in ways that suggested the cavern ceiling was still higher, further ahead of him, and lower behind him. He wasn’t surprised when the trickster and his unconventional offspring appeared at his left a few moments later, having sensed weakness or breakage in the wards the dragon had tunneled through.

Loki raised a hand, and spoke a single syllable that set the rock walls alight with runes just above the floor, and just below the ceiling, and about a hundred yards ahead of them, two massive torches flared to life on either side of a tightly-barred set of heavy doors, carved densely with still more runes, in complex protective wards. Most of the wards were meant to inspire awe and fear, but others were more offensive, should any intruder save Odin himself or one of his standard-bearers try to approach.

The trickster and his cohorts did not have Gungnir, nor Mjolnir, nor had Slepnir delivered them, nor did any one of them resemble the Destroyer... yet.

Loki pulled from the air a particular weapon one Agent Coulson had once fired upon him. It had been a most unpleasant experience, and yet very interesting. Loki had stolen it ages ago, made a few alterations to make it even more akin to the Destroyer’s capabilities that it so wanted to mimic. He aimed it at the gate and fired.

The fires were caught in the wards, then examined by them, then taken apart, traveling along branching paths along the doors, mimicking the trunk, branches, and roots of Yggdrasil in the end,
just before there was a loud series of clunks so loud the ground underfoot trembled with them, and the doors slowly swung open. Loki returned the gun to its place in one of the pocket-dimensions up his sleeves.

“What is kept here?” Fhyen asked.

“Something very old,” Loki said, unsmiling, as he walked the distance to the doors, not daring teleport further lest any of the inner sanctum’s more sensitive wards identify him as a threat. His magic, after all, did differ vastly from Odin’s in execution. Fenrir followed at his elbow.

“I gathered that,” said the dragon, letting them get ahead before taking a lazy single step forward and out-pacing them. He paused when the lit runes from the entryway appeared within the inner sanctum, and lit what lay within. Inhaling sharply, Fhyen felt a strong urge to reverse and flee.

The giant was taller than the dragon, skin of darkest red awash with black as though ash-stained, or possibly the reverse, leaving the impression of a brindled pattern, overall, of blood and rust and soot. Seated, cross-legged within a circular indent in the floor of the stone womb in which he slumbered, arms bound with his wrists crossed and resting against his collarbone, hands relaxed on his shoulders, slept Surtur. His armor seemed like natural formation of volcanic rock, covering all but his head, his neck, his arms, his ankles and his feet. His legendary burning eyes were sealed shut by unwilling slumber, which Loki traced back to a single gold lead-ring at the front of the collar around the fire-giant’s neck. Approaching with careful silence, he found at least eight viable means by which he could break that particular restraint on his own. He could not, however, do that, and break the chains connected to other parts of the metal collar, and the manacles on arms and legs too.

“Break only the chains connected to the walls,” Loki instructed.

The dragon stood stock-still, staring at the giant very hard.

“Fhyen Fjiang Fhoulm, did you hear me?” inquired the trickster, his voice echoing a little more insistently through the cave.

“You’re mad,” Fhyen whispered, loud as a car engine, but (by dragon standards) still a whisper.

“Oh yes, but I am also practical. Do not detach any chains by making contact with the collar he wears, and you will not awaken him,” Loki assured. “As per our deal, dragon, please break a few chains. Keep close to the walls, and you will be safe.”

Turning reptilian eyes on him, with narrowed black pupils surrounded by a blaze of poison yellow, the dragon let the scales around his head puffed out, spiky, like bird-feathers (a contemplation of aggressive display, and possibly warning to any observers that it was a tempting thought), but then he only strode forward, wings tucked tight across his back as he circled the giant once, taking in all of the myriad anchor-points, sometimes bowing his head to step under the ones leading to the collar at Surtur’s neck. After confirming the son of Muspellheim was steady, not held up or supported by the chains and thus likely to topple, Fhyen gripped the first link of chain, where it connected to anchorage deep-embedded in the stone. The anchor, even he sensed wouldn’t budge. The magics were too strong, there, but the fuses between links were weaker.

They clattered and groaned as long talons tested them, then settled in just the right link, off-set by the dragon’s leverage as he pushed all of his weight down and forward, tugging away from the anchor and toward himself. There was a rattling tension for a few moments, then a snap of the first link breaking. Fhyen stopped, and pulled the broken link toward him, pushing it apart a bit further, until the other links of the chain could slip free. Without pause, he moved on to the next.
One after another, with methodical application of strength that three gods of Asgard could not have inflicted in any such sustained, patient and controlled manner. Loki himself might have the power, but the chains had so few weak spots to exploit that it would burn up more energy on brute force than the trickster could stand to lose. He knew that very well, now, staring into the sleeping face of the creature he would be fleeing from for the next... long while.

Surtur’s features were very sharp, almost fine. He might have been a massive parody of vast statues of Buddha Loki had seen on earth; although, instead of contemplating anything peaceful, the fire-giant was dedicated wholly to fire, to seething rage, and to war. He had strong cheekbones like granite cliffs; a long and narrow nose that was surprisingly sharp and uncrooked for a war-monger, as though no enemy had ever come close enough to him to break it in his long life; a mouth thin and barely concealing large teeth, even when slack with slumber; a high clear brow; and round, sunken eyes that the trickster was uncertain that he ever wanted to see open their deeply wrinkled lids, like they might be doors to galaxy-devouring incinerators.

“I don’t suppose you’re suddenly realizing what a bad idea this is?” Fenrir murmured, barely audible.

“I love bad ideas,” Loki said, and caught himself using a verbal lilt not quite his own. It made him wince.

The wolf caught it. “Father... I think you’ve made a mistake.”

“Have I?” Upon realizing his voice had turned poison he grit his teeth and breathed deeply. That, he reserved for others, and not for those who had never harmed him, particularly those he had sworn to himself never to harm. Not even if they ever did wound him first. He cleared his throat. “How so?”

“I did notice you have traces of powdered plastic and glass all over your hand. I get the feeling you might have ended the conversation early?” Fenrir asked lightly.

“I do not wish to discuss this.”

His statement was punctuated by the louder metallic crack of one of the largest chains—one at the back of the collar—had a link split open. The sound of the spare length slithering deafeningly across the rock and thudding against the giant’s spine made every conscious body in the chamber still, until the slight forward movement stopped, and it became clear that Surtur would move no further.

“Equilibrium regained,” the wolf murmured. “Now there’s just your heart to worry about. You can’t afford to doubt yourself before this.”

“Then you had best stop now. While I have my anger, doubt is far from my mind. I am convinced of all the very worst, and am thus capable of being my very worst.” He reached out tenderly and stroked the wolf-face glaring at him with worry. His fingers did not shake, and his smile was oil-slick. There was warmth that reached his eyes, but it was of a purely predatory affection: warm as fresh-spilled blood, heat as quickly lost as it was replenished by more being spilt. It was as unquenchable as it was unstoppable, and he knew that this marvel, his son, would understand better than any other.

A flicker of answering dark warmth flashed in Fenrir’s eyes. He nodded, leaning into his father’s touch. “Taking it for a run, father?”

“It’s been a long time.”

The wolf grinned then, fierce and fearsome. It was a sight which had brought many who had seen it to have nightmares about just how wide his jaw might open, and what fearsome bites he might take
out of the very universe. “Then come back to me yourself, and we will discuss this properly.”

“I will return. I promise you that.”

“You’d fucking better.”

Another deafening metallic clank and rustling clatter, then another, slow and meticulous, as they returned to watching Fhyen Fjiang Phoulm at his work. It took time, but the dragon was patient. Within less than half an hour, his work upon the links of metal with muscle and claw was done.

The dragon sauntered toward them slowly, nonchalant as though it had been effortless, but there was a stiffness to his gait, particularly in his forelimbs, that the predatory trickster and his son detected all too easily. The chains had tired him. No wonder the last few had been a little slow. “I have fulfilled the terms of our agreement, little god.”

“Yes you have, and I do thank you.” Loki was already weaving another spell, this one far more intricate and far more powerful. It was of containment, and transport, and it aimed to send him very far away indeed. His hand on Fenrir’s neck and the interweaving of some of his son’s power with his own was a comfort, and a relief. Surtur was... a bit taller than Loki had quite anticipated, and such mass, such density this creature had to him, was never easy to transport with any grace. Fenrir had needed to master it out of necessity long ago, and knew all of the most elegant tricks to achieve it. The trickster was happy to let him guide the way as much follow.

“What are your plans for... this?” Fhyen gestured with one taloned forepaw toward the fire-giant.

“I plan,” said Loki, “to awaken him.”

“No here,” the dragon rumbled, and it was almost a question.

“No. Not here. There is, however, the matter of you, to deal with.”

“Pardon?” A single word managed to convey a world of suspicion. “Last time we fought, you did not fare well.”

“I needed you alive. It’s always far more taxing to fight with someone one is restricted from killing, after all.”

“You will need more than yourself and your little pet son, if you seek to overcome me,” Fhyen snarled, and seemed deeply disturbed when the response to that was hysterical laughter from Fenrir. It was a deep, gravelly and thunderous laugh, shaken through his whole body and echoing throughout the room painfully, and hauntingly. “Stop that!”

Calming only a little, Fenrir grinned a threat, though all of his body language aside from holding the dragon’s stare with hackles raised and all his teeth showing. “Oh, father dear, leave him to me. I shall enjoy this.”

“Taking it for a run, son of mine?” the trickster mused warmly.

“Nah, just out for a bite, really,” the wolf countered. “Go your ways. Come back alive or we’ll make you wish you’d never died, and Mistress Death will let us,” he sing-songed.

“Bon appétit,” Loki responded, with a bow. “And I will return to both you and Hel, always.” With an effort, he wrenched his spell-work into action, flinging himself and the most feared son of Muspellheim in history through the crooked paths between worlds. Steering was more of a challenge than usual, as expected, but that would hardly stop him. It never had before.
With his father gone, the wolf looked around the massive space around them, smiled, and carelessly teleported himself and the dragon both to the surface-world of air and trees and cool wind. Fhyen felt a sensation of unease. So few creatures could carry such a burden as he via teleportation. He wondered, briefly, where this odd little wolf learned the trick.

“I care not what you call me, you know. I’m amused, but I’m also hungry, and your kind have such fire...” He grinned more ferociously again, and this time his eyes were alight a bit unnaturally from within. As he spoke further, he began to grow in size, like a shadow as the thing which blocks the light steps closer to the light-source; although growth aside, he did not move, merely sat where he was, taking up steadily more and more space. “I know from experience that as soon as your brain’s communication with the rest of your body is cut off, you self-roast from the inside as tissues begin to break down, no longer maintained by your own systems. All waste incinerated, you might leave naught but a bone-filled husk behind, if there is not some means to let a bit of the fires out before muscle tissues also vaporize, but cut a few vents here and there in your hide and you make a fine delicacy.” By the time he stopped, he towered over the dragon, who stood stock-still in shock and something akin to recognition. The wolf before him was so large that he could see more fur and teeth and claws than sky overhead, and there was a stirring wind around him now, powerful, though it was just from the monstrous wolf breathing normally.

“Murderer,” Fhyen gasped, backing away, wings half-furled as he struggled between the need to fly away from this creature, and fear it might break his wings before he could get very far at all. This was not like the little trickster’s shape-changes; the wolf knew this form well, it was solid, it was true, and that was all the more terrifying. “Unnatural monster!”

“I am Fenrir Lokisson,” Fenrir rumbled, voice like a volcano soon to erupt. “And you are not wrong on either count.” Then his teeth and claws lashed out and the dragon’s desperate, fiery screams echoed through the night, the firelight visible for miles around as the forest around the mine began to burn, even as the fire’s source itself was silenced forever.

Atop a plateau on the day-lit side of Jotunnheim, Loki and the giant Surtur landed. The trickster stared at the massive fire-giant, and silently called himself a fool. This was not his preferred way of dealing with matters, for all that the madness and cleverness of the plan suited him well enough. As much as he loved to provoke those more powerful than himself, he usually aimed them at others, long enough to be certain he would not be caught.

This was so very, very vastly different.

Loki began with the chains, where they spread around the giant. They were heavy and resisted his magics at first, but eventually let him guide them, weaving them around the son of Muspellheim’s body in an intricate arrangement so they would not hinder him giving chase. He drew heavy links of chain from up his sleeves, and stepped in to seal them where loose-ends of chain would otherwise refuse to meet. They were not strong as Odin’s, but were equally fire- and ice-resistant, to be
unaffected by abrupt and harsh temperature changes, and had a few spells for self-repair woven into them for security’s sake.

That work done, he focused on the ring at Surtur’s collar. It kept him sedated, but knowing Odin, there would be multiple tiers of sedate available: deep slumber, as now, but also immobile wakefulness, should the fire-giant have wisdom the old gallows-god might wish to try and glean from him.

Loki and Thor had followed him once, to consult the son of Muspellheim on a cosmic matter related to Muspellheim’s instability in Yggdrasil, almost two thousand years ago. Both of Odin’s sons had been very young, Loki not even quite out of adolescence, but he had still learned much.

Apples were not all he stole from Asgard on his last visit, and he pulled his other prize, an intricately worked key, from a long chain about his neck. It was not the original, and would not be able to open the magic-binding shackles at Surtur’s ankles, wrists, and throat, but copies, if they are good enough, can still serve their purposes. Where Odin had once summoned stairs of stone back in that prison chamber below the earth’s surface, now Loki summoned a platform of ice under his feet, to raise him to a height at which he could reach the ring at Surtur’s collar.

Speaking two small syllables older than the universe around him, Loki channeled a bit of power through it, and touched it to the first of three runes on the ring at the front of the fire-giant’s collar. The rune glowed molten-red, then cooled, and there was a faint sound like the grinding of stone as Surtur straightened slightly, head lifting, and his fiery eyes opened wide.

The sclera around his irises was blood-red, the irises themselves a brindle of yellow and molten-iron orange. His pupils were black moons of soot. “You... I know your face,” he rumbled, his voice heavy with the fog of too-long sleep. He was only half-aware of his surroundings, due to the magics binding him, but half-aware was still enough to detect the fiercely biting cold, and the feel of fresh air on his face as harsh winds blew. “I am no longer in the earth.”

“You are not,” Loki concurred.

“You are... a son of Odin.” His eyes narrowed.

The trickster embraced cold, and felt it flow through him like snowmelt in his very veins, his skin feeling a bit harder and his eyes a little better able to see past the glare of sun on so much ice and snow around him, however cloud-dimmed that sunshine was. He was blue, and his eyes red, as he declared, “Odin has lost the right to claim me as his son, and I will never trust him to act as a father to me. I am Loki Laufeyson of Jotunnheim, and I have a proposition for you, scion son of Muspellheim’s war-mongers.”

“I had wondered if you knew you nature. It was refreshing, to sense cold after so long smothered in my cell,” Surtur rumbled. “Cold has such refreshing bite, such contrast with fire. You were not so cold as you should have been, little shifter, were you? Playing Aesir as best you could, because that was all you ever expected to be? Is that how Odin betrayed you? Never telling you that you were a pet and a pawn, not a son?”

Rather than letting anger move him, Loki merely gave a curt nod, refusing to rise to the bait. “You are quite right.”

“And cool are you now, despite your rage. How important must this offer of yours be, for you to free me?” His eyes a little clearer now, he managed to send a few darting glances around himself, unable to detect more than fog and ice and snow. “You have brought me... to Jotunnheim?”
“I have.”

“Why?”

“I have a proposition to offer you.” Loki raised the key in his hand. “You will chase me. When you catch me, if you can, I will free you. Your fire, you may wield howsoever you will. Your magic, I will only deign to unlock if you catch me. Your hands are too vast to wield this delicate instrument, but more than large enough to threaten to crush me if I do not use them as you ask.”

The fire-giant stared at him in bemused disbelief now. “To what purpose is this?”

“You will chase me all around this world, Surtur,” the trickster said, with cold certainty. “You will chase where I lead, and your fire and fury will melt vast quantities of ice wherever you may go. Together, we might thaw this world of the ice Laufey’s father cursed it with, and free the land and ruins and survivors long trapped beneath it. That is my wish. You must merely follow.”

“If I capture you before the thaw is done?”

“Then I lose, and you go free as this key may allow you,” Loki promised. “I only ask for a minute’s head-start, once I free your limbs to move. Do we have a deal?”

“How did you bring me here?” Surtur inquired.

“You are a mage.”

“Of course I am.”

“Teleportation will not keep you from me forever. I will wear you down. I can see you, and you are weak.”

Loki offered a very unpleasant smile, mad and twisted. “Compared to your magics? Perhaps. Mine were not tempered by unfathomable fires for millennia. You cannot reach your magics, however.”

“I would hardly need them, to kill you where you stand.”

“If you did not need me to unlock the rest of your lingering imprisonment, perhaps I might care, but that would certainly lack finesse. The other mages left in this world are young, and would not know how to free you. Have you enough patience to teach such young creatures? Have you the time to be so patient, once you are again within the sight of Asgard, from which I currently protect you?” Loki gestured around them.

Surtur made a reluctant, thoughtful sound of acknowledgement. “You are tricky, little god. I agree to your terms.”

Raising his platform of ice a little further, Loki reached out, and spoke again in words that seemed to distort his voice and light around him as they escaped his lips, into something warped and strange for a moment, as the key once more brushed the ring on the fire-giant’s collar. He watched Surtur’s hands spread wide, and curl into fists, just before he vanished.

Keeping himself well within sight, he only teleported half a mile away, up an icy ridge where a single spike of dull stone showed through the ice: formerly the base of a mountain peak. Loki waited, counting the seconds, and then caught his breath as Surtur erupted in flame with a soul-shattering roar that echoed through the empty landscape. It was the roar of a beast too-long encaged, breaking
free at last. It was the roar that preceded volcanic eruption, the groaning and cracking just before the explosion which made the burst of molten rock and ask so inevitable.

Loki turned, and Loki ran.

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Tony didn’t let the catastrophic emotional fallout of Loki’s phone call divert him from keeping his half-promise to the god of lies where the Ten Rings were concerned. The half Loki had needed to hear, he would provide; the half Loki had wanted to hear, about Tony matching what the trickster might have wished to inflict, Tony planned to be more sparing about. He was only human, and sometimes sort of a hero, after all.

With their primary headquarters, the one that had never before failed them, now a charred wreckage of twisted metal poking out between piles of shattered stone and boulders the size of whales, they were left scrambling, clumsy, and reckless.

And S.H.I.E.L.D. had all of their newer bases heavily watched, while Tony had his eyes and ears in every single bit of their network, ever since he’d used the language-hacking software Loki gave him for use against Thanos to make short work of instant Makluan-to-English translation. The mad inventor had been watching them for weeks, waiting for Loki’s signal, and now it was all paying off.

Except the fact that an entire neighborhood in Prague was now on fire and M had just hacked off his left arm with an impossible blade. Armor peeled back from the detached limb as it heated, and Tony with it. His face-plate long gone, he was able to admire the fire-lit shock on M’s face as he reached over, grabbed his amputated arm with his good and still-gauntleted hand, and pushed it back where it had been cut away. He emitted a scream as Extremis took hold and the pain soared through his whole nervous system, but focused primarily on the searing joinder where his shoulder was half-trying to fix the wound and half-trying to start the rebuild of another arm, which would take too long. Reversing and re-attaching took only half a minute.

M stared for a moment, panting hard, then charged again, batting away a repulsor-blast with his blade and an exertion of magic not once, but twice before he reached the fallen Iron Man.

Tony then teleported to stand behind him, in the blink of an eye.

The Ten Rings leader stumbled, spun around, swung that blade aimed for the inventor’s throat, but Tony caught his forearm with one still-searing-hot hand, and M screamed at the burn, still stubbornly holding onto the sword.

“Natasha Romanov has captured your daughter,” the inventor said coldly.

M snarled. “Liar!”

A flick of effort, and Tony brought the suit’s speaker system up.

“Stand down, M,” Natasha’s voice called.

“Father, don’t, please,” hissed Sasha Ling. “They don’t have mother!”

“We didn’t capture her, but that is because turned herself in,” added another voice: Nick Fury. “She
thought you dead, Miss Ling, and no longer wished to fight.”

M’s grip loosened, and he dropped his blade.

Tony caught it by the hilt, gauntleted fingers wrapping around it tight. “You done?”

“You have taken from me... everything.” He held up both hands.

Tony plucked the rings from them one by one, and tucked them in a compartment below the arc reactor in his suit. “I’ve left you alive. Your daughter will live. Her mother, too, and they have a chance to be free of the empire you wove for them. What they do with that chance depends on them. I have taken only what you used to hurt people who didn’t even properly deserve it, for your own gains.”

“Yet you still live in America,” M spat.

“It’s a work in progress,” the inventor admitted, and cuffed him. “And to be fair, nobody voted you into your position, unfairly or otherwise.”

“Democracy is overrated and corrupt as capitalism.”

“Yeah, but you try telling that to Americans.”

M snorted. “I did. Explosively, with AIM’s rise and fall, and yours.”

“Which is why you’re now in handcuffs.”

“Touché, Stark. Well played.”

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One week into his plans, Loki was beginning to deeply regret many of his life choices, but he had expected that to be the case by this point.

Breathless and scrambling through knee-deep, bone-achingly cold flood waters, he eventually gave up when the water deepened a little further, and changed his shape to that of a sea-serpent and slithered downstream all the faster, especially as the current grew stronger with Surtur following him, widening the canyon carved into the vast ice sheet while also deepening it, making the tops of those walls tower further and further overhead. Reaching what he knew to be the shore of a long-frozen sea, Loki changed back to his usual shape and teleported up to the top of the canyon ridge, scrambling back as it fast-receded.

Then he heard it: first a shivery, tinkling of little cracks, then a louder, harsher one. He looked toward the frozen sea and saw it shattering a bit, where the flood waters poured onto it, wearing away at the waters especially as the fire-giant drew closer.

A mile-wide, more-than-a-mile-long swath of sea ice was outlined by longer, more impressive cracks, and pushed up a mere inch with a creaking groan like the dying note of a thousand whales.

There was water under that ice. There was water mixing with the beds of salt under the ice. The seas were on their way to coming back. Loki half-laughed, sounding shattered even to his own ears. Then he heard Surtur’s roar, saw more flames far too close to his position, moving faster now as though
sensing his distraction. The trickster leapt to his feet, feeling his battered armor heavy with fresh ice, which he banished with a thought and a bit of his natural knack for the element, before shouting, “Over here, you miserable excuse for a weak-burning candle-wick. Not sputtering out on me now, are you?” The enraged roar he got in response to that made him grin with wild panic as he saw Surtur leap out of the ice canyon and back to the surface, sending out flames far, so Loki could feel the ice grow slicker under his feet, even as he changed to wolf-shape and bolted back up toward the next mountain range.

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The problem with a vast empire of organized crime is the sheer number of underlings who believed themselves to deserve the metaphorical throne as patriarch, or matriarch, to run things, once M fell.

Tony had spent three weeks uprooting and either incarcerating or, when forced, leading to their own destruction and death, over a dozen of them. They all fell, but it wasn’t easy, and while the dragon was slain (literally, Tony suspected, as well as metaphorically) and the Ten Rings were now nothing but a myth and perhaps a hundred henchmen for hire now absorbed by the Hand and others in the wake of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Tony Stark and even some of the Avengers here and there, Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever get enough sleep to counter the exhaustion.

Thor pestering him about Loki’s plans for Jotunnheim whenever they crossed paths wasn’t helping. Especially while Tony was still badly jet-lagged from jaunts all around the planet lately.

Nor was the sudden emergency alarm going off throughout the tower a mere four hours after he finally managed to push Thor out of his penthouse with promises to talk later and then pass out in his own bed.


“Talk to me, JARVIS,” he groaned, still under a mess of blankets.

“It would appear that Amora has landed in Central Park, and found Thor there with Dr. Foster. She seems to be in a very unpleasant mood and displaying jealous, psychologically unstable behavior in acts of violence, using more of her power than she has ever displayed on earth.”

“Shit!” Tony rolled out of bed and to his feet, jumping into a fresh pair of boxers and the first pair of jeans he could get his hands on. “How is Skurge doing while she’s at that? Is he sneaking around while she distracts everyone?”

“He is... not present. Nowhere in the city is their any indication of another arrivale from another realm in the past seventy-two hours.”

That set off all sorts of alarms in the inventor’s head; if only he could make sense of them. Amora did travel without Skurge often, but never fought without him, especially not if she was serious, and going after Thor.

And why the hell was she going after Thor again? She’d seemed quite contently over him, during the war and even after it, Tony thought. “Prep me a suit with magic dampeners and aim me at the park.”

When, ten minutes later, he arrived at the park, what he found was a chaotic whirlwind of crackling gold magic, which he barely managed to shield himself against the psychic effects of, once he was in
range. The sky was darkened with Thor’s rage, but his lightning was far from the only force of nature in play. Steve and Natasha were evacuating the far edges of the park now, while Hawkeye (from in a tree somewhere, Tony guessed) threatened camera equipment or the raised cellphones of members of the media-sphere and blog-o-sphere both, with harmless warning-shots of small projectiles that delivered ‘keep off’ notes, to keep from getting close enough to wind up either collateral damage, or subject to any mind-control of Amora’s.

Bruce was absent. Last time the Enchantress had gotten hooks into the Hulk’s mind, and it had gotten really, really ugly. The others were under less threat, their emotions more remote.

Tony was staggered a bit by the venomous shrieking accusations Amora was aiming at Thor, about ruined happiness, about never being enough, and about heartbreak. Something was wrong.

“Thor, how long has she been like this?” the inventor asked, over the comms.

“Nearing half an hour,” the thunderer responded.

“She seem... herself, to you?”

“In truth, I have never seen her so angry in my life. I know not what has happened to her. Perhaps this is not the Amora we know, and there has been a time-shift event somewhere, which let her past self through?”

“Is that... normal, to you?” Tony asked blithely.

“The Amora I last saw in battle would not do this. She did not look at me like this any longer, and I was relieved by it. I could have forgiven her, and she knew it; this cannot be she.”

A blast of power sent them all reeling and Thor cried out.

Tony could see why. Jane had been left exposed, knocked almost flat by the blow, though she sat up with an effort as Amora charged for her. Launching himself into the Enchantress’ warpath, Tony stood before her and raised his face-plate, examining her expression carefully. “Amora, talk to me.”

“Out of my way, boy, this is not your fight,” she snarled.

“Well, actually it is. My planet, my friends, my fight, but I don’t actually want to fight you, Amora.”

“Then stand down.”

“Listen, listen: where is Skurge?”

Her expression darkened, all focus narrowing down to him as she reached out, grabbed his throat hard enough with one hand, magic crackling through her grasp so her skin lit up like fire and the suit collapsed around the mad inventor’s throat, leaving him wheezing. “Do not speak to me of him, you ridiculous child,” she hissed, and flung him into the nearest lamp-post, which snapped under the force like a tooth-pick, leaving Tony on the ground.

Gauntleted hands pried warped metal out of his neck and he shouted, “It’s important, isn’t it? The reason Skurge didn’t follow? Is there trouble in paradise?”

Predictably, this got him hit with a focused blow of biting, bladed, spitfire magic, that tore at his armor and sent him scraping further back along the concrete path another few feet. He charged up the magic-dampening field and aimed it at her in a blast designed to spread out as it moved forward, but she teleported at the last second, and stood over him, crushing the firing mechanism under one of
her sharp heels. Then she kicked him across the face hard enough that he saw stars. Lightning, with Thor and Mjolnir behind it, aimed at her back, but she threw up a foot-thick gold shield long enough that he bounced off with a hideous sound, her own power feeding off the lightning and sending equivalent agony right up Thor’s arms and into his veins fit to make him scream as he was flung back.

“You think you got a read on heartbreak, baby? Did Loki leave you for a kingdom far, far away, and do you think that means you can guess what it is causing me pain?” Amora’s pretty face was twisted with cruelty and something a bit like agony. “Do you want to know how I hurt? I’ll tell you.” She kicked his face again, just as hard as before, in the other direction, and crushed the second firing mechanism for any anti-magic field, in the other gauntlet, under her other heel. Then she reached down, hands aglow again and tore his armor open with a grimace and a visible drain on her available reserves, then pinned him down with her magic in bands across arms, chest, hips, legs and ankles.

“You miss him, don’t you?” she purred, vicious and sultry. “You think you can win him. You think if you chase, if you show how much you want and how much you might give, it might be enough? You think he’ll accept you, and want you as you want him? Do you?” She caressed his face with her left hand.

“I know you’re crazy, but are you really this crazy?” Tony hazarded.

She showed all her teeth in a snarl. “What do you think?!” she spat.

“I think you need help,” he offered.

She giggled, a sound like hysterical mirth and shattering glass all in one. “You think that you can fix a broken heart? Well, of course you do. You caught a trickster, then let him go, now do you think you might find happiness, if you catch him again?”

“I can hope. You can’t, here. You don’t want this,” Tony said firmly.

She summoned a blade to her hand, long and familiar with an intricate hilt and grip. The blade had an odd, oily sheen to it. “I want to be happy. I want the pain of not being enough to end,” she whispered, then grimaced. “If I can’t have that, I want to put all of you through some of my pain. So here, little mortal boy, is a gift right from Loki, without love,” she snapped, and slammed the blade home between two of his ribs, where it sunk in deep, making the inventor scream then stop sharply as it pierced one of his lungs. “There, there, baby. It’ll be over soon,” she crooned.

“I’m a bit, hard to kill these days,” the inventor grit out, as he began to heat from the core of his body outward.

“It’s not the knife you need to worry about,” Amora assured, twisting it and making him cry out. “It’s the poison.”

That was when Tony’s gaze when strangely distorted and inexplicable purple-hued, and hazy. “F-fuck, what’d... what’d you-”

She kissed his brow. “A lovely gift, is it not?”

Tony grit his teeth with a heartfelt sob as much at the tenderness, and the implied betrayal, as the sudden spreading agony.

“I’ll leave you for him, for Thor, one of his dearest earthly friends, and the man he sees as his brother’s only possible redeemer, and I’ll leave your blood and poison for him, as you die, on Loki’s blade,” the Enchantress snarled, pushing and twisting the blade just a bit further still. “And I ruin so
many all at once, how lovely. How much you all deserve it for leaving me like this.” Then she vanished with an anguished sound.

“F-fuck.” Tony reached with half-numbed hands for the blade and his hand slid over his own slick blood. He heard a cry from Thor, and heavy running steps that seemed to shake the ground, but he was focused on pulling out the blade, on stopping it from killing him. It came free when Thor’s hand wrapped around his own and also pulled. Tony gave a muffled scream, then stared as they both opened their hands and...

That was one of Loki’s daggers, Fenrir motif at the pommel and all.

“She seriously say that he sent her with a poisoned fucking knife for me, what the fucking-?” Tony rasped, and then cut off as he passed out abruptly.

Except it didn’t feel like passing out.

It felt like being fried by live-wires of razor-sharp pain through every vein in his body, except his body was unconscious now and no one could hear that all of the rest of him was screaming.

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Loki was run ragged.

It had been weeks. Weeks and days. Storms raged all over the planet, but the winds were warmer than they had been before. Rain fell, as well as ice, for the first time in millennia, upon the surface of Jotunnheim.

Losing track of how many days he had been at this, the trickster had to rely on his physical progress instead. Mountain ranges had given way to highlands, always trying to stay away from the oceans, even if it had meant, days ago, laying a trap for the fire-giant to transport them both to the second major land-mass of Jotunnheim that was not at one of the poles. The continent was as vast as all of earth’s put together. There were other, smaller land-masses around the equator, but reports from occasional fleet-footed messengers sent by Býleistr had informed Loki that they were melting on their own, as global temperatures rose.

That was good. Loki had plans for the oceans, and for Surtur. If he could only survive long enough to apply them.

Loki had required a golden apple just to keep on his feet, and to set that last trap to move Surtur between continents. Now he had but one left, and was so tired.

He knew lack of sleep would soon catch up with him. Weeks without it... so many weeks and he had not dared shut his eyes for longer than it took to blink all the while. He could see more and more of Býleistr’s people watching them from safe distances as he ran. They watched, still and quiet so they did not catch Surtur’s eye, which had grown wearier but not weary enough by far, but they did still catch Loki’s. He could not take the time to sharpen his sight, and see their faces, and wondered, a little, if they watched out of interest in seeing his violent death, or something more innocent. Perhaps they knew unfolding history when they saw it.

Again, Surtur roared.
And again, Loki ran, fleet as he could manage in wolf-shape, melting ice making the claws of his hind-feet slip only briefly before the next stride freed his heels from the effects of heat and flame, for a little while longer.

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Tony was in agony for he knew not how long. He was dimly aware of voices around him: Bruce, Thor, Pepper, and Rhodey. Then, finally, he heard Hlín, and some of the pain abated as she spoke in old words over him—very old, as old as the ones Loki had used on Thanos, but hers were softer, cooler, and healing.

It was still a long journey, and exhausting, to drag himself back out of the torture-riddled dark. When he finally did, it was not with a gasp, but with a whimper, that he returned to himself. He was in the medical wing, with Hlín and Thor and Bruce around him. The windows were very dark, telling him it was late into the night.

He thought of Loki’s blade, and Amora’s words, and a different, more sickly sort of pain washed over him as his eyes shut again for a moment.

“It is good you came for me,” Hlín said. “Your anti-toxins, however clever, Dr. Banner, could not take into account how the heat of Extremis altered the original poison. If he were merely human...” Her eyes narrowed, curious and suspicious as they met Tony’s reopened ones. “If you were merely mortal, I should say, Tony, now you are awake, then you would be quite dead.”

“Yeah, I’m a bit confused on that, actually,” the inventor rasped. “I know I fucked up, but I didn’t realize I’d fucked up that bad.” He swallowed tightly. Suddenly his plans to chase Loki felt like foolhardiness of Thor-level degree optimism with none of his usual cynical foresight. Loki had decided to cut ties, rather than let Tony live knowing the trickster god had a weakness, and the weakness was in Tony Stark’s ability to hurt him. “So much for him needing me alive, I guess.”

Hlín’s brows furrowed deeply, and she looked to Thor in open question.

“You didn’t mention the dagger?” Tony muttered. “Seriously?”

“I mentioned. I did not... show.” Thor reluctantly picked up the blade from under a cloth on a nearby table, and held it out to Hlín, who looked grave and sad at the sight of it, then curious.

“I have not seen this blade in centuries. I had thought he lost it, long ago. He proved his mastery of weaving his spell-work into metal with this, while under my tutelage, but stopped using it, before he left my care.”

“Perhaps he crafted better,” Tony suggested, his voice less rough after he’d been handed a cup of water by Bruce, and taken a few small sips.

“He did, but not by much.” Hlín’s fingers traced over the handle and blade. “I thought... I thought he said that he lost it in a wager.”

“I guess he lied,” the inventor grunted. “Saving it for a rainy day.”

At that, Bruce cleared his throat. “I... did find something odd about the poison.”
All three of the quasi-immortals looked at him oddly.

“Of all present, Loki had the least reason to lie to me, right? I mean, while we were working on the formula to subdue the dragon. I wasn’t a very good leverage-point for anything he was up to, and we had a steady understanding that I’d crush his spine if he got on my nerves, so we did the polite-and-distant-and-professional thing.” Seeing them not agree, but not stop him either, he added, “I asked him why he didn’t just steal more from the Ten Rings, and he said, ‘I can’t stand using another’s potions. I cannot trust them, be they medicines or poisons, unless I have made them myself.’ He said it off-handedly, about the dragon, before that... phone call you had with him, before the war was even too close to over.”

“He has said the same to me, over the years, many times,” Thor confirmed. “What has that to do with anything?”

“It is his particular paranoia, since Amora tried to slip a bit of lust potion into a healing balm for Thor,” Hlín added. “Dr. Banner, you suggest the poison was not Loki’s?”

“It was the exact same poison Amora used on Thor a bit over a year ago, after a nasty fight over one of the Norn stones,” Bruce said calmly. “I don’t think Loki would tell her to use that, particularly for such a personal vendetta; he’d have given her something of his own, along with the dagger.”

“And it’s more than possible she won that dagger from him in a wager,” Thor realized. “Long ago.”

“Unless he didn’t have the time because he’s busy with some ‘imprisoned fiery horror’ he’s set loose on Jotunnheim,” Tony pointed out.

“What?” Hlín and Thor both demanded in brusque unison.

The inventor sighed. “I just knew you’d both know what that meant.”

“Yet you did not tell us?” the elder mage sounded as close to anger and fear as anyone present had ever heard from her before, even Thor. “Do you have any idea what he has done?”

“You are certain those were his words?” Thor asked, his voice shaking.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, what is it you two think I just said he said that he did, just before I even respond? You two look like Ragnarok is nigh or something.”

“Anthony Stark,” Hlín said, slow and dangerous, “I told you fire-mages, when they are powerful, are monstrously so. Odin long ago, before he was king, imprisoned the strongest of them, who was then too powerful for him to destroy, and locked him away beneath the surface of the earth. He is called Surtur, and last time he was free he almost burnt and razed all of the nine realms with his power, his magic, and his fierce ambition to render all of us to ash.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “He’s an idiot,” he said quietly.

“I could not have imagined him to be this great of an idiot!” Hlín snapped, and turned from him, running her hands over her thick braids of silver-and-white hair, tangling fingers around occasional beads woven throughout. “This is madness! He must have lied, must have-”

“The night he vanished there was a forest fire in Siberia,” JARVIS interrupted. “A vast one, centered around an abandoned mine, found collapsed rather impossibly deeper down than it should have been possible for it to collapse. A few strange, over-sized bones were found there, with marks from the teeth of an animal too large to be identified; although I have scanned the press images and determined that they might have been from a wolf, if the wolf were approximately three times the
size of a Makluan dragon. The bones themselves... might well be from that dragon.”

“He had the dragon dig him up, then let Fenrir eat him,” Tony murmured.

“It would seem so, sir,” agreed the AI.

“I must to Jotunnheim,” Thor rasped. “My brother cannot face this threat alone.”

“Do tell him ‘fuck you’ and ‘I’m getting a restraining order’ for me?” Tony chimed.

“Tony... if what you suggest is true, there is no way my brother would have had time to contact Amora,” Thor said gravely. “If we are lucky, he might still even be alive. Please, do not let fear blind you.”

“I don’t like betrayal, Thor,” the inventor snarled.

“Neither does he, when it is this artlessly carried out. Had he wished you dead, he would have waited to handle it properly,” the thunderer reminded. “You know him as well as I, or possibly better. You must know that what I say is true.”

Tony’s throat tightened, and he screwed his eyes shut, letting his head loll back. “It’s too fresh in my mind, Thor. I don’t want to wait for him to try that in earnest, when he’s done with Jotunnheim... if he ever is done.”

“What?” Hlín asked quietly.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Tony sighed raggedly. “Nothing. It’s nothing. Just a thought about... kingdoms and projects. Go, Thor. Thank you, Hlín. I think I need to sleep the rest of this whole... bullshit clusterfuck off, a while.” He vanished from sight without letting them respond.

“He’ll... need time to adjust to the idea that he really didn’t get the ultimate rejection letter,” Bruce surmised. “He’s not as sure that he didn’t deserve it as he ever thinks he deserves... not to be in pain or dead. He just needs time, and I should probably call Pepper.”

“What happened, with that dagger, Thor?” Hlín asked.

“Amora delivered it into Tony’s ribcage, with her poison on the blade, and said it was from Loki,” Thor said.

The elder mage inhaled sharply. “Oh.”

The thunderer’s expression remained very grave. “Yes.”

“How horrible, that it does seem the sort of thing he might do,” she sighed. “I should go with you, to Jotunnheim.”

Thor shook his head. “It might kill you. And it is not your fight.”

“The driving of the ice from that world is very much my concern,” Hlín corrected him, voice sharp and scolding enough to make the thunder god cringe and look sheepish. “My kin may be under that ice, boy. You will not prevent me seeing the truth of that, or the lack of it, with my own eyes. Come along.” She turned on her heel and strode out, her commanding presence radiating with anger and power, drawing Thor to stumble after her, feeling foolish.

Bruce blinked. “Damn.”
Tony reappeared with a sigh. “Holy shit, she didn’t notice.”

“Actually, she stared at the dent your butt still left in the sheets pretty accusingly before the conversation started back up,” Bruce said. “I think she was just humoring your invisibility act.”

“Well shit.” Tony crossed his arms over his chest and slumped back. “I need a drink. I need many drinks.”

“I’ll call Pepper.”

“Bruce, wait.” He caught the chemist’s arm. “The rest of the... ‘Surtur’ or whatever shit aside. He said that, about the potions?”

The chemist nodded.

Tony grimaced. “Dammit. Now I need to figure out why Amora has gone all crazy. She looked like she was rabid, I swear-”

“So you believe Loki didn’t-”

“Shush, not the point. The point is, if I want to even consider believing that, I have to understand why Amora would lie about it, and betray Loki in that way, when she sure as shit didn’t know about the apple, or how Loki had showed his hand to me. That was clear, in the way she talked about it. She was also in a lot of pain, but it was exaggerated, almost cartoonish, the way it twisted those words out of her. We all saw it, from the start, that something was wrong with Amora, something out of the norm. So what was it? How? Why?” He gestured wildly. “Who has anything to gain from Amora going absolutely bat-shit psychotic and trying to murder Dr. Jane Foster and/or Thor?”

Bruce blinked a few times. “Uh... someone who doesn’t like Jane and Thor?”

Tony’s eyes suddenly widened. “Oh. Oh shit.”

“What? What is it?” the biochemist’s brow furrowed.

“You don’t see it. Thor doesn’t see it, but that’s par for the fucking course,” Tony muttered. “I’ve gotta contact Loki. There’s gotta be a way. I need to-” He stood, then paused. “I need pants. Goddammit, Bruce, was the hospital gown really necessary?”

“You were out for three days,” Bruce responded blithely, handing over a pair of jeans and staring at the ceiling pointedly as Tony stripped the gown off without care and started hopping around on one foot to get his first leg into the garment.

“Fuck. Shit. Fuckin’ eight-legged horse riding, manipulative, tyrannical fuck-wit made of dried santorum and raven-shit,” Tony muttered as he struggled into the jeans.

“Colorful. Wait...” The doctor’s eyes widened as he suddenly caught the theme. “You... you think it was O-”

The inventor clapped a hand over Bruce’s mouth. “Names have power. Don’t use that one. I don’t want him onto me. In fact...” Tony straightened. “It’s clear Loki really did order her to do the stabbing with the dagger. It’s the only way it makes any real sense, I mean, she’d have no reason to target me. I’m nothing to do with Thor and Jane being happy. It’s not like there was enough between Loki and I to sabotage for it to be some lashing out against the happiness of someone who has curbed her more questionable tactics in pursuit of Thor over the years.” He glanced upward.

“There’s nothing. Especially now.” He held Bruce’s gaze, then, very steadily. “No son of Odin
would want me for anything but my usefulness. Apparently, I wasn’t useful enough. Either that, or my use is somewhere down the line, and Amora wanted to spite Loki and prevent it happening, but there’s nothing more than that, and either way, I’m getting fucked over,” he growled, sounding vicious and gravely certain as he could manage. Then he felt it, saw it, just a few thin threads around the room. He relaxed as it faded, traveling to the ears waiting to hear it.

Bruce was staring at him like he’d lost his mind.

“Shh, magic trick. C’mon, let’s head to the lab. I have it better warded, almost as well as Loki’s damn table.” He took his hand off Bruce’s mouth and started to drag him by his arm.

“But what the fuck-”

“Lab. Now.”

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Once in the lab, Tony found a shirt, made Bruce tea, and himself coffee, and they sat down on either side of one of the work tables.

“So Thor’s dad found out about the apples.”

“Why avoid the name?”

“I’m not as good at Loki at avoiding certain kinds of attention, and now I know we’re being paid special attention, I don’t know that my wards can keep that out. I’m still new at the mage thing, after all, and while these are my best yet-” He gestured around at invisible spell-weaving. “I think it’s really best not to risk it. So yeah, don’t use his name, if you can.”

“So he knows about Jane and the apple. And maybe you.”

“Now he knows about me, because I survived Amora’s stabbing, and he’s watching Thor, who was there. Whether he knows how honest or dishonest Amora might or might not have been? That’s up in the air. I’d prefer to think he’s uncertain, or believes I’m convinced it’s not for love.”

“Ah. Hence the speech.”

“Yeah.” Tony sipped at his coffee. “This complicates things. I didn’t think the big bearded guy would stoop quite like this. Whatever he did to Amora... it’s not good. It is, in fact, horrible. We should find Skurge.”

“What?!” Bruce blurted.

“He’ll be in her reach. He’s always in her reach. She’s not always in his, but I think she is, this time. She’s nervous about it, afraid to discuss him, hurt when he’s brought up. I used it to provoke her. I think he knew something was up the moment... whatever the fuck hit her, actually hit her.”

“What do you think hit her?”

Tony considered, then grimaced. “The worst thing it would be possible to hit her with, the cruelest, but perfect for launching her at Thor and Jane. We need to up guards around Jane, maybe take her to Asgard with Frigga’s help.”
“You still didn’t answer the question.”

“I think it’s a love-spell. She was over him, but there’s so much she used to feel... a love-spell would bring all that flooding back and more uncontrollable than ever.” Tony’s brow furrowed. “No wonder she’s lashing out. Has she appeared again, since then?”

“Twice. Just as violent. She lashed out at Steve pretty bad on the first reappearance, almost gutted him.”

“She say anything to him?”

“Oh, just how he was a waste of time, doomed to die, a pathetic excuse for a hero who should hardly be of any interest to a prince of Asgard,” Bruce recounted dully.

“Ouch.”

“The last time was just this morning. She looked sick. She came after me directly while I was out getting some more supplies for the med-bay, since you used up a lot. She tried to get to the Other Guy, and tried really hard, but Hawkeye got her with an exploding arrow in the small of her back, and she whirled on him, taking the fight outside. She wasn’t as strong, that time. She’s wearing down.”

Tony nodded. “We really need to find Skurge.”

“Maybe... what about, uh...” He glanced ceiling-ward. “Thor’s dad?”

“I’m thinking on it. First, we gotta help Amora. She’s his main weapon right now, and his most expendable, being an exile.” He grimaced. “Cruel bastard. She doesn’t deserve this. No one deserves what he’s doing to her, with this.”

“It’s overkill, definitely. Maybe that’s where Loki gets it?”

Something in Tony’s expression flickered. “Or he’s trying to bait Loki, and prove he can play by Loki’s sort of rules... poisoning the mind of one of his only trusted friends, so she goes right after Thor and Jane. And now Jane is one more count of law-breaking against Loki, since he stole that apple for her. You know Thor sure as hell didn’t.” He sipped his coffee. “They must’ve known he took more than one apple. They knew there was possibly someone else he gave one to, and Amora’s attacking the Avengers was a good way to possibly flush them out.”

“And they did,” Bruce agreed. “Now what?”

The inventor began to smirk with one of the bleakest, most vengeful of smirks in his entire collection. “I’ve got a few ideas. I might even knock out two birds with one stone, in the end. This is fucking too far, and he might be trying to play Loki’s game, but he’s not good enough to do what Loki would do.”

“How so?”

“He’ll make the mistake of believing me, when I betray Loki.”

“Wait... what?”

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Not for the first time that day, Loki stumbled, and fell. This time, the ice he fell on collapsed, weakened by the heat ever at his heels, and he fell down, down, through cracking ice, hit a slanted flat section and slid-skidded off of it to fall further until he crashed atop a pile of ice. He lay there for a moment, breathing hard, scarcely able to muster the energy to teleport, but he did. It ached through his bones, so little power did he still have left for it, but he arrived on the surface again, a mile away, but still within Surtur’s sight. He heard the distant roar and nearly wept.

There was more ice yet to go. He had to keep running. He had to.

His legs ached and longed to collapse under him, and his eyes were swollen and heavy with lack of sleep such that strange shapes moved at the edges of his vision when his attention drifted. As it did now. For a few moments he watched Surtur’s approach, almost uncomprehending of what it must mean.

*It means, dear, that ‘this is the part where you run’* snapped a sarcastic, too-familiar voice in the back of his head: part-memory, part-prediction of what a distant, strange mad no-longer-mortal might have said.

Loki’s legs started to move before he could even fully process the thought. He was running all out, muscles burning and head aching with weariness. He had no other choice. He could run, or he could die. There was no rest, no aid or respite for the likes of Loki; as he told himself it always had been, no matter what else he might have thought otherwise of family and friends, he could rely only on himself.

A cacophonous sound and a blaze of too-familiar color struck the ice ahead of him by half a mile, and the trickster stumbled again, almost losing his footing as he stared. Surely he had not been found so soon? Surely the blocks against Odin’s and Heimdall’s sight he’d constructed for a week before releasing Surtur still stood? They were built fit to last over a year’s time, both over Surtur’s now-empty prison, and all of Jotunnheim (with the aid of such young and less finely-trained mages they had in this realm, whom he had taught very much in that narrow span of days) and they should not have so soon failed him.

Then lighting, loud and familiarly unnatural, lit up the sky.

Hlín appeared in front of him as Thor charged toward the fire, wielding thunder.

“You idiot!” Loki cried hoarsely. “You’ll lead him the wrong way!”

“Then tell me where he need be led,” his teacher chided, in tones more full of anger than he’d heard from her in centuries. She then slapped him hard across the face. “For you are more than a little fool yourself, Loki! You frightened us half to death!” She seemed a bit hesitant when that single blow sent him sprawling to the ground. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ve been running him over the ice for weeks; I haven’t slept, I have only one apple left and I can’t use it yet,” he confessed. “I’m sorry. I should have asked your aid earlier, but you would have tried to stop me bringing him here.”

“His magic is still restrained,” Hlín observed, as the fire-giant roared and tried to lash out at the thunder god circling him and taking violent pot-shots.

“I may be a fool, but I am not *that* suicidal,” Loki countered. “He did manage to break free of one shackle, but another replaced it within moments. I have six more, and two collars up my sleeve, just
in case. I did prepare for this.”

“So you did. Save for yourself.” She kicked at his leg lightly.

“I... originally planned to have a third apple on hand, but another opportunity arose. Had I that... I would be fine.” He swallowed thickly.

“Why proceed, without all of your resources?” Hlín asked.

“Over-confidence, and a sudden need to run from my mistake,” Loki said flatly. “I’d rather not dwell on it. I... think I need a day to rest, but I can’t risk that bull-headed idiot leading Surtur right into the local populace.” He sat up slowly, with a pained growl, looking around himself. “You see them?”

Hlín looked in the direction he stared. “Oh... you have an audience.”

“They keep showing up,” he huffed. “I’ve tried to keep them away, but multitasking, of late, has gotten more difficult.”

“Outline for me the rest of today’s path,” Hlín said.

Loki peered up at her. “You’re certain you can keep Thor along it?”

“I have known you both a long time, and I know how you do steer him. I can apply your ways, as well as my own.” She offered him a hand. “Can you trust me?”

He reached up and took it, letting her pull him to his feet. “I believe I can.” He felt the press of her power and accepted it, channeling it into a conjured map of the terrain as he saw it in his own mind. He outlined the convoluted path he had planned to take.

“Ingenious,” Hlín murmured. “You will bring back the great falls...” She sounded awed. “Loki... you are mad for having even considered this.”

“I know,” he said softly. “But it will work. And I am the only one mad enough to think of it, let alone act upon it. I owe this world that much.”

She met his gaze with something like shocked pride, and touched his face. “I will lead him.”

She touched the map with her other hand, it shrank, hovering over her palm, then imprinting upon it, impermanent, but present, to be accessed at will. “Now... you need a place to rest.”

Loki hesitated. “For that... I...” He was quite startled when she vanished them abruptly from the spot, but not nearly so startled as he was by where she had taken them both. He may have emitted a strangled noise.

Around them, looking curious and grave and unreadable at first, stood Loki’s audience: icy Jotunn of various ages and sizes, and at least three family clans.

“We had wondered if any would aid you,” said one.

Loki did a double-take. “Pääällikkö Kaata Eevulilapsi,” he greeted, and bowed his head a little, his body too stiff to obey his request it bow slightly too.

Hän bowed more deeply, pressing the closed fist of hänen left arm to hänen right shoulder. “I am relieved to see you at last able to have respite. We have worried for you; although you have done far better already than any of us imagined.”

They were all, Loki realized very slowly, actually impressed. He had successfully earned the respect
of each one of them, and could now see it in their faces. There remained some fear, but some of it was actually for him instead of aimed at him, and his legs almost collapsed at the thought. “I... hardly know what to say.”

“These Aesir are as disloyal to Asgard as yourself?” an elder asked, another chief like Kaata, though she towered over most of the others: ancient as a mountain and almost as tall. Her scarred face was a study in distrustful suspicion.

Loki stood up a bit straighter, one hand gripping Hlín’s shoulder to keep him upright. “The one currently attacking Surtur currently is, these days. He has given stolen Asgardian secrets and powers to a mortal the All-Father deemed unworthy, and made her immortal as himself. He is my brother, and he will not see me harmed, and as I am to protect all of you from the fires I’ve here brought, he also means you no ill. This mage with me has been my teacher, and her mother was of our kind and our kin; although she may still be preserved, lost for these many years under the ice, with many others. Thus you and yours, and your safety, are indeed important to this the Lady Hlín.”

“How are you so certain these people survive?” another giant asked, his voice gravel with age and perhaps the scar at his throat. “You put much effort forward, for what might be only frozen corpses.”

“The first of the Three of Nifelheim has known of them, and kept watch over their dreams, for many years,” Loki intoned gravely. “I trust her word.”

A susurration of whispers, disbelieving and believing alike, wove through the crowd of armored blue bodies.

“You are welcome among mine,” Kaata said. “We have a resting place, nearby. You need to sleep, I believe.”

“I thank you,” Loki said, with bone-deep sincerity. “Thank you so very, very much.” He stumbled a bit as Hlín passed him into the hands of the Jotunn chief, who in turn led him away from the watching-place on its high ridge, and down along a stone path that had been under half a mile of ice days before, to a place to seek his rest.

The elder mage watched him for a long few moments.

“You, mage,” said the large giantess.

“Yes?”

“I have seen your face before, after the war.”

Hlín swallowed tightly. “Yes.”

“You asked after one of ours. You were concerned.”

“I had wished to meet her, and learn from her. I know you, now. You told me of her death.” She smiled a bit sadly. “And now you have met her son.”

“And you are his teacher.”

Hlín nodded.

“Then I thank you,” the giantess said.

The elder mage bowed, and vanished. She put on an illusion, when she reappeared, powerful
enough even the natural resistance of fire would not shake it, to make herself look like Loki.

“Thor!” she called, using a magic to forge a connection past wind and lightning, over which they could hear each other. “There are civilians around this place. We must lead him away.” Drawing closer to the Surtur, feeling the shock of too-hot wind in the otherwise icy place, she caught her breath. The creature saw her, recognized the illusion but not that it was not Loki beneath it, and roared, charging with a snarl.

“Oh you mad fool, Loki, how did this seem a good plan to you?!” Hlín gasped, and teleported a half-mile off in the direction Surtur needed to be led, according to the map in her hand. Thor did his best to follow the raging giant.

“Would not slaying him be the better option?” Thor called, over the connection.

“You could not slay him as he is now,” Hlín chided. “Loki had the better of it: let the ice wear him out, all of it. All we need is time, and to keep him running. I have his map, now follow my lead and go where I direct you!”

“Yes, Lady Hlín. At your service,” the thunderer replied.

Then she ran. And Thor followed, keeping Surtur at bay when necessary, with lighting and Mjolnir, to make up for her speed being less than Loki’s had been before.
Chapter Summary

Tony schemes around Odin's schemes. Surtur stops running. Loki finds easy acceptance of his person a foreign sensation.

Then shit goes down.

Upon his arrival in Asgard, Tony was first greeted by Heimdall’s slightly concerned and bemused expression.

“Hlín is not within Asgard, Starksson. She vanished, with Thor, after last seeing to you on earth while you were injured. I could not make out their words.”

A wan, thin half-smile tugged at the inventor’s lips, and he briefly reminded himself to thank Hlín for her discretion. The smile did not reach his eyes. “I know where she is, but it’s not her I’m here to speak with. Thanks for the lift,” he said, and then vanished.

Heimdall stared at the spot he had been, then glanced toward Asgard at where the strange human had landed, near the palace, already heading up the stairs. The sentinel guard of the bi-frost sensed, though he could not quite say how, strange winds blowing, and a stranger storm to come, even as he looked away again, returning to his duties. He was sure a lot of people felt that way around Tony Stark, when he was so clearly on a mission they could not guess the purpose of.

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It took an effort to reach, as Hlín had taught him just a week before, for the hidden pocket-dimension stored where a normal suit’s breast-pocket would be, and summon his Iron Man gauntlets from it, repulsors aglow, connected to an arc reactor he also had stored in that invisible and almost-limitless storage pocket, and proceeded up the steps into Asgard’s royal palace. Instead of donning his Aesir-styled formal-wear, he projected the illusion of it over his suit, which he suspected would play enough to Odin’s expectations to fool him into believing Tony Stark, vain mortal inventor with an ego to rival or exceed most actual gods, was in the habit of wearing such casual glamour spells, so that that Odin might develop a habit of ceasing to examine them too closely, possibly out of a desire to not find the inventor naked under them one day.

It would be useful, in the long term.

Few people stared. He fit in otherwise, coloration and style-wise with his clothing, such that only a few glances at his face or the strange gauntlets he wore lingered, and even fewer showed any flashes of recognition of the mad mortal who had been such a common visitor to Asgard of late. All the better, Tony thought. He wanted to be a surprise.

He recalled the way well enough, pushing past heavy decorative doors with strength to rival any of the gods around him, along his way. He did get more notice when he made a beeline for Odin’s
throne, and stopped below it with only the pretense of a half-bow, no introductions, and no further formalities.

“You want to explain to me, All-Daddy, why I’m suddenly quasi-immortal? Because I like it, don’t get me wrong, and I don’t want to give it up, but I get the feeling it wasn’t super-intentional on your part, and might be part of a larger scheme I’m not comfortable being unaware of the full breadth of,” he greeted, grinning pure steel and recklessness up at the old gallows-god.

The court around them went quiet and, at a wave of Odin’s hand, the guards quietly cleared them all out. The god and the mad inventor waited a few minutes, until there were no others, not even guards, within the room.

“You did not accept this gift willingly?” the All-Father inquired.

“I didn’t know what I was biting into, in a very literal sort of way. Also, I’d told Loki directly before that I wasn’t interested, when he became suspicious of my intentions, when he found out I was trying to work out a way out of my own mortality as a side-project. It’s a touchy subject with gods, I get it; sorry I make you all feel less special, while simultaneously making you suspect I’m out to steal all your secrets? I guess? Anyway, Loki asked if I’d even accept an apple, if it were offered, and I said no, because I wanted to make my own way, and one I’d be allowed to really understand and study, in-depth, which didn’t seem a likely option with the apples given Asgard has this whole thing about protecting secret knowledge on the apple front.”

“And yet, you state now that you wish to keep its gifts?”

Tony shrugged. “Things changed after I failed a lot lately, and ran into dead-ends running down every other likely-looking alternative route, and I might have been interested if Loki had just offered the apple outright, but the whole ‘not even fucking asking’ thing really bothers me. I’m thinking you might know something I don’t about that? Because I have no idea what the hell he’s got planned that he needs me to be Aesir-ified for, but I suspect it’s questionable, at best.”

Odin gave a thoughtful nod, and rose to his feet, striding down the steps to stand before the mad human. “You are, to my chagrin, a hero among the Avengers, and perhaps worthy of this gift. I will not take it from you... should you aid us in Loki’s capture, and in foiling his plans for you.”

The offered deal surprised him, then made him grin outright for a moment before he amended, “I’m more inclined to know what those plans actually are, first, if you don’t mind. Knowledge first, before rash action. I can’t promise I’ll help foil his plans; they might turn out to be something I really can’t have an affect on even if I tried.”

The All-Father nodded. “You will swear, then, to aid in his capture, and in finding out the full extent of his plans, concerning why he gave you the apple?”

“Do I get full rights to future apples like a citizen, or is this one-time deal? Just to clarify,” Tony pointed out.

“Bring me Loki, and you will be as a citizen of Asgard,” Odin promised.

“Then we have an accord, Odin All-Father,” Tony said, and bowed again, his arm across his chest, fist over his heart, as he had seen others salute in Asgard. “I will be happy to bring him to Asgard.” He then stood up again, and raised a hand, two fingers up. “I do have a couple of other questions, just now we’re on the same page...”

“Yes?”
“Thor and Jane?”

Odin’s expression darkened. “Their judgement will come when they inevitably rise in Loki’s defense.”

Clever, Tony ceded, if only in his mind. “Also… Amora.”

“What of her?”

If Tony didn’t know better, that bored nonchalance might fool him, but he saw how the gallows-god’s hand tightened around Gungnir. “She’s sort of gone crazy, but I think I know where she’s most likely to head next. Can you track her, even if she, say, wandered somewhere like Helheim, or anywhere near Fenrir, where Heimdall’s sight, and yours, would normally be obscured?” Or near Loki and his perpetual aura o’ stealth? he didn’t add.

“I have a way to do so, yes,” Odin said.

Because your spell is what’s afflicting her, Tony thought acidly, but his smile was bright. “Give me access to that watching ability, and I’ll bring you one trickster god in less than a week, probably.”

“Probably?” The All-Father’s brows raised.

“All depends on time, tide, and snowmelt, is all.” Tony shrugged. “Your choice. Without my ideas, how far along in catching him are you, just on your own? My guess is you’re fishing, and hoping he’ll bite, but you don’t have a way to aim the bait at the metaphorical fish, here, so it’s one big waiting game. I have a way to take your bait and hook to your fish directly, instead of waiting for them to find each other.”

The All-Father’s eyes narrowed. “You know more than you should.”

“It’s my perpetual state of being,” Tony said. “Also I’m told it’s common, with mages, so I don’t know why you’re surprised.”

“You can hasten bringing Amora to him?”

“If you let me drive the tracking-and-seeking portion of the deal, I promise I can.”

This time Odin frowned outright, but he summoned a complex construct within one hand and pressed it to Tony’s brow unexpectedly, making the human cry out at the abrupt burst of sharp pain from it. “This keeps track of Amora’s position, based on a spell she carries in her blood. Should you search for her, no matter where she may be, your vision will be unimpeded, even for such a young mage as yourself.”

Gasping a bit at the lingering little agonies through his skull, Tony shook off the dizziness once the gallows-god’s hand retreated. “Now I just feel hungover.”

“And now, also, you are dismissed,” Odin said coldly.

Bowing one more time, Tony turned on his heel and left, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides until he left the throne room altogether.
One benefit of over a month without sleep, one small mercy, had been that Loki had been entirely free of dreams, and nightmares.

Now, not so.

Loki dreamed of heat and closeness and fierce want, of taking apart and unmaking and being unmade by clever, calloused hands all over his skin. Sounds and sensation, smell and taste, all filled his head in a flood and he **craved**. Memories, all of them, that he had been struggling not to dwell upon, so of course they were the first dreams to strike, only to fade and leave him floating, and feeling suddenly empty.

It was a sort of dark which all dream-walkers know. When lacking in sleep and dreaming too long, shields erode; Loki’s were no different, and he was left exposed, open to the whole of dreaming but with no paths to walk, no aims. Too tired to travel properly, he merely floated, drifted on immaterial winds, wherever they might take him.

The problem there, was how often he was pulled toward those who happened to be thinking of him, and this time the first to reach out to him and tug was all screaming.

Loki thrashed, before he could quite recognize the wrecked, pained voice as one that he knew, one that he more usually cherished, but there was so much pain, electrical and fiery both, and he almost screamed with it too.

*I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry*

“Amora?” the trickster called, and suddenly there was silence again.

Loki realized, belatedly, that his eyes were closed, in this dream. He felt blood trickling over his fingers, and a dagger in his hand. Opening his eyes he saw Tony staring up at him, almost sobbing with pain, his veins going dark with bitter poison too fast for his natural fire to catch up with it.

“Why?” the inventor rasped. Gold-fire magic crackled around them.

Loki shot awake with a scream.

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“Tony,” Pepper said flatly.

“Look, I just got back from Asgard, but I’ve got to track down this bakery and please never ever initiate that lockdown procedure again. Loki was right about the anti-magic, I still feel kind of nauseous, seriously can I just-”

“They told me about the apple.”

He stopped, breathing a bit quicker for his ranting attempts at seeking freedom. “Right. That.” He cleared his throat.

“And you going out to, and succeeding at, ending the Ten Rings once and for all, fucking finally,” she added.
The inventor fidgeted a little. “I did leave you a few messages about that: both a head’s up and a warning to lie low a bit and then the jovial, celebratory, reassuring you I wasn’t dead and all. That counts!”

“And Amora stabbing you, and what she said about it, and you almost dying yet again despite the apple,” she concluded, in deathly cold tones. “I visited you while you were unconscious after that; you could have at least let me know when you woke up. Or Rhodey. Or anyone outside the tower, even.”

Tony had the decency to look deeply chagrinned. “A—lot of stuff—is sorta happening, everywhere. I haven’t honestly had a lot of time since I woke up.”

“Are you okay, Tony?”

“No.”

Her brows raised in an accusatory fashion. “Then you need to talk to me, and explain to me, until I know you eventually will be. Start with the apple. You didn’t want it, but Natasha tells me you’re now on the fast track to acceptance. Steve told me you mentioned having tried and failed with Erskine’s serum, which is news to me, too. What happened with that to make the apple easier for you to accept?”

“Well... for you I guess it might be a ‘good news, bad news’ situation. If you want it, I could safely give it to you. You might wind up with super-powers, but you wouldn’t be out of control or a monster at all. You’d just be... well, you’d be like Steve but less buff,” Tony started. “I... I can’t. I did a few tests on one or two tissue samples of mine, and the results weren’t good. I’d be worse off than the Red Skull, almost, just in looks, and I don’t know how much of a power-trip it might give me, but I don’t like the idea of it, given how it taps into some astral plane things centered here.” He tapped his temple. “There’s a hint of organic magic to it, that I didn’t expect, which explains why the good get better and the bad get...” He grimaced. “All sorts of unpleasant. Staring into the worst of my own nature, based on JARVIS and I extrapolating just from those tissue samples, was sort of one of the most harrowing and deeply disturbing experiences of my life. So the apple, yeah, seemed a better sort of plan, after that. Maybe it curbed my pride, a little?”

Pepper nodded, arms still folded across her chest, but her brow was now knit in concern more than consternation. “It sounds like it. So... he tricked you.”

“You didn’t handle it well?”

“I really didn’t. I fucked up. I really fucked up,” Tony sighed, running both hands through his hair and rucking it up nigh-irreparably. “And then he hung up before I could explain that I’m kind of fucking in love with him so he should please listen, and all, because he’s a defensive paranoid motherfucker as much as I am, and then the Ten Rings happened, and I had plans to chase after his ass after he finished thawing Jotunnheim, but I just fucking missed him really badly, and then Amora happened.” He grimaced, because the memory still stung.

“You really thought he wanted you dead?” Pepper asked softly.

“While I was all sort of dying? Yeah, I did. Despite how the imminent threat of death is kind of refreshing and head-clearing, actually dying is the opposite,” Tony grit out, his anger clearly not directed at his questioner as much as himself and others. “Amora... was in pain. She’s had her fucking mind turned inside out and twisted into an old and too-familiar shape, then shot up with the heartbeat equivalent of methamphetamine via love-spell. She lashed out at me, and lied to me about
it, so that my last words to Thor would be that betrayal thing, and even if I survived I’d never trust
Loki again. Except the evidence she left behind—the poison, and the dagger—both led Thor and
Hlín to conclude she was lying, and it does make sense: there was a halo of crazy around her head
when she stabbed me, and all of the things she said about ruining the happiness of anyone and
everyone else, make it make sense that she was lashing out at me that way because of all the times
Loki had prevented her from going too far in pursuit of Thor, or otherwise deterred her from him,
which is all super-fresh in her mind again...” Tony trailed off, and gestured vaguely for a few
moments.

“But?” Pepper prompted.

“But I still feel hurt, dammit!” he snapped, a bit helplessly, and sat down heavily on the workbench
next to her, his own arms crossed, and his head hanging forward. More quietly, he added, “I really
thought he might do that. He really might, or worse, and I want to hate him for that.”

Again, she waited a few moments for him to continue, then prompted again more gently this time,
“But?”

“But I also sort of don’t care. I’m a weak spot, for him, his own weak spot. He won’t hurt you to get
to me. He won’t hurt anyone else I care about, because me hating him hurts him worse than me
being dead, or I wouldn’t be worth trying to kill at all, so putting me in defensive mode while making
me hate him would be the ultimate in counter-productivity. That’s what the apple sort of proved, in a
twisted way. He said he needed me alive, and didn’t want anything in exchange except for that, and I
could hear how much it hurt for him to fucking-” He made an exasperated sound. “-for him to back-
pedal and say that would be enough, for me to just be alive, somewhere, and him to know it, even if
he never actually sought me out again. It hurt to hear him say that so much that I felt gutted, I
couldn’t talk fast enough, I just—I knew what I had wanted to say before he said that, but it all
evaporated, poof, gone, because I realized that was the first actual goddamn lie he’d used the whole
time, and that I could tell that. He’d actually let me in that far, because I know he couldn’t have faked
that, wouldn’t fake that brittleness because he can’t acknowledge it happens to him at all without
facing and acknowledging the weaknesses that drag that out of him. Before then, I’d only ever heard
Thor manage it.” Tony ran both hands through his hair. “He did it. He won me the fuck over, and I
couldn’t even tell him because I honestly couldn’t believe it until he said that and I realized he
thought I was refusing and it really hurt him. I couldn’t believe him until he was in pain because of it.
How fucked up is that?”

“Well,” Pepper reminded, “you are ‘a defensive paranoid motherfucker’ after all.”

The inventor gave a bitter half-laugh at that. “Yeah... I know. We’re both so broken, Pep, how the
fuck is this going to even work?” he groaned, pressing the heels of his hands over his closed eyes
and rubbing with them.

“If you didn’t have plans for that, I wouldn’t have had to ask JARVIS to lock you in here, with
magic-blocks and all, to keep you in one place long enough for us to have this conversation, I think,”
she mused.

“... True,” Tony admitted. “Also never again ask him to blast me with anti-magic fields. Never ever.
It’s fucking awful.”

“No promises. What’s the plan?”

He half-smirked a bit despite himself. “Well... the one who put the spell on Amora is trying to prove
they can play by Loki’s sort of rules and win against him. It’s a pride thing, and a sort of proving a
point thing, and an attempt to re-establish Loki as being within Asgard’s jurisdiction. That was the
big thing Loki outlined as ‘why you don’t get to have any say in what I do’ when we went to Asgard: that the king of Asgard can’t contain him for too long because his escape is usually inevitable, needs him too much to kill him, and can’t play on Loki’s terms and win anymore.”

“Except he’s playing on Loki’s terms now?” Pepper asked.

“He is, and it’s actually a little bit brilliant. Loki wouldn’t have been ready for it.”

“But you’re stopping it.”

“Well... more sort of speeding it along.”

Pepper hesitated. “What?”

A grin tugged at the corner of Tony’s mouth. “The thing about kings, is that they like to delegate. They’re fine handing off tasks to their lieutenants and pawns, and make deals with newfound allies to put a task that’s a crucial part of their plans into that ally’s hands instead of doing it themselves. He’s a busy guy, after all, being king, and all.”

Slowly, she began to smile a little back at him. “Oh.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Oh.”

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The air was brusquely cold, but not so cold as it should have been, against Loki’s face when he abruptly awoke, and the trickster gasped with it, struggling a bit under the weight of the furs piled over him until he recalled abruptly where he was. The nightmare he’d just escaped was all too vivid in his mind.

The tent around him was intricate, well-used and made of layered animal hides, some embroidered, some painted with complex patterns and scenes, until the whole of the interior felt like a small, portable sort of palace.

A Jotunn child, skin brown and eyes pale grey, peered through the door. “Is you alright?” she asked, cautious. “You shouted out.”

The trickster stared at her, disbelieving, as she strode in, holding a pitcher of water, and a cup, made of beautifully crystalline and unmelting ice. She filled the cup with water and held it out.

That the objects, well-wrapped in preserving and shielding magics, belonged to a mage, was obvious. Loki took the cup and drank deeply. “Thank you,” he said. “I will be fine, in time.” I hope. “It was merely an unpleasant dream.”

“You walked in your dreams. I saw you,” the girl said. “A few of us did, except you weren’t strong enough to walk, not really.” She frowned at him. “You seem stronger now.”

“I am rested, now; that is all,” Loki assured. “If I may ask, what is your name?”

“Amal Kaatassdottir,” she said.

The trickster nodded to her. “Kaata honors me, then, with hänen trust.”
She looked at him with a hint of a smile. “A little. I am honored, to help you. Without you, I would not know how I even look, in the warm. Nor would mama.”

Loki stared at her, and thought of years upon years knowing only winter in his more icy aspect, and could scarcely imagine it. “I am glad.”

“You have pretty eyes, when warm,” Amal said. “They match your clothes, and magic both. It looks pretty.”

The trickster smiled a little. “Your eyes are pretty too,” he said. “Silvery like fog. Have you magic, yet?”

“A little. My gift wakes slow, like my father’s. My mother’s was sooner to come. Hänn learned fast.” She looked shy for a moment. “What of you?”

“I could shape-change before I could properly walk, in my natural shape,” Loki said softly. “My magic was awake at that time, but too much, too powerful. It had to be bound loosely, for many years, before I could learn to control it.”

“I would not like that. It stifles, being bound,” Amal murmured. “When I was littler, mine was too strong too, for my size, though I can keep it controlled now, mostly. I hated the binding, but without it I hurt my brother, and that was worse.”

“Me too,” Loki assured. “Me too.” He tucked her dark hair behind he ear.

Kaata appeared at the front of the tent. “You are well, then, Laufeyson?”

“Friggasson,” he corrected gently. “You have been generous enough with me, I think, to know where my heart truly lies, and if you must not call me Loki, do call me that rather than Laufeyson. I was never raised by him, nor do I wish that I had been.”

Kaata nodded. “Come eat with us then, Loki Friggasson. Regain more of your strength before your return to the chase.”

“Before I return to being chased,” Loki lamented, droll as he could.

“Your dreams troubled you. Someone was calling for your aid,” said the chief.

Eyes narrowing a little, the trickster nodded. “An old friend. I will reach out to her soon, but I cannot, immediately. What progress have they?”

“The great falls flow again. You are bringing spring to us, however full of rain.”

Loki felt all of his limbs tingle, and smiled a little, faint and disbelieving. “Good.”

“You bring the impossible,” said Kaata, picking up hänen daughter. In the warmth of the tent, blue skin and red eyes faded, and the chief’s fine features instead bore skin the color of sepia and eyes black as pitch. The chief’s daughter was fine-featured as her mother was, but darker of complexion, which only made her pale eyes seem all the more bright.

“Why’s he impossible?” Amal asked.

“I am impossible because I do what no one could believe I might be capable of doing,” Loki said simply. “It is what I am best at, in this life.”

“Come,” Kaata said. “To break your fast. We will discuss possibly recharging your magic, with the
other mages of my family.”

“Come,” Amal echoed.

They stepped away, and Loki followed.

“It... you would do that?” he asked.

“We are creatures who do not revel in sameness, and you have brought a great deal of novelty to mages who have only known winter. So much color, so much life, and you said you might bring back our forests, as well?” Kaata shot him an amused look. “Is it truly a surprise to you, that we grow fond of you?”

“This... is an act of stubborn pride on my part,” the trickster reminded.

“We benefit regardless, and I do not think you would tend a garden you did not wish to walk through in many future days. Your pride will lead you to finish this work, but we have much we might learn from you, and to welcome you, rather than hate you, is the way to have that opportunity, is it not?”

Amal smiled a little at him and waved a hand. “Welcome!”

Staggered by that, Loki stopped for a moment, and merely stared. Of all that he might have expected, this possibility had somehow never occurred to him. “I... thank you,” he said distantly. “I know not what to say.”

“Say you will meet my kin, Loki Friggasson. Speak with us, and sit around our fire, which is hot enough now that some of us see our less cold faces for the first time,” Kaata responded. “Share a meal with us, and perhaps show us more of yourself than we have seen in your running, and your political maneuvering, so that we may decide whether or not we like you, as well as respect you, and we will offer you the same opportunity to decide what you think of us.”

The trickster nodded, and continued, following hänen to breakfast.

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Tony started to approach Frigga with caution, then gave up on it, strode right up and sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Look, do you know what your husband has been up to?” he growled.

Courteously, she drew up an invisible veil about them, to keep them unobserved, even as she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “What now?”

“Amora,” he said.

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

Tony leaned up, and whispered in her ear about the love spell.

Something in the corner of the room shattered into many pieces, very loudly and explosively.

“So you didn’t know, then.”
“I did not,” she said, so angry her voice shook.

“You can tear him a new one for now, or later, but I’ve got some ideas you may want to hear,” Tony said, low and sure. “I know how to make this blow up in his face.”

She regarded him shrewdly. “You are not as you were.”

“No.”

“What is different?”

Tony considered a number of answers to that. Too many. “In which way?”

“You seem more solid. Less... fragile, just when I look upon you.”

He gave a tentative half-laugh. “Yeah... about that. Loki did it.”

She blinked. “Pardon?”

“You know about Jane?”

She half-smiled slyly, with a nod. “Thor asked my advice. I gave it.”

“And you, uh, know Loki stole it?”

“Well, I’d assumed.”

“He took about four, actually.”

Frigga’s eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“Two for him to survive... whatever he’s doing in Jotunnheim.”

“Oh,” she said suddenly. “I... had no idea you were both so serious.”

“Neither did we? Except quietly to ourselves with intent to never speak of it again except then apple?” Tony hazarded, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “It all sort of... well, he thinks I... there was miscommunication, and I need to fix it, but my plans allow for that too. Speaking of... as far as a certain monarch knows, we aren’t serious. I’m a pawn, or something, and have no idea why he gave me the apple, or whether or not Amora lied, or he really did maybe send her to kill me.”

Frigga frowned, at that. “You have much to explain,” she said slowly.

So he did, under the cloak she had constructed, reluctantly explain all that he knew: how Loki tricked him into eating the apple, the horrible mistakes on that phone call, Amora wreaking havoc and stabbing him, Bruce identifying the poison as Amora’s, Thor and Hlín running off to Jotunnheim, and his own conclusions where Amora’s behavior, and Skurge’s significant absence, were concerned.

In the end, she gave a regal nod. “I’d wondered where Hlín ran off to. So have her students. They thought her lost in her own maze of caverns somewhere, unwilling to be found. She does that, on rare occasion.” Seeing his hesitant, worried expression, she smiled, slow and a little wicked. “You need to find Skurge?”

Tony grinned. “I believe I do. Any suggestion for how he might actually get through to her?”
“His love for her is true, and hers for him,” Frigga said. “She will hear. It will hurt her still worse, but she will hear. You merely need to tell him what to say, and how convincing he really needs to be. Where will you send her?”

The mad inventor’s grin only widened.

Reappearing beside Hlín and simultaneously canceling out her illusion with a well-placed flare of his own recovered magic, Loki hummed with borrowed power, gifted to him to supplement his own by Jotunn mages who had all wanted him to succeed in his endeavor, who had wanted Loki to unmake Jotunnheim’s eternal winter, and who furthermore had laughed at his stories and seemed to actually like his twisted sense of humor without hesitancy or chiding of any sort. He grinned wide and manic, buzzing with the thrill of it and the surprised look on his old teacher’s face, even as Surtur roared in the not-distant-enough distance.

“Did you miss me?” he crooned, low and charming.

“Your ass,” Hlín declared.

“That I may be, but for once, I am an ass people are willing to put their faith in. It’s such a novel sensation, this... trust,” Loki mused airily. “They believe me capable of things I could never do, but it makes them somehow more possible. I can feel it.” He flexed his fingers, feeling crackles of unexpected energies through all of his bones. “Is this how Thor must feel, always? Is this being a god people truly believe in?”

“No in the same way as the sort of faith he inspires in people, for they believe in you, but trust you only so far,” Hlín corrected. “They are ideal to you, as believers, for even you are only a little more cynical than they are.”

Loki laughed, high and long, and teleported them effortlessly ahead of the fire-giant, dragging Thor along with, making the thunderer stumble as he found himself suddenly on different ground, though he then looked at Loki with some faint awe, finding the god of mischief beaming at him with such joy as Thor hadn’t seen him wear in centuries. “You are well?”

“I am fantastic,” the trickster responded. “Hlín, keep an eye out for him getting too close, and teleport us as needed if you could, please? I have a great deal of strategy to explain and not much time to do it, and I only just thought of it, because I’m brilliant, but it will take some efforts to explain.”

“I will continue to keep your sorry arse out of the fire,” Hlín sighed.

“And as ever, I am eternally grateful,” Loki countered. “Now... the plan.”

No one in the bakery shop would be surprised to find out Miss Cassie Ferris, one of the newest of
their employees, had a dark secret. She seemed the type, but she was also playful, sarcastic, clever, and could sculpt baked goods with an artistic skill few of them could match. Her job application had consisted of sneaking into the kitchen (breaking and entering, actually, though she left no damages or even any signs as to how she got in) and producing a rather astonishing cake in the shape of an ancient viking longship, over a foot tall and three feet long. It had been perfect. She fell asleep in the chair next to it, waiting for the usual personnel to arrive in the morning. If she hadn’t been so dead asleep, and mistaken for another employee at first, the owner might have screamed. Instead, he’d woken her up, asked what she was doing there, and let her explain that she had no resume, so she’d decided to prove her worth by other means before asking if they might hire her on.

After examining the cake with some awe, the owner had accepted.

When Cassie cozied up to a particular customer and her god-like fiancé, who happened to be friends of the owner’s son’s girlfriend, none of them had really batted an eye. The golden fruit, after all, had been a nice touch and would finely accompany the subtler flavors used in the baked-goods they were to accompany. It seemed harmless.

They didn’t expect her to vanish the very next day.

So, of course, they didn’t know to be surprised when she didn’t.

“Hello, Miss Ferris,” said a now-familiar voice.

Kneeling behind the counter, where she had been adjusting the displays of daily specials on offer, Cassie rose to her feet and beamed with perfectly-human-yes-I-did-remember teeth at the woman who owned that voice. “Hello, Dr. Young.” There was warmth in her voice, and playfulness. “Back so soon?”

“It was so unfair to find out that the quickest route to work for me passes by here, now,” she sighed. “I should not have let JARVIS map it for me.”

Cassie’s eyebrows raised. “Who?” she asked, carefully blank.

“Oh. I’ve, uhm, gotten a job at Stark Industries, a bit unexpectedly. I did tell you I’d met Tony Stark a while ago.”

“Yes, you were shy and flustered about it.”

“Yes.” She shot the girl behind the counter a look. “I don’t suppose I can steal away their favorite microbiology major and pastry apprentice for a while? I do so enjoy picking your brain, and Stark is away on super-hero business, so no one else can quite keep up with me yet, even in R&D.”

“I should get course credits for all the work I help you with.”

“Yes,” Sylvia said, blue eyes bright and happy. “Yes you should.”

Cassie smiled a bit smaller and more hesitant at that. The trouble with farces come up with hastily, on short notice, was how fragile they could be. “Boss?” she called toward the kitchen, drawing the word out into a mellifluous three syllables.

“It’s Dr. Young, is it?” the question sounded resigned.

Sylvia blushed a little, but Cassie only laughed. “Well, maybe.”

“Take your science to your corner where it scares off the fewest customers, but I expect you to finish
that commission for the Turkish ambassador’s wife by two.”

“Thank you,” Cassie sing-songed, stepping around the counter and letting Sylvia lead her to the corner. Her eyes didn’t linger on the woman’s long legs, or the way her blazer and slacks perfectly framed her behind, or even how her clever hands spread out on the table after she set down her own coffee, and the chai tea latte she’d brought for Cassie, extra clove and cinnamon. Cassie had eyes only for the lovely woman’s face, and the rapt intellect behind it.

Fenrir wasn’t actually sure how it had happened, but some weeks ago (day two of Cassie’s employment at the bakery) the lovely mortal woman had been puzzling over something very complex on her tablet when “Cassie” had dropped by to pick up the plate of crumbs (which had formerly been an immaculate croissant) from beside the scientist’s elbow. Seeing her work, even just at a glance, Fenrir had been... interested. Fascinated, a little, in fact. Cassie had named the complex process on the screen and asked what Dr. Young was studying it for and the mortal woman had stared at her in shock, asking how she knew that. The lie of being a college student was there born, and Dr. Young had dragged her into long conversation, which had led her to an unexpected insight which solved a complex problem she then had to explain to Cassie who had been still further impressed. They had exchanged numbers, and talked with each other frequently, leading up to the final goal of the golden apple and... then Cassie stayed.

Fenrir knew fascination with a mortal was a bit dangerous, but what Tony Stark was to electronics and machines, this woman had the potential to be for organic life, in time. She was already well on her way in understanding human forms, and various animals. The wolf did not desire her. In theory, he might make alterations to himself which would enable that, but did not sense any romantic inclinations from her, nor did he feel compelled by either curiosity or depth of feeling to desire them. He merely wanted to watch the workings of her mind, because they were fascinating, and perhaps call her a friend. He’d never had a mortal friend that was still alive, before.

Of course, that would all be outright impossible if he were himself. Instead, he was Cassie Ferris, whose lie looked like it might implode at any second, now, so it might not be altogether possible for her either, which was a depressing thought.

“I want you to be my intern,” Dr. Young said. “I could really use you, and you could really benefit from it, I think.”

“I...” Cassie began.

“Friendly advice,” Tony Stark said, suddenly appearing behind Sylvia’s chair, making both women jump. “You might want a better idea of who you’re talking to, Dr. Young, before you make that offer.”

“Where the hell did you come from?” Sylvia snapped, deeply alarmed.

“Long story. Magic is real. I have it, and I’m a genius. You!” He pointed an accusing finger at the wolf in baker’s clothing. “I’m impressed and kind of find this hilarious, actually.”

“Don’t,” Fenrir sighed, throwing up an attention-diversion field around them, as well as an illusion so that others would still see only the scientist and the weird but pretty new baking assistant. As Sylvia looked toward Cassie, she grew deeply alarmed as Cassie’s image fell away, revealing Fenrir in the same outfit Tony recalled from a certain cafe. “Dr. Young, I am sorry, but you are a wonderfully interesting human being, and I’m fascinated by your work. I thus got a bit carried away. Cassie was an illusion with a purpose, and that purpose was to target Mr. Stark, here, with a gift he apparently handled the reception of poorly,” he said, his tone sincerely apologetic until he hit Tony’s name and it turned scathing.
Tony winced. “Yeah, I fucked up. I’m working on it.”

“This... is normal, to you?” Sylvia asked tentatively, shooting the mad inventor an alarmed look.

“Well... par for course, really. Sorry about that. Look, Fenrir, sorry to interrupt your date, but I do sort of have a problem, and so do you, and so does everyone, right now. Have you noticed Amora around, lately?”

“I did hear about it on the news, but she hasn’t approached me,” the wolf said. “Why do you ask of me?”

“Is that deflection field and your usual cloaking enough it’s safe to talk about this here if it’s to do with a couple of certain people.” He glanced skyward pointedly.

Fenrir considered. “I am far from their sight. My father taught me well.”

“What the hell is going on?” Dr. Young snapped.

“It’s a long story,” Tony sighed.

“That’s what you get for falling for any of my relatives,” Fenrir shot back.

“Wait, wait,” Sylvia said, pulling at Stark’s sleeve until he pulled up a third chair to their table and sat in it. “This is because of the woman you’re hung up over?”

The wolf snickered.

“’Woman’ not so much, but yeah, it’s safe to say I’m in love with this little asshole’s father,” Tony sighed. “By the way, formal intro, Dr. Sylvia Young, please meet Fenrir Lokisson. Usually he’s more wolf-shaped, and there was at one point a prophecy that he would one day swallow the sun. Having seen some satellite footage from Siberia, I’m now a little clearer on why that is.”

Sylvia stared at both of them for a few long moments. “Loki... the one who sort of tried to invade New York?” she inquired.

“I did mention it’s a long story,” Tony sighed.

“You told me a lot of it, but not the part where you were...” She gestured vaguely. “No wonder you talked about him like you were pouring your heart out.”

Fenrir’s eyebrows raised. “You didn’t mention that,” he said to Sylvia.

“I also didn’t mention I’d kissed him, and he turned me down,” she offered, then shot Tony a slightly lascivious look. “He must have you good.”

Tony buried his face in his hands and swore at length.

The wolf was frowning at both of them. “Well now I’m just uncomfortable.”

“Well, to be fair, we were only going places intellectually, sweetie,” Sylvia said. “When you’re Cassie, the problem is that I’m straight. Now... you’re a wolf and possibly sort of a god?”

Fenrir shifted in his seat a bit awkwardly. “Well... I could work up a sex drive if I wanted to, but it’s difficult when technically speaking no one is my species. I considered it, for you, though, but dismissed it, given your lack of apparent romantic interest. I’m glad that’s mutual, actually.”
Tony’s hands on his face rubbed up and down a couple times, then lowered. “Well. Spectacular. Glad we had this chat. Now about the jealous Enchantress running amok and how I need your help to get to Skurge’s hiding place because Frigga can’t without raising all the suspicions we don’t need,” he said crisply.

“You really have the weirdest life,” Sylvia mused.

“You’ve been flirting with a wolf for weeks discussing complex bioengineering concepts,” Tony retorted. “You’re not in the running with me yet, but you’re off to a great start, Dr. Young.”

“You let her get in the running for-” Fenrir began, at a low growl.

“I was aggressive,” she interrupted. “He was off-guard. It was just a kiss, Fenrir, don’t be a prude. You just talked about switching on your sex drive like a new software add-on, and we’ll be discussing your ‘species’ later, so you’re not allowed to be prude.”

The wolf-in-human-clothing gaped at her for a moment, utterly speechless.

“I also... shit.” Tony sighed. “I’m sorry, but I might have sort of thought... or wanted to think, you were possibly Loki,” he admitted, to his new employee, with considerable chagrin.

Fenrir gave a helpless, pained sort of laugh at that.

“Uhm...” Sylvia looked down at herself, then back up at Tony. “Pardon?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time he’d shape-shifted into a woman and kissed me, okay? It’d be like... the third.”

She laughed at him a bit, too, at that. “I suppose that’s sort of fair.”

Fenrir was making a face. “Stark, I’ll help you travel anywhere you may need, I swear on my life, if you only leave now and stop telling me things I never wanted to know about my father’s habits.”

“A pleasure working with you, Fenrir. You know where my lab is, when you’re done apologizing and figuring out your next series of life choices.” He pushed back from the table. “No interns for you. Consultants, maybe, but I’m not paying him,” he said. “I want everything he has part in credited partially to him, however. I’ll make an alias for that purpose, and I expect honest and studious use of it, so I know where Stark Industries is getting certain information, savvy?”

“Th-thank you,” Sylvia said, a bit shocked.

He waved at them both as he strode out, and then vanished as soon as he stepped out the door, seemingly without catching anyone’s attention, however inexplicably. She turned back to Fenrir, then, whose head was low and his expression such that she could easily imagine a scolded canine and almost giggled.

“I really am sorry,” he muttered. “I don’t meet many of the living so interesting as you are, and still in the middle of their stories rather than at the end of them.”

She blinked. “Pardon?”

“I spend most of my time in my sister’s kingdom of Helheim. It’s the land of the dead, you see,” he offered.

“Oh. Wow.” She ran a hand through her hair. “Did you notice Stark just approved you to be a
consultant and partial partner in my work?”

The wolf blinked. “I... oh. Oh. He... did.” He sat up a bit further again. “Is that... good?”

“Can you make the commute from Helheim two or three times a week to meet over coffee and talk about bioengineering, artificial intelligence, and other complex topics?” she offered.

Fenrir smiled, small and hesitant. “I would like that.”

“Good. What do you plan to do about Cassie’s job here?”

“Oh... I figure it can’t be too hard to get fired.”

She laughed at him, soft and fond, and Fenrir beamed. Sylvia blinked a bit. “Wow, those are kind of cool.”

The wolf’s lips snapped shut over his teeth immediately. “Uhm. Sorry.”

“Don’t, they’re fascinating. Let me see again?”

Hesitantly, he did.

“Conventional teeth like those of Canis Lupus wouldn’t fit in a human-like mouth, but it looks like you manage it with a sort of half-way between, mostly just keeping the upper and lower canines, not quite so long as a wolf’s but still the same shape, and the rest of your teeth shaped to allow for them, but otherwise mostly human-like,” she mused. “It’s rather elegant.”

Fenrir did blush a bit at that, closing his lips again for a moment. “Thank you.”

She smiled. “Thank you, for your interest. You’re interesting too.”

“But not...”

She shook her head. “Romantically no.”

The wolf sighed in relief. “Good. So many humans have trouble with that.”

Sylvia nodded, thoughtful. “Well... you are cute.”

“You are, too. I’m just... not human. Or a conventional organic life-form with a natural evolution leading up to my existence, and I thus sort of lack reproductive impulses because none were passed down to me; I can choose to have them, or not, but I find it far easier to abstain, generally, given my nature and how very few people I feel loyal enough to, and trusting enough toward, to want a connection of that sort of depth. Casual sex was fun to experiment with, but got a bit boring after a couple of centuries to be honest, so I mostly have just had those impulses ‘off’ since then.”

“That... you may need to explain the ‘not a conventional organic life-form with a natural evolution’ bit. Please?”

Slowly, Fenrir began to do so.

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The last days of Surtur’s run were not easy. Loki was not alone in his weariness, but nor could any of the three of them rest with victory so close at hand. Surtur was half-drunk in his last stumblings, fire burnt very low, and when he tried to slumber, thunder and lightning roused him, and his ire, into new frenzy, until at last, he no longer stirred, even when struck by Mjolnir’s full blast of lightning.

The fire-giant, last great son of Muspellheim, only groaned.

“Would you have the honors, brother?” Thor panted.

On weary legs, Loki strode forward, summoning a blade he had not used in a very long time, for swords were seldom his preference after a certain age, but no less would do. He approached Surtur’s great face, and aimed for his throat.

The fire-giant’s eyes opened wide and he roared, sending Loki, burnt, reeling back and screaming from the fire as Surtur reached for him, and he barely teleported out of reach. Huffing, singed and wrathful, the trickster growled.

“Brother, he is not-” the thunderer started, worried.

“Oh, I do know,” Loki snarled, changing shape as he spoke, to the same dragon-form he had used in Midgard. He had loved the shape, when he was very young, and wore it often for days at a time when he was meant to be studying with Hlín, and he saw the recognition in her stare as his wings spread, and he dive-bombed the fire-giant with an earth-shaking roar.

The grappling that ensued made both Thor and the elder-mage wince, and duck, once, to avoid sudden blood-splatter. They had both seen Loki recently consume his last stolen apple two days before, but still found the full recovery of his magic difficult to believe until now, as teeth and claw and fire-resistant scales began to shred the most powerful fire-giant in history, prying off his stone-like armor and sinking deep into Surtur’s flesh to pierce and rend and tear. Then Loki took his natural form and spoke in words fit to shake mountains, and he and the fire-giant vanished.

Thor cursed. “This was not part of the plan, brother!”

“Where has the fool gone?” Hlín groaned.

~~

In the middle of the largest sea of Jotunnheim, there was still more ice. Loki landed on the thickest of the ice-sheets, which was almost as vast as a small continent in its own right, and took dragon-shape again, circling his wounded prey.

“I know you have within you more fire, Surtur,” he hissed.

“Not for you. You mean to destroy me with this,” the fire-giant accused.

“Little me? Little Loki, abandoned by the king of Jotunnheim and eventually cast out by the righteous of Asgard, is one to kill the great and powerful son of Muspellheim, the last and greatest, Surtur?” the trickster taunted. “You have my word I will not leave you now, until one of us is dead. I will remain in your reach. Now are you capable of something hotter still than dragon-fire, or are you too weak?”
Surtur roared at that, seizing the dragon by his long, scaly throat as fire erupted from him and Loki did try to scream at the burn of it, but it was soon soothed by how fast the ice around them melted, how they slid across it, through it, and eventually it ended and then... there was the sea. Dragon as he was, Loki had plenty of air in his lungs to withstand the sudden drop, carried by Surtur’s immense weight, toward the bottom of the recently-refreshed seabed, but the giant was screaming, bubbles erupting from him as he tried and tried to heat, and the water around them both began to boil not just nearby, but for over a mile around, even as they fell further and further down.

So much hot water, it might be enough to re-start proper sea-currents, as well as melt most of that last continent of ice, Loki thought, managing not to laugh as he curled his long tail around the fire-giant’s ankle to keep falling with him, even as the giant lost his grip on the draconic throat, beginning to drown even as his heat crested. Loki grit his teeth against the burning churn of too-hot salt-water all around him, fit to cook any less tough form than this armored, scaly one, though his wings did suffer the worst, thin as they were, and began to burn badly.

It was long minutes before they reached the seafloor. Loki held on, waiting for the heat, at last, to die, which took still longer, but there was too much near-freezing water bearing down upon them, in the dark depths, pressure and cold and weight bearing down until, already weakened, the terror of the nine realms known as Surtur, succumbed, and drowned after half an hour of further struggle.

Loki, still in dragon-shape and as the need for air began to ache him beyond his ability to solve with convenient spells to keep himself from suffocating or drowning, managed with some struggle to gnaw through the dead fire-giant’s neck once the thrashing ceased, and dragged the head with him to the surface, gripped in his hind-talons, stabilized by his tail curled around it as he let himself rise slowly, with only occasional swipes of his forelimbs to hasten the ascent, wearied as he was.

When at last he broke the surface it was with an enormous gasp, filling his lungs anew again and again, blinking at the unexpected sunlight. Belatedly, he realized that despite the many ice-floes around him, direct overhead was a patch of blazing blue sky. He stared at it for long moments before he began the long tread toward shore, his scaly body snaking through the water, hindered only a little by the burden he still dragged with him, all along, to prove the deed done.

Loki had learned over and over again, how necessary and valuable proof of the impossible could be, for a liar such as himself.

By the time he reached the shore, Hlín and Thor were waiting for him, and before he fully left the water, he flung Surtur’s head to land, after one or two rolls along the ground, at their feet. A sound rang up, only a bit distant, but joyous and exultant. As Loki took his more natural shape, stepping free of the the tide, he belatedly realized just how many of his “audience” were in sight, around a certain perimeter, having followed his brother and teacher. They were, to his shock, shouting and cheering.

I did that, he thought dazedly. This is how this feels, then. He was a bit dizzied and unsure how to feel about it, not sure he had energy enough to enjoy the praise properly, but it did seem to make his chest ache not-unpleasantly.

“You have done well, brother,” Thor said, squeezing his shoulder firmly.

“Good. Very excellent good,” Loki panted, and nearly fell over. He gripped the thunder god’s arm tightly to keep from losing his balance entirely, and was grateful for Hlín’s hands suddenly at his shoulders, supporting him with a hard grip on each.

“You are impossible,” his teacher said, but her tone was one of amazement. “You have done what Odin could not. You have succeeded! The ice is almost gone from all but the poles and spring is
waiting to erupt.”

“That reminds me,” the trickster murmured. “Alfheim.” He pulled an inexplicable trinket from within his coat and crushed it, then flung it into the air. All of the pieces were caught up in a sudden whirlwind, flying inland away from the sea. “The first seeds of many. Mages from Alfheim will be here in a few days, once those settle, and signal them in their ways. Earth mages: nothing is ever instant; I ask you, why?” he slurred a little, leaning heavily on Hlín’s shoulder. “I was strong as I’ve ever been this morning, you know. Why is it the impossible is often so very exhausting? I boiled a big part of the ocean, actually, but the problem was, you see, that I was still in it, holding the thing doing the boiling.” He paused to consider his words. “Do I feel warm, to you?

“You’re still steaming, actually,” the elder mage pointed out.

“Come, brother. Rest.” Thor said firmly. “When you are more yourself, I have sadly grave matters to discuss with you.”

“What?” Loki asked flatly.

“Recovery first,” Thor insisted.

The trickster protested, even as Hlín teleported them, and Surtur’s head, away.

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Two hours after their meeting at the bakery, Fenrir knocked on the door to Tony’s lab, with considerable reluctance. He was irritated that the wards had been stronger than he had anticipated, blocking his direct entry via teleportation so thoroughly as to leave his pride bruised. And his head, a little, where it had struck a wall upon being rebounded by it. No shields had bounced him like that in a century.

“It is good to see you well, Fenrir,” JARVIS greeted.

The wolf half-smiled despite himself. “Thank you, JARVIS. It’s good to hear you sounding fine, too.”

The doors opened for him, and he stepped through. “You seriously thought she was my father?” he asked, droll.

Not even looking up from the suit alterations he was making, Tony responded, “I think it was wishful thinking. I missed him pretty badly, at the time, and her sort of pushing me against a wall and kissing me out of the blue, mid-sentence, kind of set memories reeling in my head that were nothing to do with her,” Tony admitted. “So yeah, I’m in love with him, I fucked up, and I plan to fix it.” He turned in his chair, finding Fenrir very close. “One question, though… Why were you a woman?”

“Father seemed to believe Dr. Foster would be more favorable toward a clever woman’s ideas than the presumptive suggestion of any male whom she might perceive as believing they knew better than she,” the wolf offered with a shrug. “She did seem to like my ideas more than those of the manager.”

The inventor gave an amused snort. “I guess that makes sense.” He then cleared his throat. “So… since you and your handy cloaking are nearby, let me give you the short version: Odin fucked up with Amora worse than anyone should be allowed to, by putting a love-spell on her and aiming her
at Thor, and thus putting Dr. Jane Foster right in the crossfire.”

Fenrir’s expression darkened into one of fury. “You’re certain?”

“Yeah. Also, she might have stabbed me with this, poison-coated, and said it was ‘a gift right from Loki, without love,’ and I sort of almost died believing that,” Tony said, low and cold, watching horror dawn on the wolf’s face. “The poison was hers.”

“I’ve never seen this blade,” Fenrir said. “The pommel is from another of his daggers, one shattered in a battle in Dvergarheim, with Amora. He was angry about that for weeks, because it was his favorite. You can see, the metals don’t quite match,” he pointed out. “The rest of the blade... is older than I.” He met Tony’s gaze. “He would not send her with this.”

“I know. Not with her poison, either, no matter how busy Jotunnheim is keeping him. He wouldn’t be so clumsy or hasty.” Tony’s lips thinned. “She was going on about wanting to take away the happiness of everyone who had ever stood between her and her own happiness, which in that case meant Thor. She was over him, during the war. You might have even noticed, if you saw her anytime before recent after that.”

“Yes... you’re right, it would be a love-spell.” Fenrir’s grip around the dagger tightened. “Amora is a very good friend to my father, and has reached him, at times, when Hel and I could not. She does not deserve this.”

“So, does that mean you’ll help me find Skurge, and we’ll start bringing her back to her senses?” Tony offered. “He’s the only one who might get through to her, except maybe Loki.”

The wolf nodded. “Where need we go?”

“An unpleasant in-between place for criminals and scavengers,” the inventor drawled. “An intergalactic dive-bar on the first floor, accommodations above. Know where I’m talking about?”

“I do,” Fenrir said. “Grimm’s Keep.”

Tony nodded. “That’s the place.”

“You are prepared?”

Fixing gauntlets to each forearm and donning a leather coat that would mostly-cover them, Tony stuck his hands in his pockets and stood. “As I’ll ever be.”

They vanished.

~~

Hlín delivered Loki, Thor and herself amidst Loki’s audience once more, but this time the crowd quickly backed away from them, and parted to let one particular among them through. Not tall by the standards of most frost-giants, Býleistr still seemed taller than he was by means of how he carried himself, as he approached.

Loki summoned the last of his energy reserves and pulled himself upright without support, bowing not so low as Thor and Hlín did, with respect to the king. It was easier, here, where the air was a bit
cooler and he could focus more on cooling himself by non-magical means, allowing him more focus. He then straightened again and gestured toward his companions. “King Býleistr Laufeyson, please meet elder-mage Lady Hlín Malvissdottir, and my brother Prince Thor Odinsson of Asgard,” he introduced, aware of Thor’s eyes widening a great deal at the realization that he was staring at Loki’s half-brother by blood.

“You are here in peace, Aesir?” Býleistr inquired, his eyes narrowed.

“I am here for Loki’s sake,” Thor said slowly. “I mean no breach of peace, with my presence here. I would not begin, or rekindle, any wars with your people.”

“I am here for Loki’s sake, and my own. It is possible my mother may have survived the ice, and still be under protective wards until the massive storms and rampant flooding all grow calm,” Hlín explained. “I would volunteer my services, in finding any and all such survivors.”

The king nodded to both of them. “Then peace we shall retain, all prior acts of war aside,” he declared, with a sharply pointed glare at Loki, who half-smiled in a self-deprecating manner, in response. “You three require rest, and my kin have been hunting to supply a feast, to celebrate this final fall of Surtur. You, brother, have a question to answer for me.”

Both Aesir shot the trickster questioning looks, which he ignored, nodding solemnly instead, and keeping his eyes on his half-brother. “I have considered your offer, and do believe I can accept it; although I would also take on the part of ambassador. I am too... peripatetic to be as ever-present to this world as the Three are to theirs. If that is acceptable to you, brother.”

Býleistr nodded. “It is. You shall then be as the first of the Three is to Nifleheim, our Wanderer,” he said, and bowed lower than Loki had done.

Slowly, the other Jotunns around them did the same, causing the trickster’s breath to catch and his heart to pound with mixed fear and pride, feeling uncertain whether or not he might have made a grave mistake.

“Brother?” Thor whispered, as he rose from his own bow, as did the giants around them.

“I am to Jotunnheim what the Three are in Nifleheim. The first of the Three is the outside perspective, the Wanderer; the second and third change depending on the monarch, between the roles of Advisor to the throne, and Voice to and of the people,” he clarified. “I make no laws, nor am I beholden to any laws. I am entrusted to do what no kings ever could.” Loki swallowed tightly. “I am everything I could not be, in Asgard, try though I did, without knowing what I was out to accomplish.”

Hlín rested a hand on his shoulder. “Is it what you want?”

“I know not, but I have so very many plans...” Loki looked up, watching the patch of pale blue sky obscured by storm-clouds, but the winds from the storm were warm, rather than cold, and he thawed at their touch, as did all of the Jotunns around them. Blue skins and red eyes faded, and in their wake were myriad colors from ivory pale, to olive, to myriad hues of dark brown. The trickster looked up and Býleistr, and found him pale, with sharp eyes of amber-gold. They did not look unlike one another, in their features. “You look well,” Loki said.

“And you look battered and half-drowned,” Býleistr responded. “Come, as our guests, and see if you cannot recover your strength a while.” He turned on his heel, and began walking.

Loki, Thor and Hlín did follow, the trickster leaning heavily on both of his companions as they
walked.

“You had some news for me, Thor?” he inquired lightly.

“Something has driven Amora out of sorts,” the thunderer admitted.

“I heard her, when I last slept. She was screaming,” Loki murmured. “She seemed to try and reach for me, but it burned, and when the pain stopped...” He hesitated. “There was blood.” Determined not to ask whose blood, he walked on.

“It is difficult to explain,” Thor said. “It would be better for you to rest first.”

“I hardly believe I am awake presently.” Loki laughed a little bitterly. “I deserve none of this. I tried to destroy this world, not so long ago. I should not... I cannot...”

“You have brought spring to a world that has known only winter for millennia,” Hlín said. “You are far from forgiven for your trespasses, but you are respected for your capabilities. They would prefer you on their side, than against them, and know what to offer you in order to get it. The king here is wise enough to admit that you could easily overthrow him, and knows that you as a younger prince, and the trickster you have reputation for being, are susceptible to being won over by the position offered you, and the deference. It will be harder, when those under the ice become a factor, and you will have to earn their acceptance and respect anew, but you planned to meet that challenge anyway on Nifelheim’s behalf, I believe. They know you are useful, and that they cannot control you anyway, and they respect that more than most in Asgard might.”

“You’re saying I earned this?” Loki asked quietly.

“I am.” Hlín smiled a little at his bemused expression. “It’s a good feeling, isn’t it?”

“It’s counter to all of my instincts and I’m not certain I like it as much as being underhanded,” the trickster mused, sounding thoughtful. “I enjoy the respect, but usually it requires more...” He gestured vaguely. “Falseness, from me. I am not sure what to do with it more easily given. It feels like I’m missing something.”

“You do deserve it, Loki,” Thor assured. “I am proud that you still call me your brother, for it is not an honor I feel that I deserve again yet either. I do thank you.”

Loki wrapped an arm loosely about the thunderer’s neck, so that Thor supported more of his weight, and hissed in his ear, “I mostly just said it to prevent them all killing you outright. You’re welcome, by the by.”

“I do appreciate it” the blond god deadpanned.

The trickster chuckled, and realized the foreign sensation under his skin might just be something akin to what worthiness might feel like.

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Finding Skurge in Grim’s Keep turned out to be trickier than anticipated. When the massive warrior wanted to lie low, he really knew how to lie low.
After two days, it was still only thanks to Fenrir’s nose that they found him, dragged him out of hiding and sat him down at a table near one of the bars on the ground floor, for a drink.

Skurge was deeply displeased by the whole business, but seemed at least to be on sufficiently friendly terms with Fenrir not to fight them too hard or make any attempts to break Tony’s neck; although the murderous glares he kept shooting at the Avenger made it clear that the thought wasn’t ever too far from his mind. Raising his tankard, he studied the wolf-in-humanoid-shape and the mad inventor of the Avengers with a shrewd eye, as he drank, then belched and inquired, “What want you of me?”

“You know Amora’s on a psychotic rampage and all, but you’re abstaining from helping her out,” Tony mused. “Why?” He took a sip of his own drink and managed not to grimace when it turned out the smell was a bit acrid; although it tasted like toasted malt barley and seaweed with a strong alcoholic kick, which actually wasn’t terrible.

The Executioner scowled deeply. “You ask as though you already know.”

“I am worried for my father’s friend, Skurge. Amora has done well by him in the past, but has openly made attempt to betray him now. She lashes out at any and all, and she is obsessed with Thor anew,” Fenrir pointed out calmly. “You saw that she was not herself, early on, I think. She pushed you away as soon as you tried to help her fight it, and then grew more violent against you as you continued to try?”

Skurge growled out, “That is no business of yours.”

“Actually, she stabbed me with a poison dagger, claiming it was from Loki without love,” Tony said flatly. “So I think it might be our business.”

The Executioner looked the inventor over briefly. “You survived.” He shrugged it off. “That should be enough for you.”

“I only survived by literal divine interference named Hlín,” Tony shot back. “No one can get through to Amora right now except you. She needs help, or you’ll never get her back because she’s going to destroy herself at this rate. Do you want to leave her to that fate?”

“I do not even know what has possessed her,” the warrior snapped.

“Love spell. Aiming her at Thor,” Fenrir said softly. “The worst that any could have done to her. Surely you see that, knowing her heart as you do.”

The way Skurge paled was evidence enough that he did see. “Who would dare?”

“Someone I plan to get even with,” Tony said coolly. “You help me, you help Amora get help, and we can make sure he pays for it. I even told his wife.”

Fenrir’s eyes widened a little at that. “You did?”

The inventor nodded. “I did.”

“Oh, this will be good,” the wolf all but purred.

“What can I do?” Skurge asked.

“Talk to her. Persuade her to go to Loki, to seek his help,” Tony said. “It has to be soon. Fenrir checked in with Hlín, and Loki’s sleeping off the end of his Jotunnheim-thawing project, as far as
Step 1 is concerned, and she also gave us some interesting political status updates too. We need you to send Amora to him, before Thor spills any beans about me being stabbed with his dagger, for preference. Hlín will do her best to delay him, but we still only have a day, tops, before Loki inevitably starts prying answers out of him. Can you do that?”

The Executioner considered for a long moment. “Can he truly help her?”

“Between him and Hlín, they can unweave the love-spell, and give her back her own heart and mind,” Fenrir assured. “He has done it for Thor before. He would not let her suffer so.”

Skurge then nodded. “I will speak with her. You have my word that I will do my best to send her to Loki,” he said, pulling a scroll from his vest and whipping it open. Light flashed, and then he was gone.

Tony exhaled heavily. “Let the games begin, then.”

“Why send Amora to my father? How does this aim anything at-” Fenrir started.

“Ah! Spoilers,” the inventor interrupted. “I need to be in Asgard like yesterday.”

“You seem to be setting a trap, and I question who it is for,” the wolf growled.

“Trust me. It’s going to look bad, but... just trust me?”

Fenrir frowned a little. “I will, for now. Just know that the satellite footage you’ve seen is nothing compared to meeting that form of mine in person. Take care you won’t have to, anytime soon, or I may eat you.”

“Duly noted.”

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Once in Asgard, Tony scrambled the troops.

Well, in truth, he told Odin the trap was set, and the All-Father summoned a few more guards than the mad inventor really thought necessary, and they all stood waiting on the bi-frost for the opportune moment. Tony was just glad Odin was too busy watching for signs of an Avenger’s betrayal to actually think to look for Amora himself.

Tony knew exactly when Amora finally headed to Jotunnheim, and tugged the spell Odin had given him a piece of until he managed to work up a visual output only he could see, right in front of his left eye like an invisible TV-monocle. He watched her, and waited. “I have a visual. I know where she is, but Loki isn’t around, yet,” he lied, watching the trickster carefully.

It was difficult to maintain his aloof expression, watching that scene unfold, but maintain it he did, biting his tongue all the while.

Over his shoulder waited Odin, the small battalion of armed guards, and Heimdall standing ready to open the bi-frost. They waited perhaps half an hour before Tony declared Loki within his sight and ready for pick-up, and reached out to Heimdall, physical contact allowing him enough connection to show the bi-frost’s sentinel guard where in Jotunnheim the trickster was.
If Heimdall noticed anything else about the image, he did not comment.

He only opened the bi-frost.

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After sleeping for two long Jotunnheim-days straight, Loki awoke to late-evening light, the smells of fire and smoke, and the sounds of continued revelry. Pulling himself out of the pile of furs he had become buried under, he followed the sounds of song to the wide clearing at the center of an array of many tents with many clan symbols on banners or the tents themselves. In that clearing were several bonfires: some to roast meat on the far east side where the wind blew the cooking-smoke up the nearest hill, others merely for gathering around. Finding Thor at one, while Hlín danced with a lithe Jotunn lady near another as music was played, Loki seated himself beside his brother, and accepted a haunch of venison-like roast gratefully when it was offered.

Once the trickster had eaten his fill, he regarded Thor solemnly. “What news?”

“Hlín was contacted, just this day, by one of her students, despite the barriers you have placed over this world,” Thor offered.

“That is not what I meant,” Loki said flatly, “and you do know it.”

“I know not where to begin,” his brother sighed.

“Begin with Amora. I can still hear the echoes of her screams from when I slept, and I tire of waking from nightmares of blood on my hands from someone I care for deeply,” the trickster deadpanned.

The thunderer hesitated. “She is not herself; you must know that. Something has affected her mind, and she is in extreme pain.”

Loki sat up a bit straighter. “What sort of pain?”

As though on cue, there was a crackle in the air near them, and they both stared in confusion and surprise.

“What is that?” Thor asked. “I have seen these disturbances around the camp, as have others, for some hours now. They last less than a minute, and then vanish.”

“Someone is attempting to locate me, whom I would normally allow, but they’re compromised somehow,” responded the trickster, rising to his feet. His own magic was still severely drained, but he had enough to track his own tracker. Recognizing Amora’s signature within the spell, he reached into it, and in doing so let himself be found. In response, Amora reached out and grabbed his forearm, dragging herself through the rift. Almost immediately, she stumbled, and fell to her knees hard, gasping for breath.

Skurge stepped through hastily after her, looking gravely stricken.

Kneeling with her, Loki placed a hand on her cheek. “My dear Amora, what has happened to you?” he whispered, feeling a dull ache of too-strong psychic magics and already beginning to map their threads.
“I’m sorry,” she choked. “I’m sorry, Loki, I didn’t know, I didn’t mean to, I just hurt so badly and you were—he was—I’m sorry.” Her voice was faint and wavering. When she looked up and saw Thor, she hissed as though burnt and tried to push herself away along the ground. “Get him away! Get him away!” She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and shut her eyes. “It’s worse when I see you now, please go away.”

The trickster shot his brother an uneasy glare, and the thunderer stepped back two long strides. A few Jotunn mages approached, but kept at a respectful distance, including Kaata.

“What have you done? What is it, Amora?” Loki inquired gently.

“He lives,” she assured. “I don’t know how, but he does, he lives, so please, don’t hurt me, please help,” she hissed, shaking. “I don’t want this, Loki, please, I don’t.” Her hands clutched at his wrists hard. “Skurge sent me, or I wouldn’t have come. I need you to fix it, please, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

“Please tell me what you’ve done. I’m already mapping what’s effecting your mind; I know you are not wholly yourself,” the god of mischief assured.

“I... I lied. I said you sent me,” she whimpered. “I had your dagger, from a long time ago, and a pommel you lost in a fight. We keep these things of each other’s, in case we need frame each other. I know you have things of mine, too, even some of my poisons, a necklace, a lock of hair...”

Loki’s hands, one stroking soothingly her hair and one on her shoulder, grew very still and tense. “Amora, what have you done?” he whispered, beginning to feel tendrils of panic under his skin.

“I just wanted to hurt everyone who ever kept me from him,” the Enchantress sobbed. “He is alive, he is unhurt now, you have to believe me.”

“Who?”

“Your mortal.” She looked up at him with sea-foam green eyes full of tears. “Though I swear I did not know you had made him more than mortal, that you cared so much, I only thought he—” She choked back a noise of horror at his stricken expression. “Loki, please.”

Hands shaking, Loki pulled her a little closer. “Were you almost any other, I would kill you, enchantments upon you or no,” he said, voice shaking. “You used my blade. What else, Amora? I need to know.”

“My poison. I... I said it was a gift from you,” she whimpered.

The trickster’s eyes fell shut. He swallowed thickly around a hard lump in his throat and raised his voice, “I need to borrow power, to lift the spell cast upon her.”

A pair of young mages stepped forward nervously, and upon hearing their footsteps Loki straightened his spine and exhaled a deep breath shakily.

“Hands on my shoulders,” he said.

The two mages, a smaller young male and a female taller than the Jotunn king, rested heavy hands on his shoulders, and reached out with offering, which Loki’s own magic embraced. So acute and deep was it that he gasped at the power, surprised and then chagrinned that he felt such surprise, knowing how Jotunns often had such powerful gifts. Channeling their offered power, unmaking the complex love-spell was still difficult, but not impossible, though the going was slow, with Amora awake and quietly panicking in his arms, one hand still white-knuckled where she held onto his right
wrist, her other hand tight around his neck as she struggled to keep her mental shields down far enough to let him reach some of the spell’s anchor-points.

“Who put this on me?” she choked out, voice shaking with rage and weak from exertion. “You know this weaving, I can tell you know it; this caster is familiar to you.”

“I do,” Loki admitted, low and murderous. “He will pay for this, mark my words. He did this not even for you, but for the sins of myself and my brother, which are the most benign forms of law-breaking I’ve taken part in for centuries, and I will not stand for what he has done to you with this. I would save you a goblet of his blood, if I thought either or both of us could kill him. I am sorry that I can only make him suffer, but suffer he will,” he promised in her ear, his eyes pressed tightly shut as he concentrated on unmaking the love-spell, careful to do no further harm, and to pause now and then to encourage healing in the damaged anchor-points within Amora’s psyche, as he went.

She trembled a moment and hissed: a sound full of more hate than a pit full of vipers given a mongoose. “Of course it would be him.”

“Shush, darling. You will need heal, after this,” Loki said softly. He glanced up at Skurge briefly, who gave a solemn nod in response. The trickster made another soothing sound, again stroking Amora’s hair, as he kept unweaving the complex arrays of entangled threads from about her mind. It took nearly half and hour before he finished, and the two Jotunns at his shoulders released him, sensing the closing of his connection to them.

The Enchantress slumped in his arms, all energy gone out of her like the pain and the need to be rid of it had been the only thing keeping her going. “Thank you,” she murmured against his armor, tears flowing freely down her face. “I’m so sorry, I’m so-”

Again, Loki shushed her, gentle and weary. “I blame you not. Rest,” he said, pulling her slowly to her feet, though she still leaned so heavily on him that he might as well have carried her, but the Executioner soon took over that burden, and sighed in heavy relief when she flung herself into his arms without hesitation and buried her face in his throat as her arms hooked around his neck.

Skurge nodded his own thanks. “I am glad I accepted the advice to send her to you,” he said. “Whose advice?” Loki asked, confused.

That was when the bi-frost hit him, carrying him far away before he could say another word, even as Thor shouted after him in sudden panic.

As soon as the whirl of color stopped, Loki distantly heard a too-familiar not-mortals voice say, “-but don’t say I didn’t warn you that this is a really bad idea,” just before a blast of pain all but shredded through his mind—another accursed spell of Odin’s—and sent him reeling with a deafening ringing in his ears so loud he didn’t hear the guards close in, or the chains being dragged by them, but he did hear the faint snap-and-tightening of the cuffs on his wrists where they were dragged behind his back, about his throat, then his ankles and a last about his waist for the other chains to connect to. They tried to force him to his knees, but at that Loki managed to successfully revolt, blinking back the white-out of agony with a snarl even as his magic was sealed away under his skin. It all happened in less than half a minute, and then Loki was staring at an armed array of guards, and Odin before them, spear in hand and helmet worn, glaring at him with suspicion and satisfaction. At his left, and slightly behind him, stood Tony Stark in one of his finest tailored suits, wearing one armored gauntlet on his left hand and forearm.

The trickster’s knees almost did give out then, but a snarl of hurt and rage escaped his throat that sounded more like that of an animal than a god. Despite his struggles, guards pressed in and held his
limbs against his body as Heimdall applied a muzzle to him as well.

The mad inventor had the audacity to wink.

That was when the trickster abruptly recalled that Tony Stark had every reason to believe Loki had made an attempt on his life. The god of lies’ expression became pained for a moment, then masked altogether.

“Loki Laufeyson, you are hereby charged with theft of golden apples from Idunn’s orchard and the giving thereof to two mortals without the consent of Asgard or one of the former-mortals in question, setting of a Makluan dragon with a history of three past attempts at world domination upon over one hundred mortal souls guilty or otherwise and thus another breach of Asgard’s protections of Midgard, conspiracy to commit treason with enemies of Asgard within Jotunnheim, and jailbreaking of the most volatile son of Muspellheim whose whereabouts are now unknown,” Odin declared.

Behind the muzzle, Loki seethed.

“This is still a bad idea. I’m just saying,” Tony chided lightly.

“Your word was to bring him here, Anthony Stark, and to find out the full extent of his plans for you. Whether you approve that plan in retrospect or not, is of no concern to me,” the All-Father intoned dismissively.

Rolling his eyes, the inventor sighed, as Odin and the guards dragged Loki away. He lingered behind, stepping closer to Heimdall. “You knew about the spell on Amora, didn’t you?”

“I did. It was... not action I would consider worthy of my king,” Heimdall admitted.

“Look, he’s about to have you summon Thor, but do us a favor and send him back to earth to bring Dr. Foster along? She’s going to want in on this, and she more than has the right to be around for his trial in the morning.”

The sentinel guard nodded, looking solemn.

“I hope Skurge remembers to tell Thor to bring a souvenir from Jotunnheim, too,” Tony muttered, following the armed entourage just before Odin paused at the entrance to the bi-frost and called the order to Heimdall to fetch Thor Odinson. Taking a deep breath or two, Tony steeled himself for the trial to come within several hours’ time.
How to Setup for a Fall with Style and Make it Apologize For You

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark does several brilliant things.
Odin is very unhappy.
Frigga is pissed.

Jotunnheim is revisited, resulting in additional Jotunn house-guests in Avengers tower.
Loki needs a weapon. Tony comes up with a great and terrible one.
Biologists often love dragons.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony resisted the urge to follow the trickster down into the holding cells, despite the god being dragged out of his sight again so soon making him feel a sharp jab of disappointment and helplessness both, especially seeing the shuttered expression Loki wore all the while: a stony façade with far too many cracks around the edges, showing pain and self-loathing and resentment of every step he was dragged forward.

It was an effort for the mad inventor to remind himself of all the reasons why following Loki now and showing his hand even to that extent, would be a bad idea.

So instead, he sidled up alongside Odin, ignoring the slightly scandalized looks some of the guards shot him for it. “Look, this really is a bad idea.”

“You keep saying so. I do wonder at your sudden reluctance.”

“You think he doesn’t have a way out? Allies?”

“From where? Earth?” He sounded even more deeply and bitterly amused as he further suggested, “Jotunnheim? No, Loki is not the sort who keeps such friends easily. He is too volatile, too ruthless.”

“Amora was a good friend to him for a long while,” the inventor pointed out.

“And she is no longer in my grasp.”

Tony found the pointy end of the spear Gungnir at his throat, and stopped abruptly. He shot the All-Father a boredly questioning look, with eyebrows raised.

“You let him unweave the spell upon her,” Odin accused. “Why?”

“She didn’t deserve that,” the inventor said flatly. “I don’t care if you’re a king, that was fucked up. She served your purposes well enough in still getting Loki to you. I didn’t see any harm in letting him lift that burden first. Were you really planning to leave her like that?” His tone turned spitefully disbelieving toward the end.
“Do not pretend to understand my purposes, child,” the gallows-god rumbled.

“I never said I was your ally on that front. You should have known me better than that, if you really thought I’d let her keep going after Thor and Dr. Foster just because you find her unworthy for reasons I think, frankly, are bullshit,” Tony shot back. As expected, this got him hurt: with the dull end of the spear, at least, as it whirled skillfully and knocked him back into the nearest wall with a blow to his solar plexus that left him winded and gasping.

“I am to be your king, if you may recall,” Odin intoned gravely.

“Maybe I’m rethinking it. I brought you Loki, but if this is how you play, I don’t think I need to share what I know about his purposes with you.”

Eyes narrowing, the All-Father stepped closer, looming. “What is it you know?”

“Citizenship is losing its savor. I say we renegotiate. Raise your price,” Tony retorted, with a grin that was almost a snarl.

“You dare?”

“Of course I do. I’m Tony goddamn Stark: ‘daring’ is my default setting, along with ‘abrasive’ and ‘cocky’. Now listen, King Lear: I haven’t been here long enough that my oath to you is so binding as yours is to me. I’m still flexible. Loki knew that enough to keep close to me a surprisingly long while without getting maimed, but I don’t think you’re quite as skilled,” the inventor challenged, grinning wider at how it earned a nonverbal half-bark of outrage from the All-Father. “Ah, ah, keep listening! You can’t arrest me, nor maim me, not only just because I’ve committed no actual crimes, but also because you know and I know that Thor would be livid enough to take your throne from you if you dared; especially since you’ve already incarcerated his brother and seem to loathe the woman he loves enough to try to get her assassinated by the Enchantress, and he knows what you did to Amora by now, too. You raised him to be a king capable of following your class-act on the throne; do you really want to learn just what he’s made of? Do you really want to have to come so close to killing him, again? You know that’s the only way you’d come out on top, there.”

The gallows god struck him again, in the exact same spot, just hard enough to make the still-bruised tissues scream a little, and pin Tony to the wall like a bug to a display board, thankfully without actual impalement. “Perhaps my lost son was right about you, Stark. And perhaps you are less honorable than I had expected of you.”

The disappointment in that statement was cutting, and Tony felt a little sickened by how small it made him feel for a moment, staring down Asgard’s patriarch. “I’m no hero, but you’re the one whose blood might boil if you renege on your deal with me, but not if I give you an out. You told me if I brought you Loki, I’d be a citizen of Asgard. I also told you I’d help you figure out his plans, but I’m not inclined to, now, and you don’t want me as a subject for a lot of the same reasons Loki is in a cage right now, so how about I keep the immortality gig, and promise not to share any of it with anyone on earth, in exchange for you not being my goddamn monarch?” He offered his most cocksure and mocking smile as he added, “To be fair, you don’t want to be responsible for me and you know it.” Hands spread wide, like he was presenting himself before an invisible crowd of admirers and urging them to applaud a little harder, Tony awaited the old god’s answer.

The look Odin shot him was shrewd and all too piercing. “Why do you wear glamours, all of the time?”

“I like variety,” Tony said, and changed the color of his suit from black to blood red with a minor illusion, just for kicks, and adding a matching set of sunglasses. “It’s fun, and I don’t have to bother
with any actual wardrobe changes.”

The gallows god snorted, rolling his eye. “I can agree to your terms. You are quite right, in that I do not need two such dissenting and deceptive creatures as you and Loki both, among my subjects.”

“I don’t think he counts as yours either, anymore, really,” the inventor said.

“I have captured him by his own means. That is a start.”

**Wow, did you ever miss the point,** Tony thought. “Can I get off this wall, now?”

Odin retracted Gungnir. “You will be present at the trial. Thereafter I hope to not see you again for a very long while, Anthony Stark,” he said, as he turned and strode off down the hall.

The mad inventor dusted himself off. “Tch. Well, I don’t like you either,” he muttered, only a little petulant.

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At first glance, the inventor seemed to be nonchalantly flipping a coin in the air and catching it again repeatedly. Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t a coin and the movements of it through the air were twisting and improbable like it was fluttering between different states of matter as it rose and fell, not actually flipping. The not-coin was actually a thin oval-shaped talisman he had been working spells into for a while, for Pepper, adding more as he learned to do more: mostly for protection, some to get her out of trouble if those failed, just the usual. He was adding to it even now, looking bored and trying to work out how to embed the newest things he had learned into the object without unweaving all that it already had built-in, nor tangling up with the existing spells in ways that might sabotage them.

It was a sufficient puzzle to keep his mind off of the people filing into the hall around him, and their whispers, for the most part; although if one more person suggest “a beheading” then he was seriously considering just giving up on all pretense and punching them squarely in the face. Luckily, Thor strode in with Jane at his side, to stand at the foot of the steps leading up to the throne, to the left of it, which seemed to be the unofficial “defendant’s side”; and his presence was enough to deter most from daring to suggest execution loud enough to be overheard. Tony, for his part in the play, appeared to be standing on the opposite side.

Thor had a bag over one shoulder that didn’t look large enough to contain the head of a certain fire-giant, but the strong spell-work Tony could catch a glimmer of whenever it moved suggested that was Hlin’s doing. At Thor’s right, the elder mage conversed quietly with Dr. Foster, who looked more than a little nervous, but also very determined. Distantly, Tony wished Pepper were here with him, to be calm and soothingly professional at her, and maybe to soothe his own nerves a bit, but her presence would’ve sent Odin the wrong message. She was too obviously his defense, and to Odin’s knowledge, the mad inventor had nothing to defend in this little case, except an unsupported suggestion that “It is actually a really bad idea for you to bring him here,” which Odin had mostly-dismissed, after their little deal-alteration earlier.

Tony only realized that he was wearing a rather disturbing sort of smile when Sif gave him a deeply suspicious look on her way past him, to stand nearer the foot of the throne than the former mortal. The mad inventor’s smile only widened a little, before smoothing into an aloof, carefree mask. The
shield-maiden continued to shoot the occasional glare his way for several minutes after.

Standing where he was, (no one in Asgard thought benches were important for this, apparently) Tony stood a bit further from throne than the warrior’s three, on the “prosecution” side, but closer than the rest of the crowd. It was assumed by most that he would outline Loki’s offenses against himself and the earth respectively. Thor kept shooting him worried looks accordingly, but at every one of them, the inventor only offered a bright and cheerful smile whenever their eyes met, and nothing more.

All susurrations of whispers and all chattering mouths fell silent as the throne room’s doors swung open wide, and there came the sound of chains dragging on stone. A circle of guards surrounded Loki, each holding the end of a different chain, wrapped around one forearm, with the end held in the hand of their opposite arms.

Frigga walked ahead of the prisoner’s procession, leading it in all of her stately grace. The expression on her face was coldly war-like and there was some murmuring over why she aimed such a terrifying glare right at Odin himself. Even the king’s own face fell, looking momentarily dismayed before he pulled his masks together again, regaining composure. Loki halted several steps before the throne. Frigga strode all the way up to the first step leading up to the throne, seeming to communicate a dire promise without words.

Looking wan and pale and drained, yet mutinous, the trickster still wore a muzzle, which Tony wasn’t surprised by, but still considered unfair; and unlike the last time he was taken to be sentenced, his hands were cuffed behind his back, rather than before him. The inventor began weaving quietly, behind the glamour he wore which altered the color of his suit. As he had expected, Odin did not look too deeply into the casual magics the young Midgardian mage wore, any longer, now seeming to accept them as merely part of the milieu whenever Tony Stark was in a room.

Thus the All-Father didn’t see new illusions being woven, obscured by the simpler one that was always there, and the inventor managed not to smile to himself as he quietly stepped back a few steps, leaving a copy of himself, glamour intact, in his place, while he himself wore a cloaked illusion spell he had been working on for some time, to keep his real self obscured by a mixture of bent light and a low level “this is somebody else’s problem” suggestion field*. He didn’t rely on it overmuch, stepping behind the nearest guard as soon as he could.

Keeping always a body or two between himself and Odin, and also between himself and any other mages in the room, Tony wove his way halfway around the hall, until he caught Frigga’s eye, knowing she would spot him, or sense some sign of his magic because she was looking for him. She had strode away from the throne and moved to stand beside Thor, and a flicker of her fingers was all Tony needed, to know the way was safe, and make the last few strides up to stand behind the trickster, concealing himself from the All-Father by keeping in the taller man’s shadow, so silent and subtle that even the guards holding the ends of Loki’s chains were none the wiser.

So many chains, it really did seem a little bit overkill, the inventor mused.

Then Odin strode down the steps very slowly, as he began to speak.

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“Loki Odinson,” the All-Father began. “You are guilty of crimes against the realms of Asgard, and
of Midgard, yet again. You have stolen from us our most precious of secrets, and shared it with one who was deemed unfit for it, and another who had told you before that he did not desire it; although he has changed his mind and proven himself worthy of it despite what ill intentions you might have had for him.”

Loki held his chin up high and gave the distinct impression that behind the muzzle was an unimpressed sneer.

Odin’s descent of the stairs seemed to have the rhythm of a very slow funeral dirge, as he continued, “You freed Surtur, and obscured his fate from Asgard’s sight: one of the most dangerous single entities the nine realms have had the luck so far to escape without any worlds destroyed, and you set him loose!”

The trickster stood very still, both to hold the old gallows-god’s gaze steadily under each accusation, and because he could feel light touches around his wrists, and at the restraining collar around his neck, and even the clasp of his muzzle, like someone was mapping each lock for some purpose, with their fingertips. Had Frigga decided to aid in his escape? Or had Hlín stepped in to avoid this incident causing any renewed warfare with freshly-thawed Jotunnheim?

Loki was at a loss, and baffled enough to be a bit annoyed about it.

Then a small key quietly unlocked first one, then the other of the cuffs at his wrist, but without a sound, magic muffling it, and doubtlessly concealing the act from the sights of the guards around him for none of them looked anywhere but straight ahead, toward their king. A thin thread of spell held the cuffs in place so they wouldn’t fall away yet, but they were open. Soon, so was his collar, and the band about his waist, and the manacles at his ankles as well. Loki’s mouth ran dry at that touch at the clasp of his muzzle again, eager to free his tongue for protest, but the hands there only waited, their owner seemingly listening to Odin drone on.

“Whatever plans you might have for Surtur, you should abandon them. He is being hunted. You were wise, not to release his magic, for it makes him trickier to find and surely gave you leverage over him, but it will make him also far easier to recapture,” the All-Father said.

Unable to help himself, the trickster gave an amused snort at that.

“You think this funny?” Odin accused, at the base of the steps, now.

Loki gave a languid shrug, eyes bright with brittle mirth.

“Your plans for the mortal are the only ones I find difficult to fathom, Loki,” said the gallows god, and watched the mirth drain from the younger trickster’s expression altogether. “Was it meant to bribe him, in time? Was he so impressive an ally to you, that you would seek to play the long game and perhaps turn him against his friends, possibly even against Asgard? He seems enough of a rabble-rouser to have that potential, more charm for mastery of a crowd than your own subtler ways. Yet even that seems strange, for you. What so inspired you to put the gift of a golden apple into the hands of a man who would have refused it, and who bears for you not even enough affection to stay his hand from betraying you?”

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Tony couldn’t see Loki’s face, but he felt the air around them drop in temperature until a hint of frost
formed on the stone floor for a few inches around the trickster’s boots, and the mad inventor could feel tension coil under his fingers where they lingered on the skin around the clasp of Loki’s muzzle. The god of lies did not stiffen visibly, but it was astonishing, Tony reflected, how much Loki’s stillness could conceal beneath its surface. He took a deep breath in silence and closed his eyes, looking out instead through the eyes of his illusory duplicate several yards away.

It was worse, from there. Now he could see the spiteful look on Loki’s face, and how poorly it concealed the self-loathing and pain beneath it.

There was only one thing to be said in response to Odin’s words.

Tony’s voice rang out, shattering the brief, tense silence as the two tricksters, old and new, stared one another down, and sing-songed, “Well now, I wouldn’t say that.”

The gallows god grimaced. “Silence, Stark.”

Loki, however, was staring right at the mad inventor, wary and bemused and almost, almost daring to hope, but not quite, still braced as though expecting further pain, and that ached to see, but Tony tried not to focus on that.

“I think not. No, no, no, you’ve got this all wrong, All-Daddy.” Stepping forward a pace, the inventor smiled, wide and charming.

“For once in your so far short life be obedient, Anthony Stark, or I will silence you by force,” Odin threatened.

“No you won’t,” Tony said sharply. “You’ve locked up his tongue to keep him escaping, but your own laws allow for him to speak in his defense. As a compromise, so you don’t look like as much of a shoddy king, I’ll do the talking. I claim the right. Thor, second me, here.”

“I second him,” the thunderer said immediately, without hesitation.

“I support him as well,” Frigga added.

“Permission from his nearest relatives present even, and the only ones in the room he’d willingly claim, these days,” the inventor chided. “So, Odin All-Father: let’s chat. Start with the list of crimes: the dragon? Favor to me. We had a deal, and there was no way that dragon was going to coexist peacefully with humanity given his track record, and Loki needed him for a plot, and I was feeling amenable. All within his rights, according to the precedent set by his previous sworn word to me to be my ally against Thanos. With me so far?” Tony stepped a bit closer, arms spread again as the crowd began to murmur amongst themselves in increasingly alarmed whispers.

Letting the pause linger for a few beats as Odin stared, Tony winked at a couple of people in the crowd who were gaping at him openly.

“And Surtur?” the older trickster prompted.

“Thor, do please present the evidence,” the inventor responded, with a flourishing gesture toward the thunder god, who stepped forward and upended the bag he had carried over his shoulder. From the surprisingly small container fell an astonishingly large disembodied head. The ragged edges of neck that remained, just below the magic-restricting collar Surtur had worn, looked suspiciously like teeth had been involved in the whole grisly business, especially on the length of exposed vertebrae.

Tony made a noise of mild disgust and grimaced despite himself. “Okay, so I wasn’t as ready for that as I thought. Damn, how big was the rest of the bastard?”
“Very,” Thor said flatly. “The Lady Hlín and I aided Loki in wearing Surtur down, over many days and nights, as he pursued us across Jotunnheim.”

“To what possible purpose?” Odin snapped.

“To thaw the ice,” Hlín cut in, her voice cool and deceptively serene, given the mild, warning glare she sent the king’s way. “Jotunnheim will soon experience the first spring days she has had opportunity to see in many centuries, by Loki’s efforts.”

“Which brings up another point: diplomatic immunity!” Tony announced. “You really shouldn’t kidnap key pillars of community and government from old enemies if you’re going to call yourself a proponent of peace amongst the realms, by the way.”

“What?” At that, the All-Father sounded sincerely baffled. “He is not their king.”

“The Three aren’t monarchs,” Tony chided. “Their monarchs bow to them.”

“Býleistr Laufeyson, king of Jotunnheim, declared him sovereign Wanderer of their people,” Hlín explained, in addition. “This position places him in a role with duties and powers within the realm of Jotunnheim equivalent to the First of the Three’s in Nifelheim. This includes giving him the right to disregard what laws he will, and even go so far as to overthrow an unworthy monarch for the benefit of their world, should one prove corrupt; although I suspect that he would need consult the Three themselves on the matter before interfering quite that far, as his loyalties to them came first.”

Odin stared between the eldest of his sons and the elder mage, with an occasional glance toward Tony Stark, with increasing unease. “Hlín, you swear to me the truth of this?”

“I give you my word; it is the truth,” she assured. “Take care, appropriately, not to reignite old fires.” She glanced pointedly at Surtur’s head. “It does not reflect well on a king, to burn those who have done no harm to him.”

“He has broken my laws,” the gallows god insisted.

“And so have you,” Frigga snapped out, cold and biting. “You have betrayed the trust of your people, and of the whole of the nine realms with the unmitigated cruelty you have shown to a single Aesir in exile who did nothing to deserve such torment added to her sentence, let alone to be used as an unwilling would-be assassin against the woman your son loves enough to stand against you, and anyone else, to protect and cherish for all of her worth, which that alone—as I tried many times to tell you before—should have been more than enough to prove her worthiness to you.”

The All-Father was so stunned as to take two steps back from her, though she was already several feet away. “Frigga... I...”

“I married a better man than this, Odin Borsson,” she said, low and grave. “You owe your son, and all of Asgard. For your penance, you will break with your previous ruling, and you will accept Dr. Jane Foster as a citizen of Asgard, and worthy to be of our kin.” Her eyes narrowed. “For a start.” The queen’s tone promised far worse than that to come, as well. “That does not begin to address Amora herself and all she has suffered, which we will discuss after inviting her once more into our halls, and you face the debt that you owe her.”

The crowd was louder, now, questioning and buzzing with wild theories and accusations, mad rumors, and increasingly desperate defensive cries.

“And what of you, Stark?” Odin said, low and wounded. “What is this to you? You would betray him, and then defend him?”
“What? No, no. This was never actually a betrayal. Why would I betray the god I’m head over heels in love with? Come on, now. I forgave the apple thing the moment I fully realized he was trying to tell me that I was capable of hurting him just by not being around for longer than a mortal life-span, and he was actually afraid of that pain enough to do something about it sooner rather than later, whether I liked it or not, which is twisted, yeah, but I kinda like it, and honestly I’d probably do the same. Hell, I might’ve already dosed Rhodey with a bit of Erskine’s serum once tests on his tissue samples proved he’d be more of a Cap than a Red Skull. Still working on Pep.”

Odin’s expression was a fairly simple study in shock and outrage, but Loki’s... Loki’s was a mangled array of confusion, anger, horror, and the most reluctant yet desperate hope, before the trickster forcibly sobered, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath, only for it to hitch as behind him, Tony snapped his fingers and all of the chains binding him fell to the floor, and one fever-warm hand broke the clasp holding his muzzle in place letting it join the manacles and all the rest of the heap of imprisoning metal as it all dropped away. During the resulting clatter, Tony’s cloaking spells vanished as he rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder with a mad, bright grin aimed at the king of Asgard.

“I said I’d bring him to you,” he mocked. “I never said you could keep him.”

“Tony...” the trickster rasped, his voice unsteady with anger and so much more. His hands, freed, were shaking when the mad inventor grasped his wrists, and he sucked in a breath at the feel of offered power, bolstering his own still-weak magic. He wove fast and quick and brilliant, feeling the inventor’s awe and quicksilver understanding through the connection, where he steered the borrowed magic into something fearsomely strong and sharp enough to cut right through all the wards in the palace meant to prevent his teleportation, all within less than a second.

Then they vanished from the court, and uproar erupted in their wake.

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Upon reappearance into the real world, in a very familiar penthouse at the top of Avengers tower in fact, Tony was unsurprised to find himself pinned hard against a wall, Loki gripping the lapels of his jacket hard and lividly snarling at him in rage.

“I’m sorry, I fucked up, but to be fair, I was in the middle of saying that I was trying to tell you that I’m in love with you when you hung up the damn phone,” the inventor said in a rush and then stopped, staring and swallowing thickly, as Loki’s glare somehow intensified. “Please, Loki.”

The god glared at him for a few moments longer, breathing hard but increasingly unsteady, then moved in abruptly, just to press his forehead against Tony’s, green eyes squeezed tight shut as he breathed the inventor in and felt tension in his back and shoulders relax in ways that they hadn’t for months, ever since they parted ways. He stayed there, breathing for several seconds, sensing the mad inventor’s increasing nervousness and comfort respectively, the latter preventing the former from causing him to speak out quite yet. The inventor himself slowly relaxed a bit too, as most of the fight drained out of him.

“You,” Loki said slowly, “are maddening.”

“You were already insane when you met me,” Tony countered, quiet and low.
“In the wrong ways.”

Tony’s eyebrows raised.

The trickster felt it. “I am not incapable of admitting some of my faults.”

“I heard about the walk.”

Loki’s eyelids fluttered and his grip on the inventor’s clothing tightened, but he said nothing, for long enough that Tony realized he would not respond at all until prompted further.

“I don’t think I could do it. That walk. I don’t even know most of their faces.”

“I almost did not.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “I’m glad you did. I’m not done with you.”

At that, Loki’s eyes fell open, but remained slightly blurred, because he seemed very reluctant to move away. “I can no longer imagine a life wherein I am not yours, whether you want me or not.”

“Loki... if you hadn’t noticed, I kind of confessed my love for you in front of all of Asgard less than ten minutes ago, and broke you out of prison in the process.”

“A helpful mannerism escaped the trickster’s lips, which also drew suddenly closer to Tony’s own. “You weren’t wrong.”

With a small huff of relief he tried to pass off as an aloof mannerism, fooling neither of them, Tony rested a hand on Loki’s neck and let his thumb stroke along the corner of the god’s jaw. “So can I keep you?”

“You can, you may, and you’d better,” Loki answered, leaning into the inventor’s touch and smiling softly when Tony’s clever mouth at last sought his own, though the wicked curve soon softened as he deepened the kiss, hands abandoning suit lapels in favor of gripping the inventor’s hips instead, and gathering him up and closer, slow as he could to savor it, but still urgent from too long spent craving without respite.

Tony was no better off, the soft and hungry noises that escaped him almost embarrassingly constant as his hands wandered, along with a few tendrils of magic, until he found a weak spot in the wards that bound Loki’s armor against inconvenient removal by anyone but himself, and banished it to the floor.

Gasping a bit in shock, the trickster broke the kiss just long enough to stare at him for a moment, breathing raggedly. “You. Yes. I love your brain; I hadn’t even noticed that design flaw,” he hissed, and then dove back in, more aggressive and more desperate both, banishing articles of Tony’s clothing one by one, as his fingers slid under them, his hands wandering in search of more and more bare skin.

The inventor laughed a little into the renewed kiss before returning it in earnest, nipping and teasing, deft and generous both, the give and take of friction and force making them both breathless. When the last of his clothing finally vanished and there was nothing but skin, Tony wasn’t entirely
surprised to be teleported from the living-room wall to the bedroom, cool sheets suddenly at his back, but he did take the opportunity to arch up without needing the floor for leverage, and roll their hips together, gasping raggedly at the sensation of heat and friction of Loki’s length against his own, and the low, rumbling moan it pulled from the trickster.

From there it was all frantic closeness and fricative power-struggle, the both of them in too desperate a state to do more than keep kissing, and moving, and occasionally remembering to breathe, though that became more difficult once Loki slipped a hand between them, wrapping around both their lengths, conveniently slick, and stroking hard.

Tony wrapped a hand around Loki’s, squeezing slightly tighter, making them both gasp as their hips bucked and rolled together inelegantly for a few moments before they found their rhythm, and promptly began challenging one another with provocative variations in speed and force and the teasing of their free hands.

Loki broke first, giving a low cry against the mad inventor’s mouth as he came, the noise enough to make certain it wasn’t long before Tony fell over the edge after him, shuddering under his touch briefly until they slowed to a halt.

Breathing in the quiet after, they stayed tangled up close for a few minutes.

“I missed you,” the trickster confessed. “I’d like to show you Jotunnheim.”

“You mean my current main competition for your time and energy?” Tony mused, cleaning them both up with a flicker of magic, to avoid uncomfortable stickiness. “Yeah, okay. I’d like that.”

“I am fascinated with you both, admittedly, and while that is potent, it is you I am in love with. You have quite the advantage, there,” Loki responded.

The inventor’s mouth ran dry and he opened it to reply, but no sound escaped.

Leaning in closer, so their foreheads touched again, the god murmured, “You have me, Tony Stark. You have me, heart and soul.”

“Loki...”

Before either of them could respond further, there came a very loud, insistent knocking at their door.

“I tried to dissuade him, sirs, but Fenrir seems quite upset about something.”

“Seriously?” Tony groaned.

“Fenrir, you are my son and I do love you, but your timing leaves much to be desired,” Loki called, toward the door.

“Father dear, it’s bad enough I can smell you two through the door right now, so trust me when I say that I agree with you at present. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t important, but Hretha was very insistent and frankly a little scary at me about it. You apparently need to haul ass back to Jotunnheim; the flooding and storms are compromising some of the old wards in places, particularly where one of her granddaughters is preserved. She said you would know where that place was.”

“I haven’t exactly recovered my powers sufficiently to tackle that,” the trickster responded, sincerely sounding worried, now.

“She, uh, gave me something to give you for that.”
“Hretha?” Tony asked.

“First of the Three. Given that you’re mine, you will be considered less of an outsider to the Nameless city, but don’t go telling anyone else you know her name. It’s early yet, and she didn’t share it with me for days after we met,” Loki explained briefly.

The inventor nodded. “I guess I should dress aiming for weather-resistant?”

Loki shot him a mildly incredulous look.

“Dude, ancient magics older than Odin to study? You being you at them? You’re not leaving me here,” Tony said flatly.

Helplessly, the trickster began to smirk, his eyes warm with pleased mirth, more open than the inventor had seen before—enough so to take his breath away. “Then fetch your armor. We have work to do.”

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Fenrir was a little disturbed by the self-assembling armor that encased Tony not long after they emerged from the bedroom, Loki already in his only semi-formal travel regalia. “What?” the inventor asked.

“You’re wearing him. It’s a bit odd,” Fenrir said. He wore his more human-shaped form, and seemed restless.

“I consider it quite normal, actually,” JARVIS responded, from the penhouse speakers.

“To each their own. Speaking of...” Reaching into the breast pocket of his jacket, he pulled out a small glass vial filled with liquid the color of a very severe fresh bruise: somewhere between dried blood and bluish-purple. “This is for you, father. Drink.”

Loki took the offered potion warily. “I do not usually consume strange potions which I did not make myself, save for in dire straits.”

“She’s kin,” the wolf reminded lightly. “How much do you trust her?”

“Enough to value me too much to bother with poison,” the trickster relented, and opened the vial, draining it as though it were a shot of liquor. He did not choke or gasp, but his jaw did snap shut with a loud click and the entire room’s temperature dropped below zero all at once, the color-scheme of his skin and eyes changing to match it, and there was a barely-tangible shudder through the very air, out from the core of his being. Various metal and glass surfaces throughout the room developed a thin layer of frost on them, so fast they could all hear its whispering crackle as it formed.

Tony’s suit was even a little icy, when he stepped closer to Loki. “You okay?”

A bit wide-eyed, the trickster exhaled a long breath. “Wow.” He sounded just a little dazed. “That was incredible.”

“Your magic should be fully recovered,” Fenrir said, looking a bit surprised himself. “I don’t know what was in that, but I kind of want one.”
“I think it was specifically formulated for frostier creatures, with a little of Hretha’s own blood, and some of the rare plants which grow in her gardens,” Loki said, a little faintly.

“They garden in the iciest place in the nine realms?” Tony queried.

“They have to feed themselves,” the wolf mocked. “They collect light from the world’s surface, convert some of it to heat, and apply both to vast subterranean gardens. Hretha has some gardens of her own which are fed solely by starlight, and some of the plants she grows are very potent for use in magic.” He then widened his eyes just a little. “Also, seriously, she has the absolute best hallucinogens.”

Tony laughed helplessly at that.

Snapped out of his power-trip daze, Loki managed to thaw himself out with an effort and hold a hand out to each of them. “Would you like to see my work, darlings?”

Fenrir changed to his horse-sized wolf-shape, and rested his chin on Loki’s palm. Tony gave an amused snort at the tableau they made, and the trickster’s mock-exasperation, even as he grasped Loki’s hand.

The world fell away, for several seconds this time, and when it returned, they were surrounded by a shattered city, once great, now rain-soaked rubble. Torrents of heavy rain began to strike them immediately, though Fenrir and Loki both causally blocked it from reaching them with shields that redirected all water that would’ve otherwise hit them. Tony didn’t bother; the suit was water-tight.

Looking around, Tony sucked in a breath at the scope of the city, and its destruction. The place had clearly been a massive labyrinth of stone infrastructure, carved into the rock beneath the surface, and using the rest to build towers and palatial buildings big enough for creatures eight times taller than any human, and much wider, too. No building had been left unscathed, but a few still stood, colossal and cracked and unsteady-looking, with roofs either sheared off or collapsed inward, but still stand they did. And many pathways and stairwells led up into nothing, or down only a few steps before trailing off into nothing above vast chasms. Seeing a statue of a giant figure broken halfway down, so that its legs remained upright, but the body and face of it were on the ground, in the middle of a small community square, the inventor murmured, “‘Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair’ indeed.”

“What?” Loki asked.

“It’s a poem reference, I think,” the wolf rumbled.

All of them were left shielding their eyes as a massive bristle of lighting broke out overhead, hitting something in the distance hard enough to make the stone beneath them shudder, just before a deafening crackle of thunder rolled in its wake, making Fenrir’s ears flatten against his skull as he whined.

“Severe weather, much?” Tony asked.

“Ow,” the wolf muttered.

“This way,” Loki urged them, setting off eastward, toward the most intact flight of stairs the inventor had seen so far, leading down below the surface of the city.

Tony followed, but had to ask, “How do you know?”

“I studied maps of this city, long ago. I was always fascinated with the cultures lost under the ice
here, when I was young. They appealed to me,” the trickster explained. “I understand all the better now why that was so.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised,” the inventor muttered.

“If there are survivors here, they will be below the surface,” Loki said. “I do not know what we may find there. Magic so old as the wards protecting these cities can... age strangely, and develop strange ideas of their own purposes, left alone. Especially with so many long, strange dreams as any under the ice for so long as these survivors have doubtlessly had.”

“You mean they start to think?” Tony asked, raising his face-plate as they stepped out of the downpour.

“They could already think. They will be... almost akin to JARVIS, but less well grounded and with personalities not so encouraged to be more akin to those of organic life. They are guardians, simple but intelligent constructs. Some act as shields, others maintain life-support systems, still others keep watch like sentinels, for whatever threat brought them into action to finally wane,” Loki said, as they descended into the dark. Not far down, Loki traced a sigil on part of the wall, and veins of light began to appear throughout all of the stones over their heads, like the weakest possible dawn, but sufficient that the rest of the long stairwell—designed originally for beings with greater length of stride and foot-size than Loki and Tony possessed—became visible, up to a small landing, which led down a hall. Watching the light creep outward, the hall opened up and became a street, became a web of streets: the city above continued down below, more twisty and less absurdly huge, suggesting those who lived below the surface were not the tallest of the Jotunns, but scale still suggested most of them were far taller than Loki, by at least two, maybe three feet.

After scanning the way ahead, the trickster teleported them ahead, to where the “dawn” was only just creeping by overhead, only to stop short, as the rock ceiling gave way to sky and rain. Loki and his companions stood at the edge of a vast area of rubble and ruin, not quite within reach of the rain, save where streams of it ran under and around their feet.

There was a hole piercing the city-below-the-city, where the massive ceiling had been crushed in over half of it, most likely from the weight of too much ice hitting too hard and fast. In the rubble were a few skeletal bodies, mummified by their long time in the ice; although most of them were only visible in pieces, half-buried under what might have been the stones walls of their homes, or their neighbors’ homes.

“That’s deeply disturbing,” Tony said quietly.

“My grandfather’s legacy,” Loki intoned gravely. “I envy his walk to his rest not even a little. He might still be walking it even now, with how very many he killed. He might not yet have finished hearing them.”

The inventor shuddered a little at the thought. “Damn.”

Silently, Loki led them around the edge of the ruins further, until they reached seemingly collapsed tunnel. Lifting the largest stones blocking its entrance with magic and setting them down several yards away, the trickster revealed that beyond the entrance, the rest of it remained intact, and led still further down. He ran his fingers along the walls as they began to walk down it, and trails of light marked their path, as they descended, and descended, the tunnel seeming to spiral steadily down, like the path had been made by a cork-screw.

Suddenly, Loki stopped. “We’ve been noticed.”
“Have we?” Fenrir asked. “I sense nothing.”

“It’s warmer,” the trickster said. “Just a little, and this pathway has gone on too long without divergence. We’re being held and examined.”

“Like Hlín’s staircase?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Loki murmured. “Quite.”

Fenrir looked around them, seeing nothing but the same pathway they had been walking for over fifteen minutes now. “How do we persuade it we’re friendly?”

“I don’t know,” the trickster said softly.

Tony reached over to one wall and knocked, as though on a door.

It echoed hollowly.

“Thin chamber walls,” Fenrir observed.

“Strong, though,” the inventor mused.

“Who knocks?” asked a bodiless, slightly suspicious-sounding voice, from the air and the walls and within their own minds.

“Three visitors,” Loki responded. “Sent by Hretha the mage. She sensed that your strength is in need of aid, to last out these storms, and we have come to supply it, if you may let us.”

“The world... is safer. Now.”

Tony realized then that the voice sounded tired. So very tired.

“Not safe enough,” the trickster said softly. “You have done very well, guardian. Let me ease your burden, please, until the storms wane. There is no food for the people you protect, no shelters yet to support them, and there is flooding everywhere. Keep them safe, only a little longer now, and let us help.”

“I sense you are dangerous. You have unsettled their dreams, before. You shook this world and made whole continents ache,” said the construct. “I do not want you close to them. I do not trust you.”

Loki swallowed tightly. “You are right. I wronged this world, when I did that. I was a fool. I am still a fool. I swear to you now that I will not harm any of the people in your care, upon my life, while they sleep. You know I will have to keep to my word; you can sense that, can you not?”

“I... can.” A hesitation. The floor under them trembled a little. “What of the awoken ones?”

“How many are there?” Fenrir asked.

“Only three. They are trying to aid me, but they are... weakened.”

“I will aid them in their task,” Loki assured. “We all seek the same goal here.”

“You are... correct. And sincere, despite your name.”

“I have not told you my name,” the trickster said, carefully.
“You are the Lie-smith. I know not how I know... but you are Lie-smith.”

“That’s a little creepy,” Tony muttered.

Seams opened in the wall where he had earlier knocked, and opened into brightly-lit cavern. The air was cool and damp, as they stepped over the threshold. The door, Tony realized, was not part of a wall anymore once they stepped through on the other side, and it vanished into the air behind them.

“I want one,” the inventor whispered.

Loki elbowed him lightly, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Tony looked, and then kept looking, his mind a bit blown. “Woah.”

Fenrir’s mouth was slightly open in shock.

They stood in a control room, strange writings in every wall, and a complex interface taking up the center of the room, at which two mages at least four feet taller than Loki (the male more like five feet) worked, until they noticed the doorway and their visitors and suddenly froze.

A third figure in the room, also a mage, but smaller than the other two (only a foot taller than Loki) narrowed green eyes at them a little, where she sat in a meditative pose in the center of the interface, illusions and displays of complex systems playing across her skin and clothing. Behind her, and the other mages, was a window into a vast complex, full of transparent chambers of various sizes, each bearing marks of identification in a script Tony had never seen, and each one holding at least one humanoid body in it. Most of them, even at such a distance, looked alive. The largest of them, Tony could even see the rise-and-fall of unusually slow but still-present breathing.

There were over a thousand, at the least.

Loki stared, wide-eyed, at the mages before him. “Hello,” he said, a bit faintly.

The two mages on either side of the table exchanged confused glances. One of them, a pale lady with blonde hair the color of corn-silk, turned to face them, her dark eyes narrowed. Opposite her, the taller mage with skin the color of mahogany and amber-brown eyes remained still as though he suspected any sudden moves might lead the visitors to either vanish or attack.

“Why did she let you in?” asked the mage sitting on the table.

“I am here to help,” Loki said. “And promised not to harm any of those in her care, while they slept.”

“Who are you?” the blonde one inquired.

“I am Loki Friggasson, of Jotunnheim and Nifelheim, brother of Asgard’s heir to the throne. I am accompanied by my son Fenrir,” he gestured toward the wolf, “and my partner Anthony Stark of Midgard. I was sent on request of the First of the Three of Nifelheim, to aid in maintaining the protections over this place, until the storms cease and more of the planet’s surface is healed.”

“Why would she send you?” asked the green-eyed mage. She had a sharp nose and sharper cheekbones, but her mouth was wide, soft and expressive.

“I travel between the realms more easily than most, I am powerful and capable, and she likes me, in her way,” the trickster responded. “Also, I am responsible for the weather as I am for the thaw.”

She gave a snort of disbelief. “You, child?”
“Well, Surtur, mostly, but he was chasing me at the time,” Loki intoned dryly. “I think you must be Tarja.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

“Because you have her eyes and smile as crookedly as Hretha.”

“I have eyes like yours,” Tarja pointed out.

“Precisely. Mine is simply further down a slightly different lineage, cousin,” Loki replied, smiling a little now. “You are drained from too long under ice, with your magic flowing through the wards to maintain them far beyond their normal lifespan. Are these apprentices of yours?”

“They were, before they became masters in their own right,” Tarja said, looking them over with more shrewdness this time. “What are you, wolf?” she inquired.

“One of a kind,” Fenrir responded. “Also a mage.”

“But what are you, and how are you his son?” the elder mage asked.

“He was once a construct,” Loki said. “He grew.”

“Grew a soul, and more. With your aid?” She nodded, seeing his expression. “Astonishing. Perhaps you may be of aid after all. Though you... of Midgard?” She raised an eyebrow. “What are you wearing?”

“Armor. Obviously,” Tony said, with a shrug. “I’m new at the mage thing, so probably not much help there, but I plan to learn and I refused to miss the show.”

The three older Jotunn mages seemed amused by that.

“The show, yes, I suppose it will be that,” Tarja mused. Gesturing to the man on her right she said, “This is Ravi Helkkisson, and this,” She gestured at the blonde mage to her left, “is Vasti Göranssdottir, my former pupils; although I’m curious how you guessed that.”

“It seemed obvious,” Loki said with a shrug. “You have the air of a teacher.”

“She did not tell you I was?”

The trickster shook his head.

“How long have we been under the ice?” she asked.

Loki hesitated. “Millennia.”

The elder mages eyes fell shut for a moment and the inhaled sharply. “Not millions of years, though?” she asked, a bit faintly.

“Not quite.”

“I had thought it would be so much longer,” she sighed, relieved. “I knew not if we could truly last. Time was not on our side, not for so long as it might have taken, more naturally...”

“Did you really thaw the whole of our planet with one son of Muspellheim?” asked Vasti, amused and disbelieving.
“Against his will, yes,” Loki responded. “I did not remove the restraints upon his magic, showed him a false key to them, and spent several weeks running with little relief.”

“Until Hlín and Thor showed up,” Tony added lightly. “You’re welcome.”

With a self-deprecating and reluctant sigh, the trickster conceded, “Yes, thanks.”

“Our former teacher who is also Tony’s current one, and my uncle,” Fenrir explained. “Both Aesir.”

“My family history is convoluted,” Loki offered, not bothering to clarify further.

“Later, then, cousin, perhaps you can explain it in more detail,” Tarja said. “For now, come here, all three of you, and do as I tell you. Yes, even you, Midgardian.” Her eyes narrowed. “Though I suspect you are not a mortal.”

“Not anymore,” Tony conceded, with a grin, and stepped out of his armor, which peeled back to allow him free. Under it, he wore a charcoal-grey suit that he knew Loki usually found distracting, and was fond of petting, and saw the brief, hungry look the trickster shot his way before they stepped up to the console.

“Place your hands and paws where you see light in their shapes,” Tarja commanded. “You’ll feel a slight pull on your magic, but it won’t engage fully until you push at it. Let go only as much as you are comfortable.”

Tony felt it. Tony pushed.

The world went orange-and-black and whirling for several seconds and he could see constellations of interconnected threads and constructs between planes on a scale that left him breathless, and so exquisitely designed and intricate he could almost cry. Then he felt tiredness suddenly hit and jerked back.

Opening his eyes like he was surprised to find them shut, the inventor breathed a bit raggedly for a second. “That... was fucking awesome,” he said softly. Glancing to the side, he could see Loki still under, head bowed and a look of concentration on his face. Then he looked up and met Tarja’s curious gaze.

“My thanks,” she said. “You have a fair amount of raw power, so young it’s quick to rush out almost before you can think to pull it back. As you use it more, it will become heavier and better behaved.”

“So everyone keeps telling me,” he responded. “It’s a bit addictive, which helps.”

“Yes... Are you unusual, for a human, these days? What I remember of Midgard... You were all so very young. Well... Your civilizations were young, but your people were wise as any, in some matters. What mages you had were interesting to teach, and to learn from. So rushed, given how brief human lives can tend to be, they innovated with a passionate sort of desperation in ways those of us who live longer often forget how to do. What is Midgard now like, after all this time?”

“Still young. The sanitation has started to get a lot better over the past century, we’ve got widespread use of electricity and mages are very rare these days. Overall, the place is still mostly just full of short-lived lunatics. I’m not exactly normal by any stretch of the imagination, by human standards, though. I’m an inventor, obscenely wealthy by earthly standards, and also a genius.”

“And no longer mortal. How?”

“How do you think?” He shot a look Loki’s way, smiling brightly when she did the same and then
met his eye again.

“You said his brother is Aesir?” she asked.

“He was adopted.”

“Ah.” Tarja nodded. “By... their king?” Her brow furrowed.


“Is Bor still king of Asgard?” Ravi inquired.

“Nope. Dead as a doornail,” the inventor replied.

“Odin, then,” Ravi mused. “I studied under him, once, when I visited Asgard. I was curious about how they maintained the flow of life-force throughout Yggdrasil. He was a most impressive master of it. Is he still? And king too?”

“He’s their everything, yeah,” Tony confirmed. “He doesn’t like me right now.”

“Oh?” Vasti inquired, smiling a little. “Whatever did you do?”

“Conned him and upended his own attempted conniving stuff,” the inventor responded casually. “While absconding with someone he wanted to imprison.”

“The story must be very convoluted then, indeed,” Tarja muttered quietly.

Tony didn’t ask how she’d so easily worked out that Loki was the would-be prisoner in question. It probably showed on his face, which she watched a little more closely than her students, who were absorbed in tasks before them, spread out in diagrams hovering illusory over the console, tied to different sigils and seals carved all over it. Suddenly Tarja spotted something in her own display-illusions that merited more close attention, and she widened her window into it with a few tugged threads. “Oh, you are a clever boy, Loki,” she murmured. “He’s reversed the flooding, it’s all draining now. How did he...” She flicked through the three-dimensional map, looking for changes he made. “I can’t see how... oh, very clever.”

“Would she send you any less?” Loki said, opening his eyes, though it was clear he was still under, and couldn’t actually see her, though he was present enough to listen and speak.

“Remind me to thank her. You’re very good. And so is Fenrir; he just solved the energy issues in the east end,” she sounded sincerely surprised and impressed.

“No way,” Vasti muttered, pulling up a display of the same view herself. Her eyes went wide. “But... that’s...” She tilted her head. “What did he even replace it with?”

“A borrowed idea,” Fenrir said, stepping off the console and shaking himself out as though leaving the daze of being under the pull felt enough like coming up for air that he felt a need to shake off water despite being dry. “Thank you, Tony.”

“You little shit, did you just make a magic arc-reactor?” the inventor sighed.

“Maaaybe?” the wolf grinned.

“Oh, good idea,” Loki murmured, and his eyes fell shut again, his head dropping forward heavily. The displays all three mages observed suddenly lit up like Christmas in several places at once.
“By the Norns,” Vasti murmured.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Ravi said.

“I get that a lot,” the trickster said, pulling his hands and head sharply up and blinking a few times to clear his vision of the after-images of all the schematics he had been flying through. “Not arc-reactors, Tony, but a similar concept... braided, rather, and twisted a bit, like DNA...” He gestured vaguely, then gave up and tugged over Vasti’s illusion with two fingers and steered it toward the construct he was talking about. “It exploits a series of small punctures between planes that had already been created in that area by the processes of the existing generators; it just had to be twisted, you see?”

“Those holes are dangerous,” Tarja warned.

“Yes, but also useful, if you know how to ply them,” Loki responded. “It’s actually fairly simple, and does mimic the workings of his reactor a little, but on a different scale.”

“Holy shit,” Tony muttered, suddenly getting it. “Loki, we should go home.”

“Hmm?” the trickster leaned over his shoulder slightly, peering at the display.

“This is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” the inventor said reverently. *And we need to go home so I can do some very important sexy things to you as a direct result,* was heavily implied, and he smiled lasciviously when Loki caught on. “And you all,” he pointed at the three older Jotunns. “You have all the power you need from it.”

“We do. In excess,” Ravi admitted. “It would not last, in the long term, but if we distribute the power through the proper channels, it could preserve enough to keep us in operation for another year, if so needed.”

“Now that’s much better than ‘we’re all gonna die in less than a day!’” Vasti mused, droll yet relieved. “Redirecting now.”

“You get to take care of it when it wears down,” Tarja told Loki. “I’ve had enough trouble with the mess from them.”

“Of course,” the trickster concurred.

“About our... conquerors,” Tarja said.

“Ah yes. Politics.” Loki stared out over the many preserved people who had lived in the now-destroyed city so very long ago. “This will be complicated, and require a lot of explanation.”

“Midgard, then. I’ve got guest rooms, you three look like you haven’t slept since you thawed, which I’m gonna guess was two weeks ago or so?” Tony guessed, then continued at their slightly-suspicious nods, “Right. So you need probably a vast amount of food and a place to lay low and recuperate that you’re safe from causing any accidental political snafus. I can provide that.”

“Leave me out of it. I’m going to curl up by Hel’s fireplace a while,” Fenrir said. “This was fun, though. Lovely to meet you all.” He nodded at them once, then vanished.

“He really is impatient sometimes,” Tony mused.

“Rest would be good, before I begin to tackle the politics of the last few millennia,” Tarja admitted. “Thank you for your hospitality.”
Tony inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgement, then turned to find Loki staring at him with a slightly awed look. “What?”

“You,” he said simply, just quiet enough for the others not to overhear, “are perfect.”

Beaming helplessly in response, even as a faint blush crept up the back of his neck, the inventor elbowed him lightly. “C’mon then. Take us home.”

With a faint smile, Loki did so.

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Explaining three Jotunn house-guests to the Avengers was, in retrospect, a more more daunting prospect than Tony had originally thought. He only realized this fully just after they landed.

Mostly because he hadn’t actually thought about explaining why Loki was back.

At least, at the start, only Natasha was home. She still did a spit-take worthy of Hawkeye when the they all appeared in the living-room suddenly.

“Oh. Right,” Tony said. “I live with a group of lunatics called the Avengers. We save the planet, occasionally. This is Natasha Romanov, who is my personal favorite assassin. Natasha, you know Loki, of course. These are a few mages from Jotunnheim who are going to be staying in a few of the guest quarters for a couple days, probably: Ravi Helkkisson, Vasti Göranssdottir, and their former teacher Tarja…” He looked at her and blinked a bit.

He supposed it was lucky, since the Jotunns in questions were all mages, and thus had ability to alter their size (even the taller two who weren’t naturally able to shape-shift otherwise), they wouldn’t have as much trouble with doorways and ceilings as expected. They adjusted after just a look around the room.

He just hadn’t expected them to suddenly shrink when he wasn’t looking.

“Lykkessdottir,” the elder mage supplied.

“Thank you,” the inventor said, and turned back to the super-spy with an attempt at a reassuring smile which had the opposite effect intended.

“Tony,” Natasha warned. “What is going on, exactly?” She looked at Loki very pointedly, raising one eyebrow.

“Interplanetary politics,” the trickster supplied.

“Lovely to meet you,” Tarja said, bowing her head slightly. Her former pupils followed suit, but were a bit more distracted by their surroundings.

“JARVIS, say hello, please?” Tony said to the air.

“Hello,” greeted the AI. “I am a sentient technological construct present throughout this building. Should there be anything you need, or if you have any questions, you need merely to ask. Call me
The three mages blinked a bit, uncertain where to look for just a moment before realizing it didn’t matter.

“Fascinating,” Ravi murmured.

“Thank you,” JARVIS responded.

Tarja nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose you may guide us to the guest quarters he speaks of? I sense that he has some explaining to do, here, and while I’ve no doubt it would be entertaining to watch, I really am exhausted.”

“I can, yes. Proceed left down the hallway on the north end of the room, please,” the AI supplied, and the Jotunns followed, hands brushing Loki and Tony’s shoulders or upper arms in acknowledgement as they passed, and then headed out of the room.

“Explain,” Natasha demanded lightly.

The trickster and the inventor exchanged glances, then sat down on the couch opposite her chair.

“So I conned Odin a little,” Tony started.

Blinking a bit, the assassin inquired, “You did what?”

So he proceeded to explain, starting from the deal with Odin and the lies it was under the pretense of, bringing Fenrir on board (though he omitted the ‘might have wished you were Loki, sorry’ conversation with his new R&D employee), finding Skurge, and aiming him and Amora toward Jotunnheim, getting Loki captured, re-negotiating with Odin, the trial in the throne room, the escape, Fenrir’s abrupt visit, and then the trip to Jotunnheim. “So yeah... house-guests.”

Sipping her tea and openly judging him for his life choices with the look she shot him over the rim of it, Natasha gave it some thought. “You’re both insane.”

“Yes,” the pair admitted easily, in unison.

“And now you have diplomatic immunity?” she asked Loki.

“I do,” he responded.

“Any extraterrestrial etiquette I might need to know beyond the usual?”

The trickster thought about it, then shook his head. “They should be no more culture-shocked than Thor.”

“You should tell Pepper,” Natasha said.

“Yeah,” Tony admitted.

“And Rhodey figured out you did something, but isn’t sure what,” she added.

“Figures,” the inventor muttered.

“I’ll tell the others. You both can go away, now,” she sighed, waving them off.

“Good. Thanks bye!” Tony said, and teleported them both upstairs.
Reappearing them on the bed, the inventor draped himself over Loki’s lap and wrapped his limbs around the trickster securely. “Where were we?”

Loki laughed and kissed him like they’d never stopped in the first place.

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It shouldn’t have surprised Tony to wake up to the sounds of arguing mages the next morning, but it somehow did. The previous few days felt like one long dream and he had, as he woke, a vague feeling of dread that it really had been just that, and the trickster god was still out of his reach.

Then he recognized Loki’s voice as doing a bit less than half of the arguing and Tony was momentarily blown away by sheer disbelief that things had actually worked out for once. He then pulled on a pair of pants, not bothering with a shirt, and stepped out into the living-room of his penthouse, heading for the coffee machine, and ignoring the slightly surprised elf mage staring at him for a few moments.

“Eyes back here, Luca, he’s mine,” Loki said, without missing a beat, earning an almost-sheepish look from the silver-haired elf, before they started arguing again about the logistics of locations for agricultural use versus wilderness, referring frequently to a large illusion hovering between them: a three-dimensional representation of the planet of Jotunnheim. Tony stopped paying much attention to what they were saying when they got down to soil composition, which consisted mostly of Loki looking bored but listening to the earth-mage’s (Tony had a feeling that was an All-speak translation of a word that referred to all the same things “earth” usually did in English except the name of this particular planet) various concerns.

Sipping his coffee, Tony examined the elf with mild interest, having not seen anyone actually from Alfheim, except Angrboða. Luca in particular looked a bit less Legolas than anticipated: hair pulled back in a single practical plait, features fairly handsome in a pretty sort of way, but also a bit oddly cat-like in a way the inventor found hard to quantify. There was a quality to his magic which had the same hint of something strange. It was, for lack of any better word, *fey*: the way the elf’s teeth sometimes looked a little too sharp, his eyes a bit too piercing, like there was something monstrous barely concealed under the oh-so-pretty surface, especially as he got worked up. He vaguely recalled Loki mentioning that most elves wore glamours to cover this and appear more elegant; Tony wondered idly if perhaps those who devoted their lives to wild-magic and botany didn’t bother with that posh frippery, or if it was just this elf in particular.

Luca dressed in less finery than Angrboða, instead wearing fairly plain traveling leathers in shades of brown, with occasional ornate accents with leaves and vines as the common theme.

Eventually, they came to an agreement on something to do with how fast trees grow, and the elf vanished from the room.

Loki snorted. “Earth mages. Maddening people.” He vanished the illusion of Jotunnheim with a gesture and sidled over to where Tony stood at the counter pouring his first cup of coffee. The trickster knew about the 2-cups rule, and didn’t press for conversation, though he did kiss the back of Tony’s neck lightly. He was then surprised when Tony reached back and grabbed his wrists, guiding them forward and around until he had the god pressed against his back, arms slung low about his waist. “Better,” he said, and filled his second cup of coffee.
Simultaneously relaxing against him and squeezing just slightly, Loki wondered briefly if the inventor could read minds. The thought of embracing him so had crossed his mind more than once, but there was lingering hesitation that this was too new. He wasn’t in the habit of seeking intimacy any longer, he realized.

“I can hear you thinking too loud,” Tony said, halfway through his second cup, brain now engaged and mostly-functional.

“This will be complicated.”

“I like complicated, with you.”

“The appreciation is mutual,” Loki assured.

“Then stop worrying.”

“I was surprised, when you invited them. I would not have thought of it.”

“ Mostly I wanted an excuse to get you back into bed as soon as possible, actually, and that was the best excuse I could think of,” Tony admitted.

With a chuckle, the trickster kissed at his neck again. “Brilliant.”

“I never said the side-effects weren’t also insanely useful, but that was still the main motive.” Then he froze. “Oh. Breakfast. For all of them. JARVIS?”

“Already in progress, sir. I ordered the necessary supplies and scheduled a visit from one of your preferred personal chefs accordingly, last night.”

“I love you, JARVIS,” he replied, with feeling.

“You’re quite welcome, Tony,” the AI responded, sounding amused.

The inventor exhaled a relieved sigh and finished his coffee, just managing to rest the empty mug on the counter when one of Loki’s clever hands unbuttoned the front of his jeans and slid under the waistband to take him in hand, making Tony emit a slightly embarrassing noise. “D-damn you’re insatiable.”

“Mmm,” Loki mused. The previous night had indeed involved a lot of frenzied, aggressive and possessive sex, until very nearly dawn. It had been good, but also desperate, very necessary relief. “I think I’ll have you here slowly.”

“Hard or soft?” Tony prompted, already hard where the trickster stroked him.

“You want me hard, Tony?”

“Always,” he panted.

“Then I’ll see how long it takes to unmake you gently, first,” Loki purred, vanishing his own clothes and pushing the inventor’s jeans down to the floor, where Tony kicked them aside. The morning light from the windows was still more golden than harsh, and under it Tony’s tanned skin looked even more delectable than the trickster had thought possible, as the inventor gripped the edge of the granite bar-top firmly for leverage to push back into Loki’s touch when the god trailed two lube-slick fingers slowly down his tailbone to press into him.

“Think you have the patience?” Tony challenged, his head drooping forward a little at the first slow
drag of fingers along his prostate, not nearly enough pressure, making him tense with the effort of not pushing back or wriggling to get a bit more.

“Oh, I can be terribly patient,” Loki warned, his voice a low rumble now, in the inventor’s ear. His other hand, still stroking Tony’s cock, let him go, and instead lightly dragged just his fingers over him, as though memorizing the feel of him, far too gentle.

The teasing was hotter than the mad human had honestly expected, already starting to pant as his nerves were afire with the need for more friction, and got only hints of what he really wanted, enough to tantalize, but never relieve. “F-fuck, Loki.”

“Not yet,” the trickster taunted, but rewarded him with a third finger, but no increase in pace or pressure. Once Tony began to writhe a bit, he rewarded further by taking him properly in hand again, making the inventor’s hips jerk at the sudden increase in sensation, however slow and still-not-tight-enough it was.

“L-loki, get on with it, f’ fuck’s sake.”

“Beg me, and I might consider.”

The inventor moaned shamelessly when one stroke along is prostate, hard and forceful, sent a white-hot spike of pleasure through him, then whined when the pace returned to how it was before, now all the more maddening for having had a taste of more. He tried to direct the pace, but Loki only seized his hip hard in one hand, leaving his cock without any sensation and giving him limited ability to push back against those teasing fingers. “P-please, holy fuck.”

“You want more?”

“Fuck yes, I do.”

“Tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me like you know you own me,” he said, voice unsteady, but with a wicked grin audible in his tone, making it clear he knew how to push Loki’s buttons, and planned to do so shamelessly.

Mouth suddenly dry, Loki gripped the inventor’s hip a bit harder, and nipped at the back of his neck sharply. “More.”

“Can I tattoo a Stark Industries logo on your hip?”

The trickster didn’t pause what he was doing but there was a thoughtfulness to the brief quiet before he responded, “You’d allow any part of me to belong to your shareholders?”

Tony hissed. “Retracted, damn. ‘Property of Tony Stark’ maybe?”

“I’ll consider,” Loki said, retracting his fingers.

With a momentary noise akin to a regretful keen at the loss, the inventor then stiffened, in some ways more than others, particularly where he had already been pretty stiff already. “Wait, seriously?” his tone was slightly awestruck, and he jumped with a yelp at a sudden sharp slap of the god’s hand against his ass, then groaned deeply as Loki’s cock slowly pressed into him, far too slowly, but still far better than fingers alone, stretching him further and making him feel used, especially as the god tangled fingers in his hair and gently used the grip to pull his head back and drop an almost delicate kiss to the side of his exposed throat.
“I would have one of my favorite circular seals drawn on your chest,” Loki purred, soft and gentle, as he pulled slowly back, barely able to keep Tony’s hips still, and even then only by pinning them against the bar with his hand, instead of simply holding them in place. “It would be one of possession, one marking you mine, incorporating my name and a little of my blood, to link my magic to you, and give you access to it should you ever need it, no matter where you may be. I want it right were your arc reactor used to be, the same size.”

Tony shuddered, both at the words and their meanings, the darkly possessive rumble of Loki’s voice, and how insane he was slowly being driven by Loki’s utterly unhurried thrusts, leaving him trying and failing to thrash free enough of the trickster’s imprisoning grip to do it himself and take what he wanted and needed, hard enough to knock the breath out of both of them, but Loki held him in place as much as the remains of his pride and a twisted curiosity that wondered just how close he could get, with barely any real action: just Loki’s words, and the lightest possible teasing, and his own desperation to lead him.

It was, admittedly, getting him pretty amped up.

“P-please, Loki, please, fuck me, please,” he panted. “Let me go, at least, please, I need more.”

“If I let you go?” the trickster inquired.

“I’ll fuck myself back against you,” he said, brutally honest.

Loki could picture it: holding the inventor’s hands pinned where they gripped the counter, standing still and letting Tony work himself to completion, increasingly desperate for more force and throwing himself back harder until he begged Loki to make it even harder. Next time. He made a thoughtful, hungry sound at the thought, but only returned one hand to Tony’s cock, making the inventor inhale sharply, then hiss it out unsteadily when it was the same slow pace, and even that too-gentle touch was almost enough to set him off, at this point, his breathing quickening further.

“You sound close, Tony, but I’ve still barely begun,” Loki mused airily. “Are you so easily undone?”

“N-n-no,” the inventor lied, still struggling, but increasingly weakly as the slow drag along his prostate and the light touches on his cock began to take their toll, making muscles in his thighs and lower abdomen spasm slightly in anticipation. “Maybe,” he breathed, leaning further over the bar counter as a low moan escaped him.

“I think you could come like this.”

“Loki...”

“Oh yes, do so while saying my name. I want to hear how much you like it.”

“L-like isn’t the word, please just speed up just a little,” he moaned, clenching slightly around Loki’s length in attempt to provoke him, but the god only slowed to a stop and hissed until he stopped, then began again, just as leisurely as before, taking his sweet time as Tony’s entire body began to tremble. His hand in Tony’s hair stroked down his back slowly, then.

“Come for me, Tony,” Loki demanded, voice low and commanding, as he slapped the inventor’s ass again, earning a startled moan. Intrigued, he massaged the reddened skin and murmured, “You want more of that?”

Tony had maybe, once or twice, let a few dominatrixes do that, and even Pepper on a few very special and memorable occasions, and was aware that it was a kink that he possessed, but the idea of
Loki spanking him, and the feel of those too-gentle fingers that should be on his cock lightly petting his ass in unspoken promise, almost set him off just on principle. The strangled sound he made in response was apparently reply enough, because there was a hand around his cock again, still just teasing, and Loki had stopped his thrusts, just pushed in deep as he could and hissed in Tony’s ear, “You want me to take you apart with the delicate application of pain until you don’t feel the hurt anymore, and can barely think for the pleasure, in such a haze you follow orders without even thinking to disobey, you’re so eager?”

Tony whimpered.

“Oh, Tony, how much more perfect can you be for me?”

At that, the inventor came hard, gasping and shaking with it, then making a sound like pain as Loki’s hand suddenly tightened and sped up the pace, and the god’s hold on his hip shifted for better leverage as Loki began to pound into him slow but hard, drawing out the force and pressure of each thrust down and forward across the inventor’s prostate until he saw stars and realized the loud moaning sounds were coming from himself.

“You do so love pushing your limits,” the trickster huffed in his ear, sounding wickedly pleased. “I think I see why. You’re marvelous like this. You’re such a gorgeous wreck, and you’re all mine.”

“Yeah,” Tony managed to choke out. “You’re so good like this, Loki, f-fuck how’d’you-” he cut off with a sharp cry as the god bit his shoulder and spread the inventor’s legs a bit further apart to get still deeper with each thrust. “We’re getting those tattoos, both, yes, I’m yours and you’d better stay mine,” escaped his lips all at once, and he was rewarded with a high, almost inhuman noise between whine and growl from the god, felt the off-tempo jerk of Loki’s hips and knew the trickster was close to losing it altogether.

“Tony.” He sucked in a breath at the feel of the inventor tightening deliberately around him again, which slowed him not at all. “Oh, you are perfection,” he moaned, and bit at Tony’s neck again, stroking him still harder until he felt the first shudders of Tony coming again in his hand, and let himself go as well, almost sobbing into it as it rolled out through his entire body.

Leaning heavily on the bar, they both breathed heavily for a few moments, after Loki casually cast the usual cleaning spell.

“You’re evil,” Tony said.

“You love it.”

“I do.”

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After two days in which Pepper dragged Tony out of the tower for a couple of international business deals (teleportation was never more convenient) and Loki spent long hours talking with Tarja and her pupils about the changes to the nine realms since the ice, Loki had to leave earth with them for a few days, to Alfheim and Jotunnheim.

Rhodey appeared just a few hours after he left, like he knew.
“I did. I asked JARVIS to let me know when you weren’t busy with anything vital, or getting busy with any deities.” He made a face even as Tony handed him a drink and sat down, and at the inventor’s questioning look he explained, “He decided to inform me your sexuality has become monotheistic?”

Tony laughed for almost ten minutes straight thereafter.

His old friend sat on the only section of the couch not occupied by the sprawl of belly-laughing mad genius and waited it out.

“Aha, haha, haaaa, thank you, JARVIS,” he sighed, once done.

“I hardly know what you mean, sir,” the AI responded, with sarcastic dignity.

“I don’t know which of you is more ridiculous, some days,” Rhodey mused, but with affection in his tone for both of them.

“I cannot even begin to aspire to Tony’s degree of ridiculousness.”

The soldier nodded solemnly. “Admittedly difficult, but you might just manage it one day. Don’t doubt yourself.”

“Now who’s ridiculous?” Tony crooned.

“I do enjoy your pep-talks, uncle Rhodey,” JARVIS said innocently.

The soldier choked on his drink while his friend sniggered helplessly, despite all attempts to hold it back. “Okay, you got me.”

“I do try my best.”

“You’ve gotten more social, I’ve noticed,” Rhodey told the AI.

“I have been speaking more with Fenrir, after his coffee dates. I have become more accustomed to being more conversationally engaging, I suppose, as a result,” JARVIS explained. “Though at present, I do have other matters to attend to in the tower, and conversations take up a surprising amount of my focus compared to other activities; I’ll be silent, now, but do call if you require anything.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Tony dismissed.


“He’s like any person. He changes over time.”

“Yeah... I’m not used to it with most humans, either, to be fair.”

Tony chuckled, at that.

“You’re looking better.”

“Hm?” The inventor looked at him, then sat up and reached for his own drink where it rested on the nearby coffee table.

“Since the war, you’ve been a little out of sorts.”
“Well, shit did kind of keep happening. A lot.”

“You know what I mean, man,” Rhodey muttered. “And we all thought he’d had you assassinated, for a while there. I was spending my spare time trying to figure out strategies to dismember a god.”

“I did tell you it wasn’t him, pretty soon after,” Tony reminded.

“You were kinda… obviously compromised?”

The inventor shot him a glare.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

A long pause followed.

Rhodey grinned. “That’s what I thought.”

Another long pause followed.

“Also, what exactly did you dose me with, since it’s clearly not Extremis?”

“Extremis is actually way more labor-intensive to stabilize than Dr. Erskine’s serum, I’ve discovered,” Tony responded blandly.

“The… the one they gave Captain America?”

“Well, you did go as the ‘Iron Patriot’ for a while, there.”

“That’s not actually an answer.”

“Yeah. I altered it a little so I didn’t have to encase you in a sarcophagus and blast you with ‘vita-rays’ by means of a bit of extremely clever nanotech in your coffee, but yeah. You can expect the lasting benefits of resisting illness, recuperating very fast from injury, and the ability to choose when you want to die,” Tony offered, with a shrug. “If you really want, I can come up with an anti-serum that I’ll destroy in its entirety, every shred of evidence and data related to its existence, after applying it to you. Any time. You just ask me, and you can go back to regular humanity instead of super-humanity.”

They sat in quiet for a long few minutes, draining their drinks as the soldier thought it all over.

“I’ll let you know if I do,” he said quietly. “And I’ll hold you to that.”

“Good,” Tony said.

“Pepper?”

“Interested in the idea. Likes it better than Extremis, since it’s less like slipping into an old almost-addiction. I plan to offer it to her tomorrow after lunch.”

“Good.”

“I hope so,” Tony said. “She’d notice something wrong with her coffee after the first sip and never finish the dose if I had to be sneaky with her.”

Rhodey kicked at his shin half-heartedly.
The inventor only chuckled.

~

Pepper took one look at him and frowned. “What are you up to?”

“I was... going to save it for after lunch.”

“So nothing major, but you still look nervous like you’re dancing around an omelette,” she observed.

“It’s... a good thing. Probably.”

“You sound unsure.”

“It depends on whether you say yes?” he tried.

“If I didn’t know you were surprisingly devoted to a god of chaos, I’d wonder if you’re about to propose, and I’d have to slap you,” she deadpanned. Then the CEO’s eyes narrowed as she took in his slightly pleading look. “Oh. Different proposal.”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“It can be unmade, too?”

“I’m not keeping anything that unmake it around, but I’ve got the formula here.” He tapped the side of his head. “It’s not safe anywhere else. This is Cap’s serum, we’re talking about. Look what pursuit of that has done to so many other people so far,” he explained gravely. “But yes, it can be undone.”

“Side effects?”

“You’ve... seen the patriotic blond with the shield around Avengers tower, right?”

“I don’t have the build for those biceps.”

“Look, I already dosed Rhodey, and he didn’t bulk up like that. That was a... unique thing with him, and Dr. Erskine and just what he’s really like deep down, the earnest bastard,” Tony sighed.

“You... already dosed him?”

“I might have slipped it into his coffee.”

“You are such an ass sometimes, Tony,” she sighed.

“Is that a ‘no’?”

“No.”

“So... it’s a yes?”

“No.”

He continued to stare at her sadly until she sighed at him.
“This is yes: ...” She paused. “Yes.”

“Thank you,” Tony sighed, raising his glass. “Cheers.”

She raised hers in turn, too, clinking it against his lightly. “This makes you a bit sentimental, you know.”

“Maybe that’s not a terrible thing.”

“You really are in love,” Pepper teased.

“Shaddup,” he muttered, but didn’t bother denying the truth.

~~

Loki appeared again two days later than planned, covered in blood and with his armor almost falling apart. He collapsed quietly on the living-room tile in the penthouse, and drifted in and out of consciousness as JARVIS contacted Tony down in his lab.

The trickster was adrift in pain and dizziness from blood loss when he distantly became aware of a voice talking near him. It took him a while to focus his eyes enough to make out the inventor’s face, but the sight was enough to force Loki’s thoughts into enough order to try and offer some explanation. “I may have accidentally caused a civil war,” he rasped, and then passed out.

He awoke again an hour later with a sharp gasp and immediately groaned in pain, barely stifling a scream as he gripped hard at the edges of the metal operating table under him.

“Yeah, I used up a lot to fix your ribs including the one piercing your lung, then de-collapse that lung, get the bleeding to stop and make up a little for your blood loss, so the options were fixing the injuries in your skull that were making your brain swell, or pain-killing spells, since I’m running too low to manage both,” Tony panted. “You’re welcome, and by the way: you’re an idiot.”

“I am regretting a number of things at present,” the trickster choked out, all too aware of the searing burn of regenerating tissues throughout his skull. It seemed to last hours until it suddenly stopped and his whole form went limp, panting raggedly as the inventor’s hands left his temples to rest on either side of his head, and Tony leaned over him so they were eye to eye, albeit looking at one another upside-down.

“That was a little terrifying to watch, actually,” Dr. Banner commented from the corner. “Also I want to know how the fuck it works.”

“Later. Thanks again for the consult, Bruce. I wouldn’t have known where to start without you.”

“No problem. I’ll just uh... go then?”

Tony looked up at him, a little chagrinned and apologetic. “I’ll catch you up on magic and physics tomorrow after dinner, if you’re available.”

“Yeah. See you then.”

The inventor stared back down at Loki with an unimpressed look. “What’d you do and why were you almost dead?”
“I teleported here as soon as I realized that any further fighting would leave me without enough power to return to you,” the trickster groaned. “I was so certain I could handle only twenty of them, but how was I to know they had three half-competent mages with more power than brains, but a knack for creativity in their more violent uses of ice to rival some of your machines? It was far too much effort to kill just them, and then there were still seventeen more of the bastards.”

“You’re not helping your case. Well, the fact you came back when you did does help, a bit, but you’re lucky I’m cynical enough to have learned enough healing magic to cope with severe physical trauma. There was no way I could’ve gotten in touch with anyone else capable of getting Hlín or Frigga down here.”

“I am sorry. I underestimated how much the transport, in that state, drained me. I should have been able to at least halt my own bleeding.”

Tony huffed a sigh at him. “C’mon. Get up. You’re explaining the civil war weirdness to me over shawarma.”

~~

Loki explained that there were a few large family clans who had already blamed Laufey’s failings as a king for Asgard’s attack via the bi-frost; although not exactly for the same reasons Tony privately did. They had all suffered heavy losses from the event, and were deeply unhappy with Býleistr’s decision (which, Loki had only recently learned, was actually from a vote within the remainder of their kin and extended clan of friends and advisors to the young king, who acted sort of as his cabinet) to offer Loki the political position he now held. They were making attempts to overthrow Býleistr as a result, but Loki was now their preferred target for outright assassination.

“It’s a bit of a mess, honestly,” Loki concluded.

Tony nodded, thoughtful. “What sort of things are they doing?”

“I stopped them from setting fire to a half-restored forest, actually. I... used to dream of the older forests, so that particularly petty attack rather got on my nerves. More usually, they stick to ambushes and raids on the Jotunns they’re against, rather than targeting the gardeners. Sorry, ‘earth-mages’.”

“Why do they annoy you so much?”

“They’re the most maddeningly peaceful, content and sincerely well-meaning lot of mages that don’t go around healing people with a touch,” the trickster muttered. “It’s like trying to talk to someone who is unbearably chipper at an ungodly early morning hour, prolonged throughout the whole of their lifetime.”

Tony chuckled under his breath. “Seriously, that’s it?”

“Ask one of them what they like so much about trees someday. Listening to them go on about nature and harmony and life and how wonderful it all is, is like trying to drink straight—oh... what is that stuff Thor soaks his breakfasts in lately—maple syrup?”

“You... tried to drink it?”

“No, but in an effort to dissuade him from his disturbing habit of incorporating it into any breakfast
he consumes, I might have dared him to make the attempt. He got further in the endeavor than Clint did; although the archer did make a valiant effort.”

Tony set down his water glass loudly. “Tell me there is footage saved.”

“I was saving it for a special occasion. Or when I might want you be slightly less angry with me,” Loki admitted, shooting him a warm look.

Tingling with that, a little, the inventor sighed. “I’m not that mad at you. I’m a little mad you did the almost-dying thing, again, but mostly I kind of want to hunt down a few would-be revolutionaries and make them regret it,” Tony mused. “Do you think we could come up with an equivalent to the anti-Extremis serum, but for removing the icy aspect of a Jotunn’s nature, and weaponize it?”

The trickster stared at him for a long moment. “They would be too miserable to keep fighting. Spring won’t return properly until the forests return and we reach the slightly sunnier part of their year within about a month’s time,” he murmured. “That’s so under-handed.”

“I know. It’ll get them off your back in a hurry, though,” the inventor assured.

Loki murmured, “I love it.”

Tony grinned widely. “I think we can come up with something.”

“I have a few ideas.” He was still staring a bit, unblinking. “You never cease to astonish me, do you know that?”

“I don’t plan to stop.”

“Please never do.”

“I won’t if you won’t,” Tony challenged.

“Deal.”

~~

The pair had been conducting mad science for a few days when they reached a particular dead end Tony had sort of dreaded. “I have an employee who can help with this,” he said. “But I should probably explain something first.”

So he did, very reluctantly, fess up to the incident with Dr. Sylvia Young.

Loki seemed faintly amused by it, but overall took it fairly well.

Tony really shouldn’t have been surprised that somehow, Loki knew precisely when to pin him up against a work table and begin rendering him senseless quickly enough that he genuinely forgot they were expecting any company, to time it so that Dr. Young walked in just as Loki had a hand tangled in his hair pulling his head back and his mouth descending to take swift advantage of Tony’s exposed throat.

For a few very long seconds after the door had opened, Dr. Young stood with one foot over the threshold, staring. Tony was only vaguely aware of either the door opening, or anyone else being
present, because of the things the trickster’s lips, teeth and tongue were doing to the most sensitive spots along his neck and throat, until she loudly cleared her throat, at which point reality came crashing back down around his ears and he felt his skin grow warmer, and realized that Loki had done the nigh-impossible yet again; he had gotten Tony Stark to blush. It was ridiculous in every possible way. “You complete bastard, you did this on purpose,” he snapped.

Loki grinned against his neck. “Maybe.”

“Give us few minutes, please, Doc?” Tony called, aiming for sounding casual and a little sheepish, but also annoyed. He succeeded at two out of the three, with not enough actual annoyance coming through.

She stood there for a moment and the inventor realized Loki had made eye contact with her and watched the trickster drag his teeth along his lower lip in the seriously distracting way that was not meant for sharing with other Stark Industries personnel and it struck a stinging, heated chord in Tony’s head.

“Make it fifteen,” he said, a little sharply.

Loki met his eye then, his expression one of beatific innocence.

“Or twenty.”

“Right,” she said, sounding flustered, and stepped back out, closing the door as quietly as she could.

It still went click as JARVIS politely locked it.

The inventor had felt occasional annoyed jealousy when it came to Pepper, and usually it had all been in his head, and this was also all in his head, he knew that. He knew Loki wasn’t really that interested in Dr. Young, but he still felt a deep desire to enforce a few things.

“Don’t play me like that,” he said coldly. “That look is mine.”

“Pardon?” Loki asked, a little caught off guard.

“That look, when you’re assessing whether to pounce or not and you drag your teeth-” He leaned in, nipping the trickster’s lower lip sharply. “-across-” He nipped again and dragged a little this time, tugging. “-this-” He let go with a light snap of his teeth clicking shut just after Loki’s lip slipped free. “-lip. And it turns me on, every time, and I don’t want to share that. You knew she was enjoying the show, but there’s no need to pretend to invite her. I’m not sharing you.”

The trickster managed to make a low, hungry noise when he opened his mouth to respond to that, then gave up on verbal communication altogether and dropped to his knees abruptly.

A bit surprised, but by no means complaining, Tony soon gripped the edge of the work table for dear life as the trickster sucked him down without much warning, before he’d even fully pulled down Tony’s jeans. Gasping and bucking his hips once helplessly at the way he felt so utterly devoured and desired, just from the eagerness Loki showed, the reverence in him, from the blissful humming at the back of his throat to the masterful swirling of his tongue, to the almost-overwhelming pressure as the god swallowed around him, more than once. The inventor couldn’t last long against that, and against how clearly Loki was enjoying himself as well, unable to resist taking himself in hand as he worked, heavy eyelids lifting enough to meet Tony’s eye as he swallowed again.

Not long after that, Tony came hard down his throat with a shuddering moan, and controlled his fall enough to push Loki back onto the floor and shove the trickster’s hands out of the way so he could
Loki writhed and hissed possessive filth in a wrecked whisper as he fucked up into the inventor’s mouth and Tony only gripped his ass harder, urging him along until at last he came with a low cry. He stayed there a minute or so, breathing hard, as Tony cleaned them up with one spell, then returned their various articles of clothing to their proper places about each of their persons, and unrumpled them, with another.

“Magic is so ridiculously convenient it’s kind of unfair,” he mused.

The trickster laughed, still sounding a little breathless. “Occasionally, yes.”

“JARVIS?”

“Twelve minutes, sir.”

“Good, I don’t have to move for at least five then,” Tony muttered, and slumped, letting his face settle against Loki’s chest, his forearms resting along either side of the god’s ribcage. He sighed a little contently when the trickster carded a hand through his hair, just idly scratching a little at his scalp. “I mean it about the look.”

“Mmm, keep reminding me of that and she will walk in to find you having me here on the floor,” Loki purred, like a deadly sweet promise.

For a full minute, Tony debated the pros and cons. “Maybe next time.”

The trickster paused. “Are you serious?”

“We’ll probably forget, actually, but at the moment?” Tony lifted his head, considering. “Strong maybe.”

“You really are an exhibitionist, aren’t you?”

“Only a little. I’m mostly just not shy and I think you’d get off on it more than you even realize, given what I’d probably say to you.”

Loki dragged his teeth across his lower lip slowly, obviously not aware he was even doing it, this time.

“Yeah, that look. Don’t even fake that for other people, please.”

The trickster actually got a bit of color across his cheekbones. “Tony,” he all but groaned. “I’m serious.”

“I can tell. I can help you.”

Loki shot him a suspicious look.

“Not that way.”

“I gathered, but I almost hesitate to ask what you consider the alternative.”

“Dr. Jane Foster.”

The thought of the woman who was his brother’s current sexual and romantic partner made him of course think of Thor, and his state of arousal caused sex to be also on his mind, and the result of the
two trains of thought crashing into each other was the sudden loss of any sexual interest, replaced by a vague disgust. “Ugh. Never do that again.”

“Hey, it worked.”

“Never. Again.”

“Fine, but we have to stand up.”

“Must we?”

“Come on. We have a weapon to build.” He pushed himself up reluctantly and got to his feet again. Proffering a hand, which Loki accepted, he pulled the trickster to his feet as well. The door unlocked audibly, and a few moments later it opened a fraction.

“Are you two quite done?” she asked, sounding amused.

“For the time being,” Loki responded.

“Come on in, Dr. Young,” Tony added, rolling his eyes.

Sylvia opened the door fully again, blushing slightly as she looked at them and clearing her throat. “So, you’re Loki? Fenrir’s father?”

The god’s eyebrows raised, and he seemed to recall Tony mentioning this woman in the context of Fenrir’s bakery façade continuing beyond its original planned duration, and he smiled a bit more warmly. “Yes I am.”

“He’s brilliant,” she said, closing the door behind her and heading toward them. “And wow, he really looks a bit like you, too, doesn’t he?”

“He looks as he chooses to look. I don’t even pretend I’m not flattered by his choices, on occasion,” Loki admitted.

Sylvia smiled more sincerely then, too. “He explained to me, yes. It’s, well, kind of an honor to meet you,” she extended a hand almost shyly.

The god accepted the handshake gracefully. “Thank you. The honor will be all mine, surely, if you can aid us with our particular puzzle.”

“Yes, Tony sent me some of the work. I’m surprised you’re bringing me in on Extremis like this; I know you’re very guarded about it.”

“With good reason.” Tony lifted a hand and let a bit of heat shine through it, with a bit of effort, though it had gotten still tamer that before, after eating the apple. “I sort of lied about removing it.”

She frowned at him a little, but nodded. “It doesn’t look very strong.”

“There’s a lot of reasons for that. Very complicated,” Tony said, “but I’m probably going to have to explain all of them, among a number of other things, for any of what we’re doing to make sense.”

“You would trust me with all this?” she asked lightly.

“I trust you, at present, have no ill intent against my son, despite all he is capable of, and how much he could be exploited by many on earth if they had sufficient power and the element of surprise on their side sufficient to capture him,” Loki said softly. “I believe we may trust you with this for the same reasons. Am I wrong?” He looked at her very intently.
“Yes,” she said, soft and calm, and unhesitant. “I’m just surprised that you actually are.”

The trickster smiled faintly. “As am I. So, where shall we start?” He looked to Tony. “Hydra or Muspellheim?”

“Ooh, tough choice,” Tony mused. “I’m gonna go with Muspellheim and Pepper.”

“You just enjoy that footage of Pepper.”


And so they began, explaining the convoluted history of Extremis’ development before Maya Hansen even got to it, Loki summoning a rather frightfully vivid (even miniaturized to fit the height of the lab’s ceiling as it was) illusion of Surtur, then discussing the human brain and use of magic and the way it tangled with some aspects of Dr. Hansen’s final version of the serum, the parallels and differences in elemental powers of Jotunns, basic Jotunn physiology and a simplified history of Jotunheim and Nifelheim, a brief run-down of Loki’s convoluted family history, and finally how far they had gotten in constructing an equivalent serum to the Extremis-unmaking one Loki had bastardized to such a degree it could probably cripple or entirely remove a fire-Jotunn’s elemental powers… except for ice instead of fire.

Dr. Young absorbed all of it asking various practical questions, her mind visibly whirring along a few different tracks at once as she formulated a few ideas and cross-referenced between them. She did ask Loki hesitantly about ice-Jotunn elemental powers and he abruptly chilled in response, causing her to stagger slightly, then step closer, curious, asking questions about the biological mechanisms behind the color-changes, and just how cold he could get, which hadn’t apparently occurred to Loki to test before. In testing it, he tried to keep most of the cold aimed inward, but the room’s temperature did still drop sharply though less than if he had been emotionally distraught, Tony noted.

The answer to the question was “It hurts sharply behind my eyes when I try to force it lower than this; I could, but I really don’t want to,” once his core body temperature was at about -175ºC.

“This is so cool,” Dr. Young murmured.

“Well, obviously,” Tony deadpanned.

She swatted at him, which he side-stepped easily, striding up to Loki as though he didn’t feel the air temperature drop to -50º once he got within two feet of him. “Need a hand warming up, sweetheart?” He raised both hands, letting a little heat through visibly.

“That might severely burn me at present, actually,” Loki said, sounding a little disoriented. “This was a more tiring exercise than I expected.” He swayed a little as his temperature rose, according to JARVIS, very rapidly once he managed to warm up over -102ºC, almost dangerously so.

“Take it easy, Loke,” Tony said, reaching out to tug at his sleeve.

“I’m a bit dizzy,” he said.

“I think you tried to thaw too fast,” the inventor said. “Slow it down?”

“I’m having trouble doing so.” He looked grateful when the inventor pushed him toward a nearby bench and steered him into sitting on it, though the metal creaked a bit at the abrupt temperature change.
“Focus on keeping your head cooler than the rest of you; your brain is still more delicate tissue than the rest,” Dr. Young said seriously.

Loki shut his eyes and changed his focus from the region around his sternum to the space between his ears, and his breathing soon evened out. “That’s better, yes.”

Tony took hold of his hands a few minutes later, rubbing warmth in very slowly, when the trickster was closer to his more usual, and stable degree of cold, and made a low and appreciative sound at the sensation.

“That level of heat doesn’t burn you?” Dr. Young inquired, still watching the real-time temperature scans.

“No more so than a very hot bath might to a human,” Loki responded, his eyes shut. He made a small noise when Tony’s hands left him, then hissed appreciatively when, a little hotter to better penetrate the thin black t-shirt the trickster wore, Tony began to massage his shoulders, rough at first, then smoother, strong fingers working the tension out of his muscles along with the heat, so Loki’s hiss soon turned into a low moan. “You are not allowed to stop that,” he said, with feeling, then groaned slightly as the engineer’s thumbs began working on a few particularly stubborn knots near the base of his neck.

“Good?” the inventor asked.

The pleased hum Loki gave in response, his head drooping forward, was answer enough to that.

“The bath comparison got me thinking.”

“Yes, you’re brilliant, I adore you,” the god muttered distantly. “This is very brilliant. You should do this often.”

Tony chuckled, then glanced up at Dr. Young and found her biting her lip and holding her camera phone, looking conflicted and a little guilty when she saw him glance at the phone knowingly. “Sorry,” he said. “Unexpected breakthrough in massage science. Totally classified.”

“Right.” She re-pocketed her phone.

“I thank you for resisting the urge to photograph,” Loki added, not even lifting his head, leaning back a little into the inventor’s touch. He was thawed by that point, skin pale and eyes green when he did deign to glance up at her through his hair.

Something like attraction flickered in her expression, but she dismissed it easily in favor of a calm professional air. “I got a lot of data to work through here. I can see why you’ve run into trouble, working with the starting blueprint you have. All the enzymes will need to be cold-tested, and reworked, probably using a few examples from fish and amphibians around here on earth; although any fauna you know of, Loki, that survive in colder conditions than earth offers would be an immense help.”

“There are some, in Nifelheim native there, though most creatures were brought from elsewhere in the nine realms. The others are... volatile,” he said. “I can bring you a specimen if you would like, but keeping it alive would be a rather vast undertaking, and its body will need to be kept very cold if you wish it to even withstand dissection long enough for you to glean much from it.”

“I just need to know what it’s made of and if it might be useful, so dead is fine.”

“This is part of why I find a lot of biologists just a little creepy,” Tony muttered.
“Oh come now, Tony, this is fascinating,” Sylvia shot back.

“I’m not keen on dissecting animals.”

“You’re not nearly so squeamish with machines,” she challenged.

“Machines aren’t as squishy and full of bacteria,” Tony countered.

“Loki, your thoughts?” the bioengineer inquired.

“He doesn’t flinch from gore, when it comes down to it, but having gutted as many fresh kills as I have in my long life, I can understand not exactly reveling in the taking apart of animal flesh. It’s not exactly my favorite pastime; although it can be intriguing to me, as a shapeshifter, to study the anatomy of completely unfamiliar species if they are sufficiently extraordinary to me.”

Dr. Young’s eyes lit up a bit. “Shape-shifter?”

Loki lifted his head and smiled.

Tony felt the very strange sensation under his hands of Loki’s clothing vanishing and smooth skin growing a sudden coat of coarse fur, just before Loki, in a smaller version of his wolf-shape than Tony had previously seen, more on par with Fenrir’s usual one, crossed the room in one stride and stood with his muzzle only two feet from Sylvia’s wide-eyed face.

“Yes,” the trickster rumbled. “I am.”

“Oh my god,” she said quietly. “I have to know how the hell you do that. That’s just—how do—how do you have your own brain in there? Does it change shape with your skull? What are the size limitations for the change? If you change into something smaller, how small is possible before you loose some higher brain functions? Is it limited to mammals since you appear to be one most of the time? How do you even begin to learn how to transform your internal organs as part of this? How-”

“Breathe, Sylvia,” Tony reminded her gently, walking up to stand at Loki’s right foreleg. “Breathe in.”

She obeyed, biting her lips to keep from exploding with more questions.

“And out,” the inventor said gently.

Exhaling, she said, “If you’re bluffing me with some illusion because you’re a mage and felt like it, I’m going to be so annoyed.”

“It’s not illusion, this time,” Loki assured. He then became an entire unkindness of ravens, a few of them settling on her shoulders, the others on the floor and table around her. “It can,” one said. “Occasionally,” said another. “Be very complicated,” said all the rest. Then they flew together and Loki again stood before her in jeans and a t-shirt, smirking a bit smugly. “That is one that’s only possible with a good deal of aid by magic.”

“Actually there were a little over twenty of you, and you’re heavier than most ravens, which average a bit under three pounds, so I’m not sure how you manage to fly so many of them with such precision, and oh my god I need to sit down and try to remember how physics works for a second,” she said very quickly, and slowly sat down on the nearest workbench, making a faint noise at how cold it felt under her hands but still remaining seated nevertheless. “What the fuck just happened?”

Tony strode over and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I know exactly how you feel. Welcome to the
weird world where magic is actually a real thing.”

“I am deeply disturbed,” she said.

Loki chuckled a little. “I assure you, it only gets stranger from here.”

“Really?” the bioengineer looked at him like a teenager who has just discovered how much they really like black metal, who has found a guru with vast knowledge about the genre willing to share both its history and their album collection.

“I like you,” the trickster said after a moment of appraising her.

“Thanks. You’re kind of fascinating and terrifying all at once,” she responded.

“Thank you.”

“But where does all your mass go?” she asked, with some desperation. When Loki only smirked and said nothing, she turned her questioning eyes on Tony.

“Don’t look at me. I’m new at the magic gig, and most of what I know about shape-shifting and how he does it, and what the limits are, is all pretty vague. And I have absolutely no idea where Fenrir keeps all his, considering the satellite imagery I caught of him and that dragon.”

“Show me this,” Sylvia demanded.

She was thoroughly distracted and horrified-yet-fascinated by the footage of Fenrir in what Loki referred to as his natural state and further explained that it was the form his son had taken when he decided to pursue the path of gaining a soul, and thus technically the one he was “born” into.

“All shape-shifters have the most power and control in the form they were born to. Shape-shifting in order to fight a creature larger and stronger than ourselves is possible, but very taxing, particularly if one chooses a form that isn’t very familiar. Learning new shapes and perfecting control of them to the point that they feel natural and truly like they belong to us, can take years to fully perfect. I myself have only a dozen shapes that I’ve taken with sufficient regularity to be comfortable in them, and I’ve lived for a bit over two millennia, roughly speaking.”

“One thousand nine-hundred and forty-one, actually,” Tony muttered. “JARVIS and I finished the calculations on the time-shift between all nine realms and fit them to the least-contradicted bits of your timeline we’ve gathered from you and Thor both.”

Loki shot him a sly smirk. “Fine. Only over two millennia in the sense of time passed on earth.”

“You knew, didn’t you?” the inventor muttered.

“Forty-two,” the god corrected lightly.

“I was damn close, though.”

“You were.”

“Oh god is that thing burning from the inside?” Sylvia exclaimed suddenly. “That’s so awesome.” Then it seemed to sink in. “Dragons are a real thing. I think my inner child just exploded with joy.”

“Biologists and dragons, man,” Tony sighed. “JARVIS, play the footage from Loki vs. Dragon for her, she’ll love it.”
“Not that, please,” Loki groaned.

“Why not? You’re a badass, in that fight.”

“I was trying to avoid slaying it because I knew it might be useful,” the trickster muttered. “I hate fighting what I’m not allowed to kill; it’s so over-taxing.”

“Play it,” Sylvia insisted.

Loki sighed and subjected himself to watching, mostly because the bioengineer’s reactions and facial expressions were absolutely hilarious to him.

“I think you have a fan,” Tony muttered in his ear.

“She only wants me for my bodies,” he whispered back, and heard the inventor choke down a squawk of laughter not-quite-successfully.

“Shh, stop laughing, Tony, you’re interrupting the awesome,” Sylvia hissed.

“‘The awesome’?” Loki repeated, slightly mocking, but also a bit preening.

“If you think magic turns your physics on its head, Tony, let me reassure you it’s nothing compared to how much a mind-fuck this is to the entire field of biology,” she intoned gravely. “Fenrir does all this, too?” she asked lightly.

“Yes,” Loki admitted.

“Tony, I need a bigger lab than the current one I’ve got access to in R&D. Not like... big enough for even that dragon, you know, but just, one with a bit more space?” she asked, eyes still fixed on the screen. She stopped abruptly. “I... can’t think very clearly whenever you change into a dragon. It’s fucking mesmerizing how do you even conservation of mass this fuckery?”

Eventually, she left with a bunch of data to work over and process, and her head still in a bit of a whirl, half an hour later.

Not long after she left, Loki pulled the mad inventor into his lap where he still sat on his bench, and kissed him, pleasantly unhurried and languid, just enjoying being close and only a little outright dirty.

When they parted, Tony sighed in mixed fondness and exasperation.

“You’re leaving for Jotunnheim again?” he prompted.

The trickster offered a self-deprecating grin. “So I should stop leading with that?”

“Not actually complaining, or saying it won’t still work as a tactic.”

“How is it different from other occasions I kiss you?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“A hint of regret, in how careful you are not to let it actually distract you.”

Loki shook his head a little. “Sorry.”

“Still not a complaint,” Tony murmured, and kissed him briefly again. “When?”

“Tomorrow, morning.”

“So we have tonight.”
“We do.”

Tony nipped his bottom lip sharply. “Good.”

Chapter End Notes

*I did borrow the "Somebody Else's Problem field" from Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series. Because Tony would totally make one.
How to Explain Your New and Questionable Relationship With a Former Super-villain to Planet Earth

Chapter Summary

A brief look back on perspectives other than Tony and Loki's after Loki’s return to Avenger's tower, including Tony explaining some things. Also Thor and Asgard.

Plans change, politics is discussed, paparazzi get way more than they bargained for.

Also smut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day after Loki’s reappearance in Midgard with three additional guests...

Loki’s return to Avengers tower affected everyone rather differently.

“No, wait, please explain again?” Steve sighed.

“What part is confusing you, exactly?” Natasha asked, exasperated.

The super-soldier gestured toward the dining room, where Loki was holding court at their table, discussing his life story in low tones with three Jotunns who were all taller than him, one of whom had eyes green as his own and looked like she might be his cousin. According to Natasha, she was.

“This. Peacefully. Him not crazy?” he tried.

“Look, we all know he’s still crazy,” Clint cut in, from the end of the couch Natasha was laying on, her ankles across his lap. “He’s also kind of brilliant, though.”

“Which is why I don’t get why we don’t think he’s conning anyone here?” Steve added, with a little urgency.

“He’s really not,” Bruce muttered. “You haven’t seen them around each other, yet. They’re practically in honeymoon-mode, right now. It’s a little disturbing, actually.”

“But couldn’t he be faking it? Taking advantage-”

“Steve,” the super-spy cut in dryly, “he already showed his hand when he gave Tony that apple, and didn’t use it as leverage. Tony kept treating it like he was expecting something demanded in return, and Loki was hurt by it. He refused to make another deal and ended the call in a hurry. You know how Tony looks when real, visceral guilt hits him, how gutted and hollow his eyes get when he feels worthless because he’s caused pain where he never wanted to? That was how he looked, along with stunned, after that call. He hurt Loki, and knew it.”

“I still don’t know,” the super-soldier murmured.
If there’s anyone in this tower aside from Thor who knows how to spot the difference between Loki feigning hurt, and Loki genuinely wounded, Tony is it,” Bruce added. “He got up in Loki’s face while they were allies, wouldn’t let him run. We all saw how things changed between him and Thor, because of Tony. They’re still changed, or he would never have given Thor a stolen apple for Dr. Foster.”

“There is that,” Steve admitted. “Tony isn’t his family, though.”

“He is now,” Natasha said flatly. “That’s what the apple for Tony was about. Loki gives a shit about him, and couldn’t stand the idea of not having enough time to get what he ultimately wants from him.”

“What does he want, then?” Steve asked.

“Just me.”

They all startled a bit, at Tony’s sudden appearance behind the couch Clint and Natasha occupied.

“Well, all of me, admittedly, but I’m fine with that,” Tony added.

“You really need to stop teleporting in the tower,” the super-spy demanded.

“I decided I wanted in on the pow-wow, but thanks for offering to take the brunt of the diplomatic work,” the inventor said. “And also: fuck no, teleporting is still my favorite thing about being a mage aside from how fun hacking reality is, just in general. Now, Steve, you’re worried I’m being conned, right?”

“Y-yeah,” the super-soldier admitted.

“Nat, did you explain how I got him back here?”

“Not quite yet, no. I just mentioned it was your idea and you caused trouble in Asgard over it.”

“Oh goodie. This will be fun.” He stepped around the couch and sat cross-legged in the middle of the coffee table, facing all of the others on their various chairs and couch. “So. Natasha has a point about the Loki and pain thing. There’s pain he can’t fake, and pain he can. I’ve seen him try to fake the former, and it always comes out a little too soft. He gets brittle, and bitter, and sounds thoroughly like he hates himself even more than he hates whoever hurt him. I did that to him. I wouldn’t have been able, I don’t think, to believe he was actually sincere if that hadn’t happened, which is fucked up, but so am I, and so is he, and we’ve come to terms with that pretty well.”

“How, exactly?” Steve asked.

“I showed him how much I meant it, my own way, and a little bit his way: basically, the same tactics that got me the original alliance with him in the first place, but played out on Asgard’s turf. I went to Odin, pretended I didn’t have a damn clue why Loki gave me the apple, and suggested I thought it might be some sort of con. I managed to bargain with him, and in exchange for bringing him Loki, and helping find out the extent of Loki’s plans, I’d be a citizen of Asgard. Well, the thing is, Odin had fucked up, when he did what he did to Amora.”

“What’d he do?” Clint asked. “No one clarified to us, but Bruce said you’d figured it out. And you already told Nat?” He looked at her, and she nodded.

“Love spell,” Bruce said. “Imagine you’re in love with someone who never loves you back, and it twists you up a bit. You do and say horrible things to them. Eventually, you get over it, and get past
it. You don’t even want them anymore. Then someone twists up your heart and your brain and brings all of that back with the irrational fervor of an enchantment. We’ve all been under Amora’s spells before, if only a little, but even how she took over the Other Guy’s head... wasn’t like that. Odin was cruel, to do that.”

The others nodded silently, looking grim.

“I wasn’t happy about that, either. Amora did right by us, against Thanos. She didn’t even mess with Thor or Dr. Foster while she was our ally, or seem to have any more interest in doing so. It was fucked up, making her lose that. So I told Frigga what he’d done, and she found where Skurge was for me. Then I found Loki’s son Fenrir in a bakery shop, and had him take me to where Skurge was.”

“Wait... a bakery?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. Most of you haven’t met Fenrir, I guess. Usually he goes around looking like a wolf the size of a horse, sometimes he looks like a slightly-punk male model in a leather jacket with a fur-lined hood, but he also shape-shifted into a cute brunette girl named Cassie Ferris, got a job at a bakery, and arranged events to bring Jane there post-golden-apple by some pretty impressively subtle means. Fenrir was the one who arranged for the apple to get to me, and in exchange he got to roast and eat a Makluan dragon once Loki was done using him to release Surtur. With me so far?”

“Why was he still at the bakery?” Natasha asked.

“One of my R&D employees caught his eye. She goes to that bakery a lot. Oh, not romantically, don’t look at me like that. They’re like...” He gestured vaguely. “You know the two scientists on Phil’s team? Fitz and Simmons?”

“FitzSimmons,” Clint and Natasha corrected, in unison.

“Well... there’s two...” the inventor tried to justify.

“I get the gist,” Steve said.

“Right. So, Surtur. We already got the run-down on him from when just finding out Loki had released him caused Hlín and Thor to panic and run off after him. Big bad giant, lots of fire, powerful mage, etc.” Tony waved that off. “I got in contact with Hlín a bit, toward the end of the thaw of Jotunnheim... do I need to explain that?”

“Covered it, in explaining the guests,” Natasha answered.

“Thank you. So, that. Hlín was able to tell me when Surtur was dead-”

“Wait, I thought Odin couldn’t even destroy that guy?” Clint cut in.

“Odin didn’t think to wear out his fire in such a slow, drawn-out way until he barely had any power left and hadn’t slept in weeks, then transported him out into the middle of a frozen ocean and pissed him off one last time so he melted through the ice and sent himself to a watery grave, but not until he’d made the very ocean boil and gotten rid of most of the remaining sea-ice before succumbing to the cold and the pressure and lack of air,” Tony explained. “Loki then, uh, well he said he was a dragon at the time, and chewed through the guy’s neck to bring back his head as proof. I made sure Thor brought that with him to Asgard, after, but kinda wish I didn’t. It was disgusting.”

“This is why I think your boyfriend is a creep, still, Tony,” the archer deadpanned. “He chewed through a corpse’s neck, and you still make out with him?”
“You say that like he never cleans his teeth. I assure you, his mouth is a wonderful place,” the inventor assured.

“So Hlín told you when Surtur was dead,” Steve reminded loudly, to change the subject as soon as possible.

“Right! Which was good, because it was a close call, actually, getting Skurge to go after Amora in time. I didn’t want Thor telling him about what she did first. Loki might have really hurt her, and she didn’t deserve that.”

“She... stabbed you,” Clint said flatly. “Remember?”

“That wasn’t her,” Tony said gravely. “That was Odin.”

A bit chilled by the inventor’s tone, Clint merely nodded.

“I’d made Odin give me a connection to the spell he’d put on Amora, as part of our deal-brokering, and so I knew when she arrived in Jotunnheim. I told Odin, he gathered his soldiers, and we waited for her to get close to Loki. I didn’t actually tell them he was in range until he un-wove the spell Amora was under, and she was away from him, which I technically wasn’t supposed to do, but like hell was I gonna leave her like that. All the while, I was also telling Odin, ‘You know, this is actually a bad idea’ but he wouldn’t actually ask why, so I didn’t explain.” His grin was unpleasant. “Per our deal, I told them when and where to aim, and they brought Loki to Asgard. Odin incapacitated him with a sudden spell, and he was put in chains and dragged off to a cell.”

“But you had Frigga on your side,” Bruce mused. “And Thor, and Hlín...”

Tony nodded. “I also tried to tell Odin, yet again, that it was a bad idea to bring Loki to Asgard, and he got on me about letting Amora go. I used that as a way to get out of the citizenship gig, by persuading him that he didn’t want me as a subject, and also decided not to tell him all Loki’s plans, and so basically he has to uphold his word that I have the same access to Asgard and the golden apples as a citizen but am not under his rule, as long as I don’t share them or their secrets with anyone on earth.”

“And this is why the trickster god likes you,” Natasha muttered.

“Oh, I did so much better than that.” The inventor’s grin widened. “I called him out in the middle of the trial. Then Frigga called him out and almost made him collapse under the weight of his own epic fail. I made every charge he’d laid against Loki no longer applicable, explained Loki’s own diplomatic immunity now that Jotunnheim has given him a sovereign-but-not-actually-monarchial political position, and then unlocked all of Loki’s chains and his muzzle and loaned him enough magic to get us out of the palace despite anti-teleportation wards, and back home. I apologized for the phone thing, he confessed a few things, so did I, sex was had, until we got interrupted by Fenrir, and dragged to Jotunnheim. Now here we are.” He swirled ice-cubes around the bottom of his empty drinking glass. “So... Steve, do you see the moral of this story?”

“You... don’t think you’re being conned because you conned Odin?”

“I’m not being conned because I know how cons work, and I know Loki has nothing to win by faking this with me, and I know what he’s like when he’s fake, and when he’s not, thanks in large part to meeting his kids, actually. I know him better than I’ve known almost anyone else in my entire life and he has no reason to hurt me, because hurting me brings him pain he can’t prevent. Same for me, with him. That’s what this is, Steve. That’s why I don’t doubt that I’m not the only one in love in this equation, here. Okay?” He held the super-soldier’s gaze for a long moment.
Staring back, curious and confused at first, but sliding into understanding and acceptance soon enough, he half-smiled. “You’re happy with him. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... I’m happy for you, that you make each other happy.”

Tony smiled warmly, then. “Thanks.”

“Nat, do I still have all of my teeth?” Clint asked, and opened his mouth wide.

She leaned up slightly, under the pretense of checking. “Yes. No severe cavities I can see, either.”

“You keep that up, I’ll knock out a couple for you,” the inventor suggested.

The archer only laughed at him, and Natasha looked fairly amused too.

“What was Jotunnheim like?” Bruce asked.

“Severe storms and flooding. We went through the ruins of a city, and there are ice-mummified bodies all through some of the rubble that are horrifying, but there’s also over a thousand people who survived under the ice all this time, so...” Tony half-smiled. “I kinda want to see what happens, there. I really do.”

The others made thoughtful noises, at that, and glanced toward the dining room, where Loki was gesturing soothingly and Tarja said something vaguely threatening in a language none of the Avengers present recognized, pointing at him in an accusatory fashion. Loki responded in the same tongue, low and slightly droll. Tarja looked shocked for a moment, then laughed loud and long for a few moments.

“Well, we know he has the diplomatic skill and hutzpah to achieve a lot, when he puts his mind to it,” Natasha mused.

A murmur of agreement went up from the others at that, as Tony smirked.

Three Days after...

“Look, Fury, I’ve only just gotten a god back in my bed after a couple months of a depressing sexual dry-spell full of a lot of pining, and it’s bad enough I just spent half my day in Tokyo instead of on him. I really, really do not want to be here, but I am, so we can set this record straight and you stop hassling Pepper and Happy and even Phil about all this. So cut to the goddamn chase.”

He said this to a security camera within the room he had been left waiting in.

So he might have hacked it, and the audio bugs in the room, so that it played over every screen and speaker in the whole S.H.I.E.L.D. facility.

They’d kept him waiting for almost forty minutes. He’d had time to really craft his response, and they should’ve really, really known better.

Message communicated, Tony restored their systems back to normal and put his phone back into his
pocket. He took his seat and waited.

Within five minutes, Director Fury came in looking thoroughly incensed.

“So what else do I need to cover, here?” Tony asked lightly.

“As much as I’d prefer to never hear your voice again, right now, especially not in stereo from every single goddamn direction, you do have some explaining to do,” the S.H.I.E.L.D. director growled, dropping two dictionary-thick dossiers onto his desk. Loki’s was actually a bit thinner than Tony’s, given he was still technically more of an enigma. Most of the content was probably added during the alliance, at a guess.

“Sit, then, ask. Get this over with.”

Fury sat down. “He’s in your tower.”

“He’s conducting delicate interplanetary political talks with some people whose civilization was buried under a few miles of ice for the past few millennia, and is now in a diplomatic semi-sovereign political position amongst the kingdom which has been living on the surface of Jotunnheim ever since the ice arrived there. He has some shiny new diplomatic immunity as a result, given his position is technically above that of their king,” Tony explained quickly.

Fury’s expression was a bit flatly disbelieving. After a few moments of staring, he said, “You’re serious?”

“Yep. Thor can confirm, once he’s back from Asgard.”

The director drummed his fingers on the table between them for a while. “Is he still a wanted criminal in Asgard?”

“Not anymore, so far as I know. I pretty much took all the charges they wanted to pile on him and kicked them out a window or into Odin’s groin before I brought him home. Well, loaned him sufficient magic for him to get us to my penthouse.” He shrugged. “Also, for his crimes against earth, Jotunnheim, and Asgard, Death herself put him through a wringer you might be interested to hear about.”

“Oh? Do tell,” Fury deadpanned.

Tony explained Loki’s walk from the battlefield, delivering Thanos to Mistress Death, and the fact he was not alone. It took a few minutes to sink in, but there was something hard and almost like fear in Fury’s face, by the end.

“His son told me all that part, by the way. The one who lives with his sister, the queen of Helheim, which is the land of the dead, and all. Apparently, at the end of it, before he could come back to the land of the living, Loki had to experience all the pain suffered by all of the people he had killed, as they died. Every single one. Fenrir quickly found him once he was delivered back on the right side of Helheim in no small part because Loki was screaming so loudly when he got there.” He clicked his tongue. “And while he’s as good of a liar as his dad, he’d have no reason to make that shit up and present it as true not just to me, but to Hlín, who would have called bullshit, or lost respect for him, or both, if he’d lied. So. I’m looking forward to death even less than I ever was before. How about you, Nick?”

The S.H.I.E.L.D. director nodded slowly. “Neither of us will have a pleasant walk, I’m sure,” he agreed. “You think he’s changed, after that?”
“A bit. He’s still himself, but he notably has gone back to, as Thor suggested was his norm before he fell, only killing people who try to harm or kill him or his own first, so far. Well, except Surtur, but this is Loki we’re talking about, and I think he regards Surtur as someone he’d happily face on another walk, when his time comes. Sort of like his father Laufey, I think.”

“His father.”

“Biological father.”

Fury blinked twice, and dropped that topic. “Speaking of the dead and the less dead, you’re looking at a longer life-expectancy these days.”

“Yep.”

“Because of Loki.”

“Yes.” Tony’s grin brightened further.

“Why?”

“He needs me alive.”

“Does he?”

The inventor nodded. “Same as I need him.”

“You do?” at this, the director seemed even more surprised.

“Like air.” His smile became suddenly scarier, his eyes cold, and almost all of his teeth showing as he leaned forward a little, resting his elbows on his knees. “Try and take him from me, Nick, and the results won’t be pretty. Same goes for anyone else.”

Nick Fury considered him for a long few moments before responding, “Understood.”

“Good. Can I go now? I swear, Nat already knows the rest.”

The director shooed him off with a sweeping gesture of one hand.

Tony put on his sunglasses, grinned, and vanished into thin air.

A few alarms went off around the facility.

Fury sighed, and shook his head. “I’m gettin’ to old for this shit.”

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Six Days After...

“You okay, Tony?”

“Yeah, mostly.”
Natasha narrowed her eyes at him a little. “Lie.”

“It’s nothing.”

“You’re on your second cup of coffee, but it sounds like that’s not cutting it for you this morning,” she pointed out.

The inventor grimaced a little, then perked up at the familiar sound of the bi-frost delivering someone on the balcony. His brow furrowed in concern and he darted out of the room swiftly.

Thor and Jane were just about to knock on the balcony door when he opened it.

“Hey. How’s things?”

“You okay, Tony?” Jane asked. “You look a little off.”

“Nah, I’m okay. C’mon, Steve’s making breakfast.”

“We just left a feast, actually,” Jane said, and blushed a bit. “It was for us.”

“My mother did send you and my brother her regards,” Thor said. “Is he here?”

“Uhm... no.” Tony rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “He’s late, actually. He was supposed to be back from Jotunnheim late yesterday. Not a peep, though.”

“So that’s it,” Natasha mused.

The inventor turned on her, swearing.

“You’re worried?” Thor rumbled.

“A little. I mean, I trust him. He wouldn’t get himself killed or anything. Probably.” He grimaced a little. “No more than I might? Ohhh-kay, bad example.” He shrugged. “It’s probably nothing. Maybe. I need more coffee,” he muttered, stalking back into the kitchen, all too aware of them staring after him.

“Is he well?” the thunder god inquired of Natasha.

“Before he’d had his coffee, he admitted that he hadn’t slept well. Judging by the fact he doesn’t actually look that tired...” She shrugged. “Nightmares, I imagine, become more ominous when you’re dating a guy who can casually stroll into your dreams anytime he feels like, or might reach for them if he were in danger?”

Thor nodded solemnly. “Perhaps I will speak with him later.”

“That might help. In the mean time, I can tell you’re both trying really hard not to run in the direction of a bed behind a locked door, so I’m going to go back to breakfast,” the super-spy dismissed casually. “Though... was it a good party?” she asked Jane.

The astrophysicist nodded enthusiastically. “It was great.”

“Congratulations, then.” She winked at them, then turned away. “Have fun.”

The pair did, indeed, slink off toward Thor’s quarters, whispering and occasionally getting caught up in one another, along the way.
Six and a Half Days After...

Thor found Tony Stark in his lab, running tests on one of his drones, a new prototype for a different set of purposes than the ones he had used against Thanos. The inventor was muttering to it quietly as it hovered, and occasionally made an electric-chirp-like series of sounds, like it was answering him.

Reminded of Loki and a very young Fenrir, the thunderer chuckled, as he approached, alerting the mad genius to his presence.

“What’s up?” Tony prompted, finishing the adjustment he was working on, closing the compartment and muttering, “Go rest,” to the drone, which obediently swam through the air and joined two others like it wrapped about one of the Iron Man Suits along the wall.

“I do have some news, from Asgard. You left... rather abruptly. I wondered if you might be curious as to the effects your games have had.”

“Sounds ominous,” the inventor said flatly.

“I think you may find most of them to be positive, in your eye. They are to mine, mostly,” Thor admitted.

Tony’s eyebrows raised. “Really? It sounded a bit like chaos was ensuing as we left, and all.” He couldn’t help but smile a bit at the thought. “That was exactly what I was after and all, but I still figured you might be a little angry with me, possibly?”

“My brother... has paid his debts. Those which deserved to be paid, in any case, as much as any living creature can. He cannot give back the lives he has taken, but he has suffered for them, and I do believe he has changed. I also know him well enough to see that your actions that day were very much for him, for your love of him. I expect he accepted your suit?”

“Yeah.” The inventor grinned a bit despite himself. “He did.”

“I’m glad. You compliment one another very well.”

“I think we do, yeah. Uh. Thanks.”

“Thank you, for seeing his worth even more keenly than I do, and being what he needs, in his life, to be happy.”

“Wow,” Tony muttered. “Uhm... I... don’t know how to respond to that?”

“You needn’t. I do, after all, still have news.”

Grateful to escape the heart-achy sappiness, Tony said, “Yes. News. That.”

“Odin’s ruling Jane unworthy has been overturned. He gave a speech indicating that he has seen the errors of his ways and his own pride and stubbornness, which blinded him to Jane’s true worth, and he apologized to her, though I think it fair to say she has not yet forgiven him.” Thor’s smile went a
bit brittle. “Nor, in truth, have I.

“Good on you. He went way too far.”

“He did. And words alone will not repair that.”

“What about Amora?” Tony asked.

“Hlín sought her out, and explained that Asgard is again open to her, should she wish to return to it, and cease to be an exile, as well as take the opportunity to confront Odin and claim recompense for his crimes against her. She has agreed to journey there once she has recovered more of her strength. She also wished to pass on thanks to you. She sensed your involvement, it seems, and that you gave Loki the time to remove the spell, before capturing him.”

“You sound regretful.”

“Amora... is a better woman than I ever gave her credit for. I feared her, and hated her, for far too long. She is a good friend to my brother.” He chuckled softly. “Before Hlín could even begin to explain, apparently Amora shouted at her a great deal about he injustice of Loki’s capture and being put on trial again. It took Hlín over twenty minutes to explain that he had escaped with aid from you, and that Asgard has dropped all charges against him, in the wake of a visit Hel paid to Odin, after the chaos of the trial cleared from the palace.”

“Oh?” Tony asked.

“Yes. She explained to Odin and Frigga both, in detail, precisely what Loki went through, to deliver Thanos into the arms of Mistress Death,” Thor recounted. “Being who and what she is, to Mistress Death, she was able to tell them exactly how many names and stories now rest in his heart, and how impossible it would be for him to forget any one of them, for the rules of his walk did make his memories of it indelible, apparently. She persuaded them that he has done his penance for those crimes committed before he killed Thanos, and to hold him accountable beyond what Death herself judged him to deserve, could be perceived as an insult to Mistress Death, in its way.”

“Oh, I like her,” the inventor said. “That is clever.”

“Even the likes of the All-Father pale at the thought of offending Mistress Death, yes. It was a sight to behold.”

“You were there to see it?”

Thor nodded.

“You lucky bastard.”

“Indeed. Since you overturned all but the initial freeing of Surtur off of the current list of charges Asgard has against Loki, and Surtur’s death and the resurrection of Jotunnheim cannot be considered criminal acts, but do instead qualify under some exception clauses in Asgardian law, which exempt Loki from being penalized for releasing a monster he did eventually slay with minimal damage to property and lives around him. My brother, for the first time since his fall, is not considered a criminal.”


“I want you to realize that without you, none of that would have been possible.”
“And without him, I’d never have figured out magic let alone awoken my own, or gotten rid of the Ten Rings for good, and probably lived only a five or six decades before someone got lucky and killed me for good, Extremis or no,” the inventor said softly. “Maybe we’re even.”

Thor smiled warmly. “Perhaps so.”

“He’s still late. Still no word.”

“My brother will return to you. I have no doubt.”

Something relaxed a little, between Tony’s shoulder blades. “Here’s hoping.”

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*Four Days After Bringing in Dr. Young on the Anti-Freeze Project*

“I can’t take this seriously if you expect me to call it that,” Dr. Young sighed.

“Oh come on,” Tony pleaded. “Anti-Freeze. It’s golden!”

“Also, I personally think you’re over-estimating how politically dangerous it is to use a weapon like that in Jotunnheim,” Fenrir said. “There’s something like ‘ruling through terror’ in using something like that. Ice is second-nature to these Jotunns. It would be like stripping you of your magic, Tony.”

The inventor remembered acutely what that felt like, *No thank you, Pepper*, and grimaced. “Okay, you have a point. We could aim to make it temporary. Subdue rather than completely reverse-engineer.”

“That would be far safer, and less deeply disturbing to all of the local populace,” the wolf concurred. “There’s never been a revolt against The Three, and Loki is so far the only case of another world adopting their governing structure, so he does still need to tread a *little* carefully, and not cause every ice-Jotunn on that entire world to be deathly afraid of what he’s capable of doing to them.”

Tony’s frown deepened. “I should’ve probably thought of that.”

“Where did you learn all this?” Sylvia asked.

“I’m my sister’s closest advisor. She is a queen, you know.”

“I heard about her little warning to Odin, by the way. That was genius.”

“I just wish I’d thought of it first,” Fenrir sighed. “There’s good reason I adore my sister, though. Hel is one of the most shrewd and subtle rulers in existence, and I feel safer at her side than anywhere else in the nine realms.”

Idly, Tony recalled Loki’s warning/question to Sylvia, and how he had mentioned Fenrir’s exploitable potential. It occurred to him that people must have tried, before. Who, he couldn’t guess, but the thought was harrowing. It was also strangely fitting, that Hel’s former guardian-construct, having become her little brother, now enjoyed her protection and support.
“What happened?” Dr. Young asked.

“Long story,” Fenrir sighed. “Also not mine to tell.”

“The end result was, Hel came up with an ingenious suggestion of a threat, not even a direct one, still of a magnitude that even gods would shake in their boots at it, and Odin has dropped all criminal charges against Loki for any and all crimes he committed before killing Thanos,” Tony offered.

“Oh wow.”

Fenrir and the inventor nodded.

“How is Loki, by the way?” the bioengineer inquired.

Tony hesitated, about to complain a little about tardiness, when he felt two hands settle on his shoulders unexpectedly.

“I am well, and only a little late, this time,” Loki said, standing close behind him.

Grinning despite himself, the inventor let his head fall back until he could meet the trickster’s gaze. “Hey. How’s tricks?”

“Surprisingly well, actually. I have some news.”

“So do we,” Fenrir said. “Well, more a sort of critique. Pull up a chair.”

Loki did so, sitting between Tony and Sylvia, across the small round table form his son. “What did I miss?”

The wolf briefly went back over his concerns with the Anti-Freeze weapon. As he listened, the trickster was aware of Tony’s hand on his knee under the table: not provocative, merely appreciative and a little possessive. He rested a hand over the inventor’s, entwining their fingers.

With a thoughtful partial-grimace, Loki admitted, “I do suppose that might be a bit of a problem. Being more reliant on my magic than my ice abilities, and for them to be still new to me rather than second-nature, I hadn’t fully considered how traumatic their sudden complete removal might really be, and the sort of widespread fear that might cause amongst the populace.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t, either,” Tony admitted.

“I did come up with a plan which might at the least delay our need for such a weapon, even temporary rather than permanent in its effects, or remove it altogether. I’m waiting to hear on the results,” said the trickster. He grinned at their questioning faces. “I sent them Tarja.”

Slowly, realization lit up the inventor’s features, though Fenrir frowned a bit, somewhat confused.

“You sent her to rabble-rouse,” Fenrir said.

“I did. She is an elder mage from the civilizations of Jotunnheim lost because of Laufey’s father, maintained and potentially wide-spread by Laufey had he gotten his way instead of losing the war against Asgard. They could not find a more powerful leader to flock to, who is further from Laufey and all he represented,” Loki mused.

“But that would set her against Býleistr, wouldn’t it?” Fenrir asked.

“She has met him, conveniently,” said the trickster. “They get along fairly well, my brother and my cousin. She may well be as Advisor.”
The wolf sucked in a breath. “No!”

“Oh yes,” Loki preened.

“I’m missing something,” Tony muttered.

“The Three of Nifleheim consist of the First, who is Wanderer, and the Second and Third, who are either the Advisor or the Voice, depending upon which of them gets along better with the current monarch,” Fenrir explained. “The Voice stays among the people, listening to all of their concerns, keeping track of whole communities from within. The Advisor works within the palace and oversees matters political and economic from the inside, providing insight and guidance to the acting monarch directly, almost like a combination of spy-master and grand vizier. The Wanderer provides outside perspective, and most often travels further from the palace, to other lands if need be, and acts as diplomat, dealing more with outsiders than the others, but also acting as their advisor and providing insight and spotting and clarifying problems between the other two that can only be seen from a slightly more distant point of view,” Fenrir explained. “Loki, to Jotunheim, is Wanderer.”

“Ahh,” Tony said. “Kind of ingenious actually.”

“That just leaves Voice,” the wolf murmured. “With the other two positions occupied, people will expect a Voice to be selected or elected, or demand changes along the lines of a senate, and to have some representation they elect, if they cannot have an individual that they might come to trust brought into the position.”

“If we find no one suitable, from beneath the ice, I have a candidate of my own to consider,” Loki acknowledged. “I may be biased, however.”

“How so?” Sylvia asked.

“Hän was one of the first to befriend me, in my visits to their world, even before I brought Surtur, and provided me rest and support from hänen clan when I needed it, once Thor and Hlín arrived and could keep Surtur distracted,” Loki explained quietly. “I... felt truly welcomed.”

“I’m missing something again,” the inventor said. “Or All-Speak is finally kicking in for me but not completely enough. What’s ‘hän’?”

“Kaata Eevulilapsi is a Jotunn who is neither male nor female,” Loki explained. “Being a race of shape-shifters without rigid gender conventions, this is hardly uncommon, and those who fall outside the masculine vs. feminine binary have their own pronoun which is neither masculine nor feminine. Instead of he or she, the word is ‘hän’ and instead of his or hers: hänen. You see?”

“Finnish,” Dr. Young said.

“What?” Loki and Tony both asked.

“It took me a second, but that pronoun is actually... well Finnish doesn’t have ‘he’ or ‘she’ they only have ‘hän’ and ‘hänen’,” the bioengineer said. “It’s interesting, that’s all.” At their surprised looks, she cleared her throat and shrugged. “I... dated a Finnish guy while studying abroad in college. He was a linguist.”

“The land which became that country did get more attention from Jotunns, pre-ice, than Aesir, as I recall,” the trickster mused.

“This Kaata is a clan chief?” Fenrir asked.
Loki nodded. “Also a respectable mage, and very astute. I would have to find some way to not appear to be the one to make that selection, which might prove tricky. As I say, this is my own personal preference. I know not if any other candidates may be under consideration by Býleistr or Tarja, respectively.”

“Being the sort of position it is, I’m sure the Voice will make themselves heard, when the time comes,” Fenrir suggested.

“I just hate not knowing things,” the trickster muttered.

“That said,” Tony cut in, “even if you effectively set up Jotunnheim’s Three, there’s still the general resentment of you that’ll have the clans that kicked your ass once already continuing to try and murder you. You’re still newly established, and thus not considered an immovable anchorage for their society like the Three in Nifelheim seem to be.”

“That’s true,” Loki conceded. “Those who oppose the blood of Laufey in control of Jotunnheim’s fate will be reassured, but those who despise me in my own right will be far less so. Given all I’ve taken from them, I hardly blame them, except that I’m selfish enough to value my own life regardless of how justified they may be in wishing to take it from me. Also, my death, at this point, would be more loss than gain to them, whether they realize it or not.”

“How can you eat people?” Fenrir asked lightly.

“I sympathize, but no argument you start off that way ends well,” Tony interrupted, smirking a bit.

After a brief huff, the trickster dropped that topic, and went back to the weapon: “A suitably terrifying deterrent, should they ambush me again, would still aid me. I am aiding earth mages and architects frequently enough with larger projects that I am more often at half-strength than full, in my time there. Hunting them down and being the aggressor, directly or indirectly, would only incite further action against me. Loathe as I am to admit it, leaving most of them alive would change more minds than the alternative, simpler though slaughter would be for me.”

“So I can’t just eat them?” Fenrir asked lightly.

“Would you?” Sylvia asked, a bit concerned.

“Well... maybe a few. The meat would go to waste or carrion birds otherwise,” the wolf offered, with a shrug. “Though they can leave me with a cold sort of stomach-ache for days if I over-indulge.”

All three of the others stared at him for a long few moments.

“... Okay, so I don’t actually know from experience whether that would happen, but you should see your faces,” Fenrir confessed, amused and grinning.

Loki snorted, amused, while Tony shook his head. Sylvia elbowed him, but her nose wrinkled in a slightly adorable way that made it clear she was a little reluctantly amused by him.
“You had a few models in your discarded designs folder, Loki, that would’ve partially uprooted a fire-giant’s abilities,” the bioengineer then suggested, “but not in any permanent sort of manner. It would’ve crippled them, and rendered them unable to wield their powers for a while, but not removed them permanently. They’re actually a little easier to convert over, and compared to some of the scans of brain-areas used to control Jotunn elemental abilities Tony got from his own later modifications of Extremis, I could probably put together a way to temporarily knock their ice-systems offline a lot quicker than I could reverse-engineer them altogether.”

“That would be quite helpful,” the trickster mused. “Only a little bit of shock and awe, and perhaps enough to stagger them to a degree they would listen to my words first, before continuing to attempt assassination. Also, I delivered a specimen from Nifelheim into the cold-storage unit in your lab, Dr. Young.”

She grinned brightly. “Thank you. That’s awesome.”

“You want to lay out some of the ideas you obviously just came up with?” Tony asked lightly, sipping from his drink.

Sylvia did so, explaining at length, while the others listened, questioned, and occasionally made suggestions or posited theoretical ways something may or may not backfire. Eventually a waiter came by for Loki’s order, and to deliver the orders of the others, all while the conversation never lost its flow. They all parted ways over an hour later, heads abuzz, save Tony and his trickster, who stuck together, strolling back towards Avengers tower, hand in hand.

“What held you up this time?” Tony asked, more mocking than serious.

“Tarja requested my aid in retrieving bodies from the rubble, in the city we found her in, and burying them in a place which will have a memorial constructed over it, when we have more time,” Loki responded, sounding very tired, though he offered a bittersweet half-smile when the inventor squeezed his hand, and met Tony’s gaze with a look of warm affection the mad human genius couldn’t help but return.

That was when they heard three cameras go off and were almost blinded by the flash-bulbs. Typical really.

And Lo, a wild band of paparazzi appeared.

Tony suspected that there should have been actual planning for this ahead of time, but shrugged that off and decided to play it by ear, even as a dozen or so cries of “Mr. Stark!” and “Who is this you have with you?” and “Are you in a relationship with this man, Mr. Stark?” assaulted his hearing from three directions. He could feel Loki tense up, resisting the urge to either teleport them away or hide behind a glamour, but it was just a little too late for that now.

The inventor supposed they would have about twelve hours maximum, before someone figured out the man next to him was Thor’s brother, seen in footage from the invasion of New York, but also fighting side-by-side with Thor on an English college campus, against a bunch of Dark Elves. Using a fake name for the trickster would only make that eventual revelation all the worse.

That gave him this chance here to do immediate damage control.

“If you want any questions actually answered, at least a few of you will need to shut up, just from a practical standpoint,” Tony announced sharply, standing his ground and making it clear he wasn’t going to give them a chase. They hushed a bit, expectantly, as the inventor put his press-conference-crasher demeanor into full effect, “This man is my lover, and helped me take down the Ten Rings, as
well as an interplanetary threat called Thanos which the Avengers have not made the public wholly aware of. The various alien vessels which crashed down at various locations on earth a few months back were fleeing from a larger battle held near Jupiter, with the aid of Asgard and another interplanetary empire of a race known as the Kree. The full details of the story surrounding Thanos and Loki’s part in it are very complex, but New York isn’t on his hit list again anytime soon, is it?”

Loki shook his head calmly, at ease with the showmanship and perfectly able to follow Tony’s lead, smirking a bit as he replied, “No, I’ve no intention of targeting the earth in any new schemes whatsoever, and do apologize for the unavoidable casualties caused by my actions in the invasion of New York a few years ago. I did my best to sabotage the whole endeavor, and the Avengers were of great aid to me in that regard, minimizing the overall harm Thanos’ Chitauri forces might have caused.”

The paparazzi were, understandably, stunned into shocked silence. They had clearly just been expecting the buzz of Tony Stark dating a man who looked tall, dark and gorgeous, but the added super-villain angle made for a far bigger, more intimidating story to report, but a few of the veterans, used to Tony Stark being unpredictable in this sort of manner, sobered quickly, and one woman asked, “When were you planning to announce your romantic involvement with a former super-villain, Mr. Stark?”

“Honestly? It’s a relatively new development and I’ve been busy enough, lately, that I hadn’t had time to come up with a time-table. You all lucked out,” Tony responded.

“Mister... Loki? Are you still actually a super-villain?” one man inquired cautiously.

“What an endearing title that is: ‘super-villain.’ I’m at present now a political figure with sovereign duties to another planet called Jotunnheim, and am responsible for maintaining their diplomatic relations with other realms. Given that Jotunnheim is in a state of recovery from a series of natural disasters and their government is doubtlessly about to undergo a major overhaul from within and without, they are in no state to consider attacking any other worlds. I thus would prefer, for the time being, to maintain peaceful relations with the earth. I would hardly consider that very villainous, so I suppose I no longer qualify for that title.”

“Are you now one of the Avengers, Mr. Loki?”

“You can use the surname ‘Lie-smith’ if you like,” Loki offered. “And no, I’m no longer a villain. I am a diplomat. Diplomats, by their very nature, are not heroic in the same sense that any of the Avengers might be considered so.”

“You’re good at this,” Tony muttered in his ear.

“They’re an easy audience to feed,” the trickster whispered back.

“When will the events related to this ‘Thanos’ you mentioned be made public, Mr. Stark?” another reporter barked.

“Was Thanos a single person or an organization?”

“Thanos was a single being,” Loki clarified. “And the Chitauri belonged to him.”

“Release of the full story, no doubt, I will have to discuss at length with S.H.I.E.L.D. in coming days, while they deeply regret ever involving themselves with me,” Tony replied. “It’s technically classified, and I’ve remained quiet about it in order to prevent any widespread panic here on earth, given that the Avengers, with Loki’s aid and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s both, had the situation very well in
hand. We had three years ahead of the event to prepare for it, after the battle of New York gave us a good idea what was coming for us—"

“You’re welcome, earth,” Loki added.

The inventor elbowed him but chuckled a little. “-Yes, thanks to you, but only after I threatened you a bit.”

“Fair enough,” the trickster conceded.

“The earth was in danger, but it was one which was successfully contained and no one on earth was even injured by the falling space-crafts,” Tony reminded firmly. “I saw no harm in giving the real story, after that, but it is, as I said, very complicated.”

“You suggest, Mr. Lie-smith, that you deliberately failed to invade New York?”

“I do. Had I truly wished to invade this world, I might have opened that portal far wider to admit entry to more of the armada far faster, and stolen one of the more portable energy-sources in Mr. Stark’s collection rather than using his tower, in order to open the portal somewhere far less easy to reach for the Avengers, such as either the north pole where my activities would have been difficult to detect until satellite imagery noticed the first few larger armada ships, or even on your international space station; however, I did not actually want the Chitauri to win, and knowing of earth’s nuclear capabilities and the paranoia of the United States in particular which makes them slightly more trigger-happy than many other nations, New York and Stark Tower were the ideal locations to make certain the destruction of my enemies.”

“Why were the Chitauri your enemies, and why let them through in the first place?” another reporter called.

“Do look up my history. Thor is the god of thunder, and I am the god of lies. The leader of the Chitauri sought to use me as a pawn to retrieve a weapon on earth called the tesseract, which was not originally from earth but lost here. All I actually wanted was to get back to this part of the galaxy and away from Thanos, but the best way to do that was in letting him believe I was manipulable to him, and so I let him believe that I would give him that weapon in exchange for an army to take over the earth. Cliche, yes, but effective; however, given my reputation for dishonesty and betrayal, it would be outright foolish for him to send me here if he did not have painful and potentially lethal leverage against me, to ensure my obedience, would it not?”

The trickster shrugged casually. “I had to be convincing, in putting forth the general impression that I was following orders, even while subverting them. While I do apologize for the loss of life that my interplanetary con-artistry inflicted on your world, but if I had done it any other way, I never would have become allied with Tony Stark and not only the earth, but Asgard and the rest of this galactic quadrant in its entirety, would not have been prepared to deal with Thanos when he managed to arrive within your solar system years later intent upon vengeance for the foiling of his plans.”

The female reporter from earlier asked, “When exactly did that alliance begin?”

“Classified,” both men said quickly.

“When did you both become romantically involved?” demanded another.

Both men hesitated, at that, and exchanged glances. “No comment,” Tony eventually responded.

“Why is that, Mr. Stark?”
“Why?”

“Is it not classified?”

“It’s not so much classified as difficult to determine,” Loki deadpanned. “We are complicated people.”

The inventor sniggered helplessly at that.

“Mr. Lie-smith, have you been held accountable and punished for your crimes against the earth by any court of law?”

“Yes,” he said, his expression very grave. “And I have been changed by it. Not into a hero, but as I mentioned before, villainy is no longer quite the term applicable.”

“Would you two say you’re in love?” someone called out, and all other queries and general muttering suddenly fell quiet.

Again, the pair exchanged glances, this time a bit nervously, squeezing one another’s hands tighter. Not looking away, Loki replied, “Yes, I would say I am.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Tony said.

The ensuing photo-fest almost blinded them, and they squinted a little, though let their eyes shut entirely when the trickster leaned down and caught Tony’s mouth and slid an arm about his waist to pull him a little closer, catching the inventor a bit off-guard, but not unwilling, as more pictures were taken en mass. The kiss was brief, and only a little dirty, but still enough to leave Tony breathless when Loki pulled back.

“I’d say we’re done here,” the inventor announced, waving.

Taking the hint, and laughing as he did so, Loki teleported them away.

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They arrived in the middle of Tony’s penthouse living-room, in the same position as when they had left. The inventor’s left hand rested on the back of Loki’s neck, and his right gripping the god’s tie. Loki had one arm about the inventor’s waist, and the fingers of his other hand at Tony’s jaw.

“You’re utterly insane,” Loki mused. “You could have told any number of lies.”

“And had most of them disproven by a few kids on the internet before morning,” the inventor countered. “The truth is a pretty good counter-weapon against that sort of scandal, in the right selective doses. You basically gave them the whole story, though.”

“I got the gist of your game, and the more sympathetically I might be viewed, the less S.H.I.E.L.D. can frame me as unlikeable as I truly am, in their own reports, and be believed,” Loki responded. “I really did earn the nickname Silver-tongue for my words first: not just what else I can do with it.”

“You deserve it in both cases.” Tony leaned in for another kiss when both of their phones suddenly went off and JARVIS stated, “Sirs, S.H.I.E.L.D. is calling you.”
“I’m impressed they managed to get my number,” the god muttered.

“Tell them they’ll get everything they deserve... in the morning*,” the inventor responded, and pivoted on his heel in a way that unbalanced Loki and sent them both sprawling to land in a heap on the couch, the trickster landing on his back with Tony straddling his hips.

“Sir, Pepper is also calling. She is, actually, in the elevator now, and has ended the call and begun swearing.”

“Damn, are we sure she can’t teleport, too?” Tony muttered.

“You may recall that you made an appointment with her for this time, a few hours ago, Tony,” JARVIS chided. “Your plans were to discuss matters pressing to Stark Industries for a time, and then go to dinner to discuss your personal life.”

The inventor winced. “Oh. Right. Well.”

Loki laughed at him a little.

“I had no idea when you’d be back, to be fair, and then you distracted me.”

“I gathered,” the trickster sighed, still deeply amused, pulling him closer.

“Hey, wait a minute-”

“No, in a minute or two, she will be here, and I’d like one more taste of you before then, if I’m to have to wait after,” Loki purred and kissed him again.

Tony went boneless for moment, save where his arms held him up, as the soft, deep and surprisingly unhurried kiss melted his brain for several heated seconds. Then the trickster let him go and they stared at each other for just a moment, close and heated, before the elevator dinged and they both sat up reluctantly.

Pepper stepped in, amused to find them both looking tousled but resigned at her. “Good to see you back, Loki. I’m guessing you forgot I was coming, Tony?”

“To be fair, I was distracted by complex bioengineering discussion and a run-in with the paparazzi, as well as his sweet ass,” Tony insisted.

“So I just heard,” the CEO sighed, stepping around the couch to sit a foot or so from them, looking exasperated. “How did that happen, exactly?”

“We may have both been distracted,” Loki admitted. “I should have thought to put on a different appearance, while we walked about in public.”

“This was inevitable anyway, though, Pep.”

“I know, but I think everyone involved was hoping to delay it, or find some way to... make people not think you’re you, Loki, to be frank.”

“I did consider,” the trickster acknowledged.

“Seriously?” Tony’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Loki’s eyebrows raised. “It would have been far easier on you, and S.H.I.E.L.D., and the Avengers altogether.”
“So what? It’s you I’m involved with, for the long haul, and the longer we faked that, the worse the eventual fallout would be when the truth did out. I don’t want to be with one of your other faces, either, to be honest. I prefer you, and I don’t settle for less just for PR reasons.”

“He really doesn’t,” Pepper sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger for a moment, then giving the inventor an exasperated look, only to notice the very open, slightly shell-shocked look the trickster was wearing, and find herself a bit awed.

“Oh,” Loki said quietly.

“I know you like being half in the shadows a lot, but I’m kind of in a perpetual spotlight,” the inventor said, his fingers tracing a random shape on the fabric just above the god’s knee where their legs pressed against one another. “You okay with being under the glare of that, whenever we’re outside the tower?”

After a few moments, the trickster nodded. “I am. It might be challenging, but not in a way I’m actually averse to. It will be interesting, I think.”

“You have a knack for it so far.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. might try to arrest you both,” Pepper pointed out.

“I’d be interested to see them try,” Loki purred.

Tony tried not to be too turned on by that while they had company.

“Give me a quick run-down of exactly what you told the press, please,” Pepper said crisply.

“Actually, JARVIS, send a transcript to my tablet. You were listening, right?”

“Yes, and I also collected copies of all the recordings taken on nearby devices at the time,” the AI responded. “It has been sent.”

“Thank you,” the CEO replied, and began reading. She immediately made a face. “Oh my god, I’m so glad I wasn’t there. What were you both thinking?”

“She always says that, usually just to me, though,” Tony assured the god.

“You can’t just... Oh god you did.” She covered her mouth, but kept scrolling for a few minutes, until she reached the end. “Then you just... you teleported away. You pulled a literal disappearing act. Oh my god, Tony, you’ll be on every news network in the country in about an hour, and globally in an hour and five minutes.”

“Yeah, probably,” the inventor admitted.

“But you... okay...” She took a deep breath. “Stark Industries has had no dealings with you, Loki. You’ve solely been allied to Iron Man, officially speaking. Just so our share-holders don’t shit bricks,” she began. “I’ll set up a press release for that, and handle it personally. I’ll probably even say a few nice things about you, and your relationship with Tony. You both didn’t put a start-date on it. That should probably change, so things don’t get wildly misconstrued, even if it’s sort of a lie.”

The trickster smiled a little at her practicality and shrewdness, even though it was clear she wanted to be scandalized, but just couldn’t find it in herself to be even all that surprised by their actions. “I thank you.”

“I’ll also call Fury,” she said. “He’s less likely to have coronary, with me as mediator, and he respects my PR skills, especially since New York. Loki, you’ll need to make a few press
appearances within the next week, casual interviews, and maybe an episode of 60minutes for the full story. Think you can handle that?” Then she hesitated. “You... know what 60minutes is? The show?”

“I watched some television, in particularly slow weeks while preparing for war with Thanos, and did see a couple episodes of that, yes. Better that than making rounds on talk-shows, certainly.”

“That was my thought,” Pepper mused. “Though you might consider NPR.”

“That is a... radio thing, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose so, if you really recommend them.”

“They’ll be less gentle with you than television, and more political, but it might be good to prove you can withstand that,” she elaborated. “Television, also, will get you a lot of fans based on your image alone, and how well you play your audience, as I suspect you probably will. Just don’t get too carried away with putting on a show. People will want to see you appear raw and as unfeigned and matter-of-fact as possible, which I know you can do and still be lying to their faces. On radio, you can be more relaxed, and convey more emotion without seeming to be hamming it up, and in ways that listening audiences will likely come away from you impressed by, as well as sympathetic toward.”

“Sounds ideal, then,” Loki said.

“I’ll reach out to them,” Pepper agreed. “Actually, it looks like they’re already interested in interviewing both of you, according to a few messages left with JARVIS. They’ll devote a series to it, starting as soon as tomorrow evening. When will you be needed back in Jotunnheim?”

“I have at least a week, if all goes well. I need to regain my full strength before tackling the next major project there, and my absence for a time will let my cousin Tarja handle her own political machinations without her target audiences getting distracted by trying to assassinate me,” he replied.

“That sounds fun,” the CEO mused. “Who is trying to assassinate you?”

“Clans who suffered heavy losses when I aimed the bi-frost at Jotunnheim,” Loki explained. “I don’t blame them for their anger, but I’m still not exactly pleased with people trying very hard to kill me, on general principal.”

“Fair enough. We’ll leave the Jotunnheim situation vague in interviews, I’m guessing?” she inquired.

Both men nodded.

“Tony, no press conference for you, on this,” Pepper said. “Stick to a few interviews both with Loki and independently, through your more usual channels. Try to keep particularly regrettable sound-bites to a minimum.”

“No promises.”

She sighed at him. “Well, I now have a number of calls to make, and you’re both clearly distracted by one another. Rain check on the dinner you owe me, Tony.” Getting to her feet, she ruffled the inventor’s hair and leaned down to accept a one-armed hug from him, and dropped a kiss on the trickster’s forehead, which apparently surprised him. “Have a good night, boys,” she dismissed, heading back to the elevator.
“She is so refreshingly competent and astute,” Loki mused. “I do see why you keep one another.”

Tony pushed the god’s shoulder and maneuvered him onto his back in a sprawl along the couch-cushions. Given how long the couch itself was, the inventor loved seeing how much space Loki took up on it, long limbs all stretched out over it, almost like he was made to fit there, a puzzle-piece with shattered edges that fit in perfectly with Tony’s own, and perfectly suited to his fine and expensive tastes too. “Take me with you, in a week.”

The god tensed a bit under him. “What?”

“Good as I’m getting with teleportation, I still have no idea how you get between realms, so it’s you take me and keep me as involved in your life as you are in mine, or I’m basically your kept mistress here. I want to go where you go, and meet the people who are becoming so important to you.”

“There are people trying to kill me, who would see you as an easy target,” Loki said sharply. “Harm done to you is worse than harm done to me, in that case. I deserve it from them; you do not.”

“They have no idea who I am, Loki.”

“I would not pretend you are anything less than mine. I’m not capable of it, any longer, and I would not let them see you as potentially available, in ways that are reserved for me alone.”

Tony’s mouth ran dry. “Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe some of them need to see that side of you anyway, and know you aren’t what you were, and get some hints as to why,” the inventor suggested. “I’ll carry my armor rather in a pocket-dimension than wear more than one of the gauntlets just day to day, and have a few camouflaged drones with me at all times. I’m strong as you are, you know how dangerous I can be even without my armor these days, and you can trust me to be strong enough to keep up with you... right?”

Loki hesitated. “I do. It frightens me that I do, because I have been wrong before.” He looked chagrinned. “More than twice.”

“I know. That’s why I want to go with you. I want to be twisted up with everything you do, and never feel that you’re completely out of my reach. Wherever you go should be in my reach, in case I have to hunt you down to bring you back to me,” Tony assured.

The trickster’s breath hitched. “Tony...”

“A thought stuck with me, when I realized how long it must’ve felt like, before you came back from that walk,” the inventor said. “If you’d really been gone that long, I could’ve never gotten you out in time to see you again before I ran out of time myself. Death isn’t the only one who can warp time, so I had to live longer, so that wouldn’t be a risk the next time. That’s why I wanted to ask you about the apple anyway, even before you gave it to me. I wanted more time to find a way to catch you.”

Loki tangled both hands in his lover’s hair, holding his gaze steadily. “You’ve certainly caught me.”

“Yeah.” He smirked a bit. “So...”

“I’ll take you with me. They should know... You’re right, that they should see you, and meet you. They should know where my heart truly lies, and perhaps understand me the better for it,” Loki said. “I have no reason to hide you. You’re as much my strength as my weakness.”
“Silver-tongue,” Tony teased.

“It’s truth!” the god protested.

“I know, Loki.” He grinned and pressed their foreheads together. “That doesn’t make it any less well-crafted, shiny and precious to me.”

“Now who is speaking quicksilver?”

“Both of us, generally,” Tony said, “but I could use my tongue for something other than words, if you’re interested.”

“I am always interested in the actions of your tongue,” Loki assured.

“Good,” the inventor responded, and kissed him, slow and deep and languid, full of heat and want that made the god moan from deep in his chest. Tony felt the long fingers buried in his hair slide downward, along his neck, down his back to his hips and then up, unbuttoning the two front buttons of his jacket and pushing it back off of his shoulders, unhurried and appreciative of every inch of fine fabric he touched, but still more interested in tracing the shapes of Tony’s body underneath. Compliantly, Tony moved his arms back, letting the garment slide off of him and draping it over the back of the couch with a flick of his wrists toward the end, only for Loki to catch both wrists, gently, and pluck open the buttons at his cuffs before trailing back up his arms to his neck, deftly pulling his tie off with one hand while the other began to unbutton his shirt.

The inventor let him, focusing on the kiss, and rolling his hips slightly as he felt Loki growing hard under him, and making them both gasp. The arch of Tony’s back with the movement facilitated the trickster pulling his shirt untucked, and unbuttoning the last two buttons before pushing it off of him slowly, just as he had the jacket, and it was given the same treatment, though Loki only pushed it only halfway down his arms before his fingers were drawn instead to stroke Tony’s sides, and to reverently trail up along the inventor’s abdominal muscles, as Tony draped his shirt over the back of the couch next to his suit-jacket.

Then Loki sat up a bit further and bit at Tony’s chin, nudging it up to better bare his throat, which the trickster set about worshipping with his mouth in ways that would have left a colorful array of marks, were Tony still fully human, but now they heated under his tongue, tasting faintly of hot iron, especially when he bit sharply, making the inventor gasp and roll his hips again as the god’s hands and mouth mapped his skin like Loki meant to mark and memorize every last inch.

“I love the feel of you,” the trickster murmured against the tender skin between Tony’s collarbones. “I love your strength, and how I make you tremble.” His hands feather-light along the inventor’s hips, Loki’s tongue and teeth trailed across his chest, back and forth in a downward-moving zig-zag between pectorals, until he paused to lathe a broad stroke over one nipple and nip at the top edge of it in a way he’d learned, from experience, made Tony shudder and buck his hips, which he did, and Loki grinned against his skin, nipping again, one hand dragging fingernails teasingly in a circle on Tony’s other nipple, earning a low keening moan.

“You’re wearing too much clothes,” the inventor panted.

“I’m busy. You may fix it yourself, if you like.”

“Tease.”

“Ask and you shall receive, Tony,” Loki said, fingers lazily tracing along the length of the inventor’s cock straining against the confines of his trousers.
“Wasn’t a request,” he groaned.

“Wasn’t it? You enjoy being worshipped as much as I do.” Loki smiled at the feel of Tony’s magic abruptly removing his all of their remaining clothing.

“So let me worship you,” Tony challenged, rolling his hips again, this time hissing in pleasure at the slide of skin-on-skin caught between their bodies, then arched a little up and forward hands splayed on the god’s chest for balance, until Loki’s length rubbed between his cheeks.

“Yes,” the trickster breathed, gripping the inventor’s ass hard for a few moments, kneading a little before one hand slid down, and a flicker of magic made certain his fingers were slick when two of them pressed into Tony’s entrance slowly, stroking in and out, slow and deep, catching the inventor’s prostate each time until he just pushed in hard and began rubbing hard in that single spot as he nipped at the same nipple again, making Tony moan and buck more desperately despite himself.

“F-fuck.” Eyes fire-bright, Tony reached down and grabbed the trickster’s wrist hard, and began to pull him out, shivering a little as how those long fingers teased him the whole way. Reaching back with his other hand, the inventor grabbed Loki’s cock and held him in place as he sat back against it, and impaled himself slowly, inch by inch.

Loki held his gaze, and tried to pull his wrist free, but Tony only caught the other one too and pinned both to the couch on either side of the god’s head as he sheathed Loki to the hilt, with a low moan.

“I love how you look when I do this, like you almost want to be offended but you’re enjoying it too much to really fight it,” Tony mused, and began to grind his hips in a slow circle, making them both breathe a little harder. “And your cock really is magnificent to ride, let me tell you.” He began to raise and lower his hips, still with that little bit of rotation, making each rise and fall a smooth undulation, like tidal waves against the shore. Tony achieved just the right angle to almost bruise his own prostate as he picked up the pace, panting. “So good, Loki, fuck.”

“Yes,” the god rasped, thrusting up with what little leverage he had, in the position Tony had pinned him into. “I want to touch you, Tony, please.”

“I want you to come like this, just used by me,” the inventor panted. “Because you’re so good I can come just from this, with you, seeing how much you want to fight me but can’t, because you want me to use you and want to see me do this to myself, for you—only for you.” He moaned low in his throat and almost lost his rhythm at a particularly hard thrust from the god under him, but kept it up, even as he started to tremble with it and his cock ached for touch and friction.

“Tony—oh, Tony, please yes,” Loki bit out.

He caught the god’s mouth with his own and was rewarded with a muffled cry and more forceful movement under him as Loki struggled for more touch, more closeness, just more.

Tony pulled back to watch him struggle further, and the desperate sounds and writhing rolls of the god’s hips as those wide green eyes pleaded with him, greedy to touch his skin, wanting to lay claim to him and almost pained to be unable to, set the inventor over the edge, and his movements grew less coordinated and he rode himself through it, his come striping Loki’s stomach and chest. Pulling free of his weakened grip, Loki grabbed both of the inventor’s hips and rolled them off the couch and onto the floor, one hand at the back of Tony’s head preventing too-violent smacking against the ground.

“You call me tease,” the god rasped, pulling both of the inventor’s legs up to hook over his shoulders
and pressing his hands flat on either side of Tony’s head. “Do brace your arms over your head, darling, and I’ll give you precisely what you need.”

Without hesitation, Tony obeyed, arms crossed at the wrists behind his head to cushion it and each hand gripping one of Loki’s forearms as the god began to pound into him hard and deep enough to earn a cry almost akin to pain, but it was too good to stop, even as it bruised.

“**FFFUCK!**”

“Very good, Tony, that is indeed what we’re doing,” Loki crooned, though his breathing was uneven and he sounded close. “Do you know how delicious you look, writhing as you take everything I give you, like you love the pain almost as much as the pleasure? Oh, what that makes me want to do to you, Tony.”

“Sh-should never have been s-suprised my subconscious handed you a riding crop,” Tony moaned, each pounding thrust shaking his voice and taking him closer to the peak of pleasure again.

“Would you let me shatter you, Tony?” the trickster purred, lips brushing his.

The inventor felt a jolt straight to his cock just at the thought. “Yeah, yeah, I would. You let me return the favor sometime?”

Loki’s whole body shuddered, his eyes hooded. “If you think yourself capable, I might be intrigued to give you an opportunity to prove it.”

Tony caught the glimmer of a spell over Loki’s mouth, and somewhere between their bodies, just before the god kissed him again, sucking hard on his tongue and the inventor felt that suction right on the head of his cock, and spasmed hard through his orgasm, drinking down the noises Loki made as his own overtook him, and they both rode it out until they were still and close and shivering, but unable to move a muscle.

Save when the inventor teleported them to the bedroom, and pressed Loki down into the sheets face-first, a hand at the back of his neck, smacking the god’s ass firmly when the trickster made a startled sound and tried to struggle. “If I’m capable,” he purred. “Now how to prove that?”

“Tony, I didn’t mean to suggest.” He cut off with a gasp at another smack.

“I know what you meant, honey,” Tony said. “I love letting you lead. You’re incredible at it, and your cock is, as I’ve said before, truly divine.” Kneeling beside Loki’s hips as he was, he leaned close to the trickster’s ear and whispered low, “Don’t let me neglect to treat you to the same, if you want it so badly you have to dare me.”

“T-ony—” Loki grunted at the two lube-slick fingers sliding into him abruptly, as the inventor pushed his legs apart and settled between them, never letting up on the pressure at the back of the god’s neck holding him forcefully down. He couldn’t deny the shuddering keen as Tony’s fingers played him expertly, hard and clever and maddening in their treatment of his prostate. “Remind me to challenge your ego more often,” he mocked breathlessly, as his still-sensitive cock returned to full hardness almost painfully.

“I do so love it when you do. Arch a bit more for me? Yes, there, perfect.” Then Tony’s fingers retreated, fast replaced by his cock, and he watched the trickster’s hands, splayed above his head, grip the sheets a bit tighter, as he pushed in to the hilt in one hard stroke. He wouldn’t last long, with how hot and tight Loki felt, and the way those pale hips were already pushing back, starting to fuck back against him. “You really did miss me,” the inventor purred, and slapped one beautiful pale
cheek of Loki’s ass hard enough to redden. “Harder, or I’ll leave you like this. Show me how much you want this.” When Loki stilled entirely, the inventor smacked his ass again, and the god responded by moving with far less subtlety, rolling with his entire body back, and then up and forward again, then crashing back and down, over and over. Another smack earned the inventor a muffled cry. “Faster, Loki.”

Pushing back faster, arms now braced against the bed so he could use their leverage for more force and control, the god began to pant hard as he sought more, and harder, and tried to speed up his pace but only succeeded a little at first, and whimpered as it earned him another smack, and another, drawing increasingly ragged sounds from him. “Tony, please.”

“Please what?”

“Please fuck me, I can’t go any faster like this, please.”

“You want faster?”

The god nodded quickly.

Another smack, and Loki moaned with it this time, feeling a mixture of shame and thrill, slowing his pace deliberately.

“Say what you want Loki, and don’t slow.” Another smack.

“Want me faster, then contribute, Tony,” the trickster challenged, and made an openly wanton sound at the next smack.

Tony licked his lips, finding that way hotter than he’d actually anticipated. It took him a moment to recover, and realize Loki had stopped outright, pushing back against him hard and single-mindedly instead, and smacked again at the increasingly red spot on Loki’s ass, this time earning another outright mewl of pleasure. He had to do it again, and as he did the noises kept coming, and Loki started to writhe, and Tony really couldn’t help beginning to thrust, slow and deep, making a moan rise out of Loki that started deep and guttural but rose to a near-scream when the inventor slapped his ass again and started pounding into him harder. “You manipulative little shit,” Tony panted.

“It worked, did it not?” the trickster moaned, low and sultry, but cracking a bit. “Oh, yes, keep doing that, Tony.”

“You’re so gorgeous it should be illegal,” the inventor groaned, grabbing Loki’s hips hard with both hands, and pulling him back still more sharply with each thrust, making the god cry out and arch like a cat, supporting himself on his forearms and lifting his head without the downward force on his neck, letting him push harder back against the inventor and deliberately tighten around Tony’s length at the same time, earning a startled half-shout from the inventor.

“So good, Tony, so good, please,” Loki moaned, and gasped when the inventor abruptly took him in hand. “Yes, yes, fuck. Tony!” He came hard, and all but whined as the Tony didn’t slow or stop his thrusting, only wrapped his other hand around the trickster’s throat to pull him upright until they were pressed together close, Loki arched back like a bow. The hand still on the god’s cock squeezed a little harder, but stroked slower, pulling Loki back from the edge mercilessly toward another rise and fall, until the trickster was a half-sobbing wreck caught between the two states—orgasm and the desperation to reach it—to such an extent they seemed almost to blur and he came twice in quick succession, almost screaming with it, his whole body shaking, until he heard Tony swearing and praising him distantly before he felt the mad inventor come inside him and finally started to slide back down from bliss and back into reality.
He blinked himself back into self-awareness to find himself laying on his back freshly cleaned by a bit of Tony’s magic, feeling the inventor’s body settle into the bed next to him, the room full of the sound of their combined heavy breathing and the smell of sex. It was not a disagreeable place to find himself in the least.

“I’m keeping you for far more reasons than this,” Loki said, “but I can’t say that wasn’t some of the best sex of my life.”

“Same. You are kind of made of amazing in the sex department.”

“I have millennia more experience, and you are still my favorite.”

“... Really?”

Loki nodded, eyes fluttering shut. “You read me so well.”

“Having seen Sigyn and Angrboða, and since you introduced me to that cock-ring, I’m actually really flattered by that,” Tony mused.

“Mn... they were astonishing, I won’t deny in the least,” Loki muttered.

“But I...uhm...”

“You understand me as they did not in many ways, because you yourself are so similar to me, not the same, but of like mind in more ways, and I can tell from every action you take just how well you know my thoughts. It goes deeper than physical intimacy to a fundamental understanding of why I want what I want from you. The ways in which you know all that you do of me, all of my desires and motives, and still desire me so and seek to please me in ways which cater to all of that because you derive pleasure from it in the same ways, which are so easy for me to see in turn, adds far more to orgasm quality than I honestly anticipated.”

“Same here. Good to know.” He promptly sprawled across Loki’s chest comfortably with a huff of contentment.

Loki chuckled softly and carded his hand through the inventor’s hair. He pulled a light blanket over them both, and kept petting lightly, absently, until they both drifted into a deeply satisfied slumber.

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They woke up to find themselves, unsurprisingly, making headlines.

Tony couldn’t help but be amused by the stack of different magazines and newspapers Happy delivered, which were covered in photos the paparazzi had taken just the previous night. “Some of these photos are pretty good.”

“Pepper asked me to remind you to please not crash the press conference,” Happy said. “Which I’m about to go to.” He looked Tony over from head to foot, where the inventor was wrapped loosely in a dressing gown over his boxers and little more. “You look indecently pleased with yourself.”

“Life is good, Happy. Life is good.”

“I don’t even want to know what’s stroked your ego this time,” Happy sighed, shaking his head as
he headed back to the elevator. He seemed a bit surprised to find Loki already in it, carrying what appeared to be a tray with enough breakfast foods on it to feed a small army. “Morning.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hogan,” Loki said, and stepped out, letting the elevator doors shut behind him. If it occurred to him that a Norse god wearing nothing but a loose, soft pair of black pajama pants might be an unusual sight for most mortals, he didn’t bother to acknowledge it; although he let himself momentarily enjoy the appreciative head-to-toe-and-back-up-slower appraisal the inventor sent his way. To be fair, Tony then eyed the food and thermos of coffee on the tray just as hungrily. “I wasn’t planning to wait on you to wake, but Mr. Hogan’s arrival suggested you would wake soon enough.”

“So you brought me food pilfered from Steve’s table.”

“We would have both eaten it regardless.”

“Thanks,” Tony said reverently, upon being handed the thermos and a mug.

Loki sat beside him on the couch, setting the tray of food on one of the only open spaces left on the coffee table, which still had to be expanded by picking up a handful of magazines. Looking at them more closely, the trickster huffed a laugh.


“My favorites so far is ‘Can Tony Stark’s Mechanical Heart Really Redeem an Alien God of Evil?’ and ‘Tony Stark: Gone to the Dark Side, Where They Make them Tall, Dark, and Devastatingly Handsome’.”

Loki almost choked on a bite of his bacon-and-egg sandwich, but after a couple of coughs, had to set food aside to giggle hysterically.

“You’re pretty face alone has won over the tabloids, already,” Tony added. “Also, according to JARVIS, the internet. We have developed over a hundred Tumblr blogs dedicated to our relationship overnight. Twitter is in chaos. Reddit is full of conspiracy theories budding off of one another so fast that they’ve crashed twice since midnight. Fox News is foaming at the mouth in baffled confusion, more than usual, CNN seems to want to paint you as a tragic hero and a double-agent, while MSNBC thinks you’re still probably evil, but that our potential as an ‘interplanetary power-couple’ should strike intimidation and fear through the hearts of any of the Avengers’ enemies, so maybe it doesn’t matter that you’re evil as long as that’s a factor to consider. This should be an excellent day.”

He poured his second cup of coffee and snagged a toasted-and-schmeared bagel off the tray.

“So many of these magazines are trying so desperately hard to ask ‘who tops?’ without actually saying it, that I almost pity them,” Loki mused.

“I really hope someone interviewing us dares have the cajones to ask,” Tony mused. “Do you want to answer or shall I, if that comes up in an interview with both of us?”

“Oh, I imagine you know how to embarrass these people far better than I, being more steeped in earth culture. I would simply disconcert them, but you, darling, may feel free to outright annihilate them.”

Tony kissed his cheek. “I love the way your twisted mind works.”

“The appreciation is mutual,” Loki said, and took a bite from his bagel, picking up one of the
newspapers for a change of pace. He swallowed quickly, making a face. “Should we kill this man?” he asked lightly.

“What? Oh, you’re shitting me. They interviewed Hammer about this? Why? What the actual fuck, even?” Tony then read some of it and grimaced. “Maybe we should. It’s not like I haven’t thought about it before. A lot.”

“He is a former competitor, is he not?”

“Yes, and he’s in prison.”

“I could easily arrange an assassination,” the trickster said.

Tony thought about it for a minute. Then another couple of minutes, in very vivid detail, with a lot of blood-splatter involved. “I’m trying to think of reasons not to, and you know, I’m coming up a little short. I should probably ask Pepper, first.”

Loki nodded. “Fair, given he still has sufficient power and influence to be a popular media target and presence even from prison.”

“Why is he even so shocked I like men? For fuck’s sake, it’s like the man’s eyes don’t work, even with his glasses on.”

“He also charmingly suggests we might have a slightly abusive relationship which you were attracted to because of your Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

Tony emitted a noise like a snarl. “That man is one of the slimiest on this entire planet, in the most annoying possible ways. I can respect self-aware slime, but this never ceases to get on my nerves worse than anyone else.”

“Still want to ask Pepper first? I can arrange it in under an hour.”

The inventor took a deep breath, and let it out. It was harder to be good when there was the most tempting, subtle and efficient ‘be bad’ option offering him the kill button while shirtless and wearing low-slung black pants of such soft, thin fabric...

“Tempt me not with your siren song, she should have PR responses planned ahead of time for that, and you know it,” Tony insisted.

“You really wouldn’t be bothered by arranging for his assassination?” Loki inquired, a bit sincerely surprised.

The inventor thought about it, and hesitated. “Okay, you have a point.”

“Damn. I didn’t mean to,” the trickster sighed.

“Well, having had a hit out on me from a ‘business competitor’ I didn’t even actually know I was competing with, the idea does actually sicken me a bit. I never want to be like him, again,” Tony said quietly.

“Ah,” Loki said. “That, I can understand.”

The inventor shot him a silently questioning look.

Loki held his gaze and trailed a finger down his cheek, a self-deprecating half-smile tugging at his lips.
“Thanks,” Tony said.

“He should still die.”

“Yes. Just... not that way.”

Loki nodded, and that particular newspaper went up in flames quietly as he reached for another and banished the falling embers and ash with a quick spell. His face fell and he looked deeply uncomfortable.

“What is-” Tony stopped, staring and sipping the last of his second cup of coffee as he tried to figure out if he felt more hilarity or dread at what he was seeing. “They interviewed Thor.”

“How exactly did anyone have time to interview Thor about this?” Loki insisted.

“He’s in New Mexico. They’re two hours behind us on the East Coast. Someone had time to track him down and ask what the fuck was up. Do we dare read this feature?”

“I already am. I am also regretting his ability to speak.”

“Of course he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself from bringing the Odin parenting epic failures into this. He wants people to sympathize with you, and means well, but this is still slightly painful to read,” Tony sighed.

“I want to stab him,” Loki growled.

“I know, but he doesn’t know better.”

“Shouldn’t he?” Loki squeezed his eyes shut to stop himself reading further.

“He didn’t mention the attempted genocide against Jotunnheim, at least. He did mention the bit where you killed your real dad, but only if you squint.”

A terse, annoyed noise escaped the trickster’s throat.

“Actually... some of this isn’t so bad. Where did you stop?”

“The part where I told him Odin was dead.”

“Right, that. Well, keep going. It’s miserable for another few paragraphs, but the rest here... you should read.”

*My brother was not treated as he should have been, in Asgard. He is not like most Aesir, and should have been valued for his differences rather than condemned for them. The people of earth are also learning this lesson, as more people of different beliefs, ways of life, and races are finding their voices to cry out against oppression and make change happen. In Asgard, my brother was the only Jotunn, and the only ones who thought like him at all were other mages, and our mother. He tried to create change, but was always cut short in his aims by people unable or unwilling to change their beliefs or decades-old habits. If he had been adopted by a less stagnant culture, such as Alfheim, or even of earth, he would perhaps not have been a hero in the traditional sense, as Tony Stark is not a traditional hero compared to Steve Rogers in the eyes of some, but would be no less valued for his capabilities to do what no one else can, and achieve wonders the likes of which I could never have imagined, had I not seen him bring them to life with his own hands. This is why I, personally, hope*
that Asgard will not perceive him to be theirs to wield and manipulate, and hold to their own laws; they have too deeply betrayed him to deserve that honor.

He has found a new place, and I believe some new sense of purpose, in Jotunnheim as they rebuild, in the wake of a long ice-age he brought to an early end by means of his own brilliantly mad schemes to revive that world, and they have welcomed him, there. His own people have forgiven his actions against their world and their former king, even to the point of making him a major figure in their government with powers above even those of a king, while also accepting his chaotic nature and his need to wander, particularly to earth of late for obvious reasons to any with eyes, and thus giving him the opportunity to shine in matters of diplomacy, where he has always been more talented and subtle than I.

While I will not elaborate on how, also trust me when I say that in the years since his attack against this world, he has suffered for that crime, and has felt the impact of every life lost to it. I do not know that I would say he is redeemed, but he is changed, from how he was before I lost him to the void, and from how he was upon his return from it. He is again my brother, and I am honored to call him such.

Loki had a hand over his mouth halfway through the second-to-last paragraph of direct-from-Thor verbiage. Tony watched him carefully.

“You okay?”

The trickster nodded, and slowly set the paper aside. He then wordlessly pulled Tony across his lap to settle between his legs, back against the god’s chest, as Loki pressed his forehead into the crook of Tony’s neck and breathed very slowly and deliberately for a while.

Relaxing once he realized Loki was okay and just trying to process that emotional overload, Tony moved a plate of bacon closer, resting it on a stack of magazines he had already grimaced at the featured articles of, and flipped through a few more newspapers. He had set aside a few dull ones, and started reading one with some surprisingly accurate putting-together-of-events. He then noticed the writer of the article was an M. Young, and recalled that Sylvia had a younger sister who was a journalist. He pulled out his phone and ordered a couple of very expensive personalized gift baskets, one for each of the Young sisters, to be sent to them. Once he finished, and went back to the article, he had only managed to get another paragraph in when Loki sucked in a slightly deeper breath than the previous ones, held it a few moments, and let it all out before lifting his head to rest his chin on the inventor’s shoulder.

“Better?” Tony asked.

“More coherent,” Loki responded. “I no longer wish to stab him as much.”

“Good.”

“I still want to stab something, though, with his face on it. Just on principal.”

Tony sniggered. “Now that’s progress.”

“I... thank you for helping him understand,” the god said softly. “It means more to me than you will ever hear me admit again, to have my brother back.”

The inventor leaned back against him a bit, turning his head and gripping Loki’s chin to pull him into a brief kiss. “I know. Well, I don’t, fully, but I can see how much good it’s done you, and that makes
me feel ridiculously pleased with myself and happy for you, and all sorts of other disturbingly warm sort of feelings. It’s a little ridiculous, frankly.”

“You’re a bit ridiculous, as well,” Loki pointed out, smiling broadly.

“You too. I like to think we have complimentary forms of ridiculousness.”

“Mmm. Yes, I would call that an accurate assessment.”

Tony proffered a slice of bacon, and Loki took a bite out of it, reading over his shoulder now. “This article is good.”

“Note the author. I sent her a gift basket.”

“Young... Sylvia’s relative, I’m guessing?”

“Pretty sure that’s her sister. Or aunt? Either way. Sylvia probably got the call from her because she works for me, and made certain some of the facts got across pretty well. She’s not cited as a source, though, clever girl. We did cover a lot of it in our impromptu Q&A, and it’s good to only fill in gaps with believable leaps of logic, instead of sounding like they relied on another source. I’m a bit impressed.”

“Sirs, Pepper has arranged your radio interview for this afternoon at two. She recommends arriving by car, rather than teleportation, to avoid alarming them unduly,” JARVIS chimed in, from overhead.

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Loki responded.

“Well, Loki.” Tony gestured at the array of media representations of themselves spread out across the table. “Earth sort of welcomes you. A bit. They’re not sure.”

“I wouldn’t be, either, in their shoes.”

“I’m sure, of all people, you and I can talk them ‘round.”

Loki grinned and kissed the side of his neck. “Oh, yes. I’ve no doubt.”

Chapter End Notes

*“Tell them they’ll get everything they deserve... in the morning,” is a direct homage to one of my favourite fic authors and particularly her fic *Draco Malfoy the Amazing Bouncing... Rat?* because even years later it still makes me laugh hysterically
The Best Ways To Cheat at International Diplomacy Are The Ones No One Can Prove

Chapter Summary

In which Loki cheats at international diplomacy by scaring a lot of people and leaving no evidence.

Also contains the transcript of Tony Stark and Loki Lyesmithe's NPR interview.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

What Loki didn’t mention to his lover was that he had been very busy, the night after their meeting with those paparazzi, once they both had descended into slumber.

Once asleep, Loki began a new project altogether.

Dream-walker that he was, he could easily manipulate the dreams of one, or two, or several people at a time.

He had to call in a large favor owed him by a very powerful being, to which he had clung for a very long time. It was too precious, before then, to spend, but knowing the earth now as well as he did—knowing how volatile nations of the world could be, how hatefully many of the followers of Abrahamic religions with their fervent monotheism, and attitudes toward expressions of sexuality not approved of within their their holy texts, would react very poorly to the perceived sinful nature of the dangerously powerful Iron Man, with a very male figure (albeit not the most traditionally masculine) out of a pagan pantheon: a god of chaos, of evil, and lies, and thus to many of them all too representative of the Devil—he now knew it was time to call in that favor.

In sleep, he wandered out of time, a while.

Once there, he wandered into the wild dreaming, and down an old, familiar path.

It felt familiar, despite his having traversed it only twice before: once when he was called and knew not why, by whom, or to what place, as he had been drawn inexorably forward; and once with the king of this Dreaming, which in truth was just outside his own universe, or should have been, but a few lingering tangles remained where it had collided with the universe to which this Loki was native.

The Dreamlands spread out before him in surreal color, smelling of nostalgia and fields of wild herbs, at first, through rolling hills that passed more quickly than they rightfully should have, given the trickster’s slow, unhurried pace.

A crow circled overhead, eyeing him suspiciously.

The thing, Loki mused, about multiverses, was how confusing it could really be, for myths and realities to meet.

His mythological self had met a violent end after betraying the king of this realm, and been returned to the care of the Odin he knew, sans his eyes and will to live; although live he would, imprisoned
again as the myths all told.

He had been the creature of the Asgard living within men’s hearts, with whom Loki-the-dreamer-and-not-the-dream shared so many tales and attributes—except, oddly enough, fire.

Also, color-scheme; though their faces had been a little similar, the last occasion they had met, but Loki of myth had red and gold hair and yellow eyes that frequently seemed to have a more orange-red light when his anger was sparked, making them look like gold-glowing embers. The scars all around his mouth had looked deep and a little twisted, his features had been sharper, his nose a little longer, and he had looked older. Far older. Loki-the-dreamer had never been sure what to make of it: that the tale inspired by himself seemed so much more aged and wiser and more ancient than his own self.

Now, no strange mirror-images taunted him. Only the old guard of the innermost region of the Dreaming, occasionally dotted the landscape. In the distance, a round man with a dark beard waved at him as he walked. There was a pale yellow gargoyle on the short man’s shoulder. Behind him, a taller, thinner man with a wild mane of brown hair and a very pointed beard, was digging what might have been a grave.

Just before they were out of his sight, he thought he saw the tall thin man knock the other into the hole by application of his shovel to the rounder man’s kneecaps, leaving the gargoyle to spread its wings in an uncertain fluttering.

The crow circled lower overhead now.

“Been a while,” it called, after a few more minutes, as a vast palace came into sight, seemingly very distant. Loki knew, however, that the distance was illusory, so long as he followed the path of his memory, instead of the one before his eyes.

The trickster looked up at the crow. “Matthew, was it not?”

The corvid swooped down and landed on his shoulder. “You remember me, then,” he croaked. “Most dreamers don’t.”

“I am not most dreamers,” said the god of lies.

“Well, I mean... even the deliberate ones like you.”

“Dr. Strange does.”

“Does he?” Matthew asked, sounding pleased.

Loki nodded. “He made fond mention of you.”

“The boss does owe you both a debt or two,” the crow mused. “Maybe that’s the thing of it?”

“I remembered you my second visit, before I incurred that debt.”

“You were summoned, then,” said Matthew. “You needed to remember all of us. For the good of the boss.”

“Yes, I recall,” Loki murmured. “It did feel strange to recall you all so acutely. Perhaps it was alteration, the way one knows, in dreams, what one has to, for the sake of the dream.”

“You’re coming collecting, this time.”
The god nodded. “I am. Have the others who fell through the rift with me that day, into the Dreaming here, returned too?”

“Most have. Odin and a couple others from your universe still technically haven’t come through yet. Others aided the Endless back in your proper universe, in clearing up the mess caused by multiple realities getting rubbed up against each other a little too hard before and after Morpheus died,” said the crow, in thoughtful tones. “Every time I try to narrow down the list of things that should’ve warned us all ahead of time that the boss was gonna die, and knew it, that little rift fiasco is still in the top ten.”

“I still have not met Dream, from my own universe.”

“I had a long talk with Strange, about all that. He did meet the other one, you see. She’s apparently very different from the boss. Very different.”

“Once all our debts are paid, and the stories of that rift have endings without loose threads, will the paths leading here vanish?” Loki asked. “Will our universes ever fully separate again?”

“Your guess is better than mine. You’re the mage, here. I just used to be a poet.”

“Fair enough.”

They wandered in comfortable quiet, and within a mere minute were able to see the distant shapes of the guardians at the gate.

“The... other version of me, how is he?” Loki asked. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard?”

“Your shadow and your muse?” quoth the crow.

The god paused and turned to stare into the beady eyes of the poet-turned-bird. “He is not my muse, these days.”

“He is what people of earth saw in you, and admired of you, in ways that your own people couldn’t,” Matthew said. “That’s what Morpheus said, after the first time I met you, at the rift. You were almost a child, then.”

“I was quite grown,” Loki argued.

“You were a tenth your current age, though, right? It’s hard to guesstimate time, with the likes of you. You never age, and you come here through the wilder paths, where time is slippery at best. I look at you and I know your far older than you were, so far, from when you first came here. I don’t even know how long it’s really been for you; for us you’ve only been away a few decades, maybe.”

“For me... it has been far longer.”

“Right.”

“Was there one like me counterpart to the Loki I met? Does his Asgard exist outside the Dreaming, as mine does?” Loki asked.

“No. He’s all myth. No other planets involved, there. Just earth.”

“How very strange.”

The god considered. He had not given much thought to how much he had truly learned of himself, and how others saw him, based on meeting his... shadow. In his own native astral plane, there was
no separate version of him; his stories traced all back to him, and Asgard, and the rest of the nine
realms, rather than weave bodies and worlds out of the ether, housed solely in the metaphysical.

It had been daunting to meet a version of himself woven solely out of tales which, back home, were
all inspired by his actions. Loki-of-myth, by contrast, had been maker of his own tales and yet would
not have existed without the retelling of them, which had made him a god that humans had
worshipped and part-admired, part-feared, part-mocked but duly respected, too: twisted and selfish,
yet so clever, so capable, always providing solutions and fixes for problems his own and otherwise,
making him sly and untrustworthy, yet vital. Willow-thin and fleeting as flame, burning hot with
anger and dissatisfaction, always, yet despite wildness and the restless ever-moving quality to him,
Loki-the-myth had been as wise and clever as the Odin he was counterpart to; and yet he had been
unfettered by the weight of authority and responsibilities, which made him so capable, and slippery
and quick: light as wind whipping over a bonfire. He was expressive and venomous and unable to
contain his rage.

Unlike the myth, Loki-the-dreamer had grown into a creature of masks to conceal his emotional
volatility and natural restlessness. He was more quiet, more like a viper than a wildfire, and moved
smoothly as a river’s currents, slow and predatory until the time to strike was right, and then he was
always more force and strength than anyone quite expected, because he had made them believe him
to be smaller or more cautious than he truly was. Had he seen the flaws in his mythic self, and begun
to restrain them, but also seen what within himself was worth respecting, and developing that more
than the more reckless and pettily spiteful qualities about himself? It was a disturbing thought, and
yet also oddly comforting.

Strictly speaking, he and his fiery shadow had not got on very well: the older-seeming myth resentful
of the young upstart mage who had committed in the material world, the same acts which inspired
the tales and actions human minds had painted Loki-the-myth’s lives, and his grim fate.

Lost in such thoughts, Loki-the-dreamer had scarcely noticed his feet resuming their walk, until he
heard the booming greeting of the Wyvern, first of the three palace gatekeepers to speak:

“You have waited long to return here, little god.”

Loki stared up at the Wyvern, the horse-headed hippogriff, and the griffin. They made an
intimidating tableau, surrounding the entrance into the palace walls. “My life has not, until recently,
had anything in it of such worth to defend as I now do, of a nature which those of the Dreaming
might have aided me in protecting.” He bowed deeply, but slowly so the crow was not dislodged,
and just as unhurriedly regained his more upright posture. “Will you inform your master that I am
here, and would speak with him, if he might hear me?”

“We have,” said the hippogriff. “You are welcome, Loki Friggasson.”

The god was discomfited by how the guardian’s instinctive use of that name made his heart warm
and his stomach feel hollow in a bittersweet way. “Thank you,” he said, and made his way up the
stairs. They watched his every step, as he entered the palace.

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The crow left him halfway to the library, called away by a bizarre creature with a head made up of a
pumpkin, with simplified facial shapes carved into it.
He found the pale king of the Dreaming in the middle of a sunlight-drenched, cathedral-like open section of the palace’s impossibly vast library. Tall windows above the third floor, reaching almost to the top of each arches of the vaulted ceiling, were the source of late-morning light.

Considering that the room behind him showed starlit skies outside its windows, Loki tried to ignore any worries about the passage of time. Coming here, he had all the time he would need. In theory.

The king, dressed all in cloth as white as his skin, and almost as pale as his hair, had very dark eyes, like staring into distant galaxies, when he turned to look at the little god before him: one dreamer out of countless others, some with lives that outstripped Asgard by countless millennia, whose dreams he maintained and crafted and shared.

Loki held that gaze, but only barely. Mistress Death was but one small facet of this being’s elder sister, he was forced to recall, at times like this—Mistress death was but the collector and the bargainer, but others knew Death of the Endless, too. In theory. Most of them never told stories of her, or if they did, they knew not who or what they truly spoke of. Loki had met her only once, and had suddenly understood why Mistress Death had chosen his daughter for her post: she must have been reminded of the soft smile, and stubborn playfulness, of the Endless she represented, in the universe to which Loki belonged.

“You look well, Loki,” said Dream, in a voice like sun-warmed fresh linen. “I have to wonder what desperate straits you must be in, to call on a debt you have been owed for so long.” There was a cool appreciation in his expression, like he was pleased that the little god knew the value of the debt he was owed.

“Not dire yet,” said the trickster. “I would like to keep them that way, as subtly as possible. I have a plan, if you might hear it.”

“I would.”

“I require a few dreams,” said Loki. “I can craft most of their contents myself, but I need them shared amongst quite a great number of humans, for at least two nights, with greater variation on the second night. Some parts, I will need your aid in constructing, as well as sending. Some few may block even you, should they sense my magic and have wards against it...” His eyes narrowed a little as he thought of Doom. “One in particular.” He stepped closer, his expression open and more sincere than he might have wished it to be as he further added, “I need this to protect my love, and all that he has built, and all that I might have with him. I will do no harm, and I will conquer no one. I merely need them to know that I am not afraid of, nor incapable of, doing more than they have ever dared imagine, should they make me their enemy. I do not want to fight them, because they can cause me far more trouble than I care to let on.”

Dream considered thoughtfully. “Show me what you have made, and I will consider. You would not come here, without any constructs, asking such a complex boon as this one.”

“Of course,” the god responded, and raised his hands, green sparks swirling about his fingertips.

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And so it was that on earth that night, every world leader, every senator, every representative of any house of government, parliamentary or otherwise, with influence on international law, had the same dream that night, with a few individual touches just for each one of them, to leave a lasting
impression: personal touches. Loki would casually allude to, or even directly make mention of, each of their individual fears and deepest vulnerabilities that they never wished to have brought to the light. He did not even have to threaten. Just his knowing was enough to send any politician’s mind afame with thoughts of personal and public ruin. Loki Lie-smith whispered to each of them, that they were not alone, and all their colleagues too, would have more than a little trouble looking each other in the eye come morning.

“You will have a harder time,” he said, “spotting others in power who don’t look as nervous as you do now. I recommend you make no judgements of myself and my lover, publicly, until you have heard my story. Just a suggestion. Then we may chat like this again—so long as you do nothing too… rash.”

Then they awoke.

None of them dared discuss the dreams aloud in public, the next day, but private emails, text messages, and whispered confidences in quieter corners—one would say, “I had the strangest dream” and the other’s eyes would widen with horror, and both would suddenly know just how real it had been—soon spread the word more sinisterly than any news news story ever could, because these were all people who hid their most personal secrets from the limelight by habit and out of absolute necessity; all people who lied to the press and did not believe most media sensations to even truly be real, on some fundamental level.

Some of them were the people who decided what lies whole nations would be told, and made to believe (or made to purport to believe) was their true history, despite generations of contradictory history with holes punched in it, and pages ripped out, having taught them otherwise; and yet those teachings simultaneously told them that to point out the gaps and contradictions aloud to anyone else, was the quickest way to become one more forgotten name of many, one more page torn out like their stories had never existed in the first place.

Those leaders who had no close confidants, not really, overheard whispers from where they spied on other leaders, and felt their blood run cold. They were not safe. Their enemies were not safe. None of them could fight this force, but it could reach out and touch any of them, and share secrets none of them wanted to share.

From Russia, through North Korea, through the thoughts of many high-ranking party-members in China; through the mind of every monarch left in the world, even figureheads; through the hearts of every shrewd puppet-master politico, or spymaster, whose name was never officially listed to indicate their cabinet positions; through the paranoid high-ranking brains running terrorist groups be they domestic or international in nature; through the minds religious figures in power—although he agreed, at Dream’s request, to leave the Dalai Lama un-harassed—from the most powerful and respected like Pope and all of his bishops archbishops, and the Ayatollahs, to the least, even down to cult-leaders and would-be gurus with significant followings; through all of these minds hissed unaccustomed cautiousness and wary restraint, whether or not they dared admit it was also fear.

That fear and doubt and hesitation smothered the most violent outcries amongst their followers and within the reach of their influence, sometimes quiet and efficient, but sometimes so obvious and hasty that they earned strange stares from other ends of the world stage. Only the fringes remained foaming at the mouth, crying about indecency and sinfulness and Satan disguised as an old pagan god.

All of the expected outrage from around the world was strangely muted. Fervently conservative and religious groups shouted at leaders who would more normally take up their cries and repeat them through bullhorns, deafening the world stage and the media and calling for war.

Instead, there was no response. Or, on occasion, a hesitant shushing.
Instead, all the leaders of the world seemed to be... waiting.

The uproar on the internet, through media machines themselves, was very present, but strangely muted. The silence from all quarters who should have rightfully been ablaze with outrage filled the public with doubt. Those they had always counted on being able to inflame with this sort of story were stoic, offering “no comment at this time” from all around the world.

It freaked S.H.I.E.L.D. right the fuck out, as they tried to detect any evidence of mind control or dark magics affecting any and all world leaders.

It was into that nervous array of confused media machines around the world, all of them turned awkward and busy with non-stories and filler most of the day—however desperate for data about Loki and all of his motives, but unable to rely on their most-respectable commentators, because political sound-bites and bullet-points were suddenly thinner on the ground than they had ever been, with those usually responsible for approving them being... unexpectedly disapproving of any words at all spoken on the subject of Loki and/or Tony Stark, which might be traced back to them (oh, how they now knew the trickster would trace it back to them; they knew all too well)—that Loki’s interview with NPR was broadcast even over television channels the world over, accompanied by slide-shows of images and one or two muted video clips from the meeting with the paparazzi.

They all stared at the press-released images of Loki: a tall man with dark hair and bright green eyes, the small curve of his little half-smirk all too familiar to each and every one of them. They felt as though those images were watching him, and the first spoken words of his voice over the air made even the most confident of them try to repress a shiver, with success rates overall variable.

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Interview Transcript

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

On the list of people who generally need no introduction, Tony Stark is certainly one, with us from our studios in New York along with his new romantic partner Loki Lyesmithe, who does merit some introduction, given he was long considered to be solely responsible for the alien invasion in New York City just over three and a half years ago, but since then his track record has been almost but not quite heroic. Gentlemen, thank you so much for talking with us this evening.

LOKI LYESMITHE: Thank you for having us.

TONY STARK: It’s good to see you again, Rachel.
MARTIN: I thought I would hardly know where to start with you both, actually, but I really do think that I have to begin with: who is Thanos?

STARK: Well, that’s a long story. Like, eons, really.

LOKI: There really is no way to explain without sounding like a passage from a history book, or from a book of archaic bedtime stories from another age.

MARTIN: Well, given you’re sort of a mythological figure on this planet, as well as an alien from another world, I suppose that’s unavoidable. So, dry as it may be, just maybe give us a brief summary?

LOKI: The late Thanos was an extraterrestrial a couple of millennia older than myself, when I did meet him. His origins are unimportant for interplanetary security reasons, as well as for the protection of the reputation and dignity of the moon he was originally from. His list of crimes committed, particularly murders of entire worlds of sentient races, were vast in number long before my own birth. He was in love with the very concept of death, in a romantic sense, and he had the vast power and intellect to create tributes to her made of the bones of fallen empires. He is now very dead.

MARTIN: Wow. That’s quite a lot to announce over public radio.

STARK: Well, earth has missed out on a lot of galactic history, outside our own planet. Modern television outlets aren’t really the sort of venue suited to it, and given Loki’s a couple of thousand years old from a world that doesn’t even have television or video technologies through which they communicate their news and other media—just a cultural thing—this still seemed the most apt place available. Thank you, again, for having us. I know some of the major television-focused news networks must’ve given you all some trouble.

MARTIN: They did, until your fleet of lawyers interceded and made arrangements for this to be broadcast over television media outlets as well. Thank you.

STARK: No problem. You should’ve seen Rupert Murdoch’s face.

MARTIN: I’m sure you have pictures.

STARK: I neither confirm nor deny.
MARTIN: How are you finding the attentions of earth’s press corps, Mr. Lyesmithe?

LOKI: As Tony suggests, for cultural reasons, earth’s media-sphere is a very new experience for me, and as such, radio did seem the easiest place to start. It’s wonderful that you’re all so very cordial and relaxed here as well. I do feel quite welcomed.

MARTIN: I admit, we were slightly nervous to have both Tony Stark and extraterrestrial royalty in our studio in the same day.

STARK: Eh, he’s from Asgard.

LOKI: Most conversations of this sort in Asgard are about a campfire, usually after a hunt or some equivalent, with a bit more braggadocio than purest sincerity.

MARTIN: But you’re being sincere here?

LOKI: As much as I ever am.

MARTIN: Well, I do have to point out that you did advertise yourself to the paparazzi as a God of Lies.

LOKI: In myths here on Earth, I already had that title. Well... Earth and elsewhere. I gained that reputation from the fact that people often knew me as a trickster. Often, however, it was a deceptive form of truth-telling which brought about more downfalls that outright lies—except on the occasion that I persuaded Thor to cross-dress in order to retrieve his hammer from one who had stolen it.

MARTIN: [Laughter] I was not aware of that one.

LOKI: Well, it’s available in the old sagas, only a little distorted. I hardly think my brother would forgive me telling that to quite such a wide audience.

STARK: Good story, though.
MARTIN: I will certainly have to look it up, later. I must take advantage of your sincerity for the time being, and continue asking you more about Thanos. How, exactly, did you come in contact with him?

LOKI: I... made a series of highly unwise decisions.

STARK: That could be the tagline for either of our autobiographies.

LOKI: Accurate, yes. In this case, it comes down to politics, and a fundamental misunderstanding of my own position in the royal household of Asgard.

MARTIN: Thor’s interviews with the media have been enlightening in that regard.

LOKI: He has alluded to the fact I was adopted, and unaware of it until fairly recent, particularly for someone of my life-span. There was rather more to it, which he politely kept out of the public eye, but as it does have a key bearing on my current political occupation, and how I ran into Thanos, perhaps it is best to lay things bare.

MARTIN: Our audience would genuinely appreciate your frankness.

LOKI: To begin, the planet of Jotunnheim itself has a more complex history than earth may know. There were many tribes and cultures in that world, but they were all smothered under miles of ice by a fanatical group who stole a weapon from the world of ice: Nifelheim. They converted Jotunnheim into a world of winter like the one they had known, seeking to create their own empire far apart from the more peaceful, less ambitious kingdom they had lived in the shadow of in Nifelheim for so long. Without their strongest weapon, called the Casket of Ancient Winters, the leaders within Nifelheim were not able to stop them. All of the older tribes of Jotunnheim were lost under the ice, wiped out.

MARTIN: I can scarcely imagine... Sorry, please go on.

LOKI: I understand. Even though all of that happened centuries before my birth, the scope of that tragedy... Nothing like that had ever happened within the Nine Realms before, and all were horrified. For the innumerable lives taken during the hostile takeover of Jotunnheim, that icy tribe’s leader, whose name was lost to himself and to history by the means with which he propelled himself so far with powers not meant for him, was sentenced to death. Odin, who was but newly king of Asgard back then, was elected to conduct that execution, by a council made up of representatives from all of
the other realms in Yggdrasil save for Nifelheim. That fallen leader’s son, Laufey, became king of Jotunnheim some time after, and managed to steal back the weapon which started it all. He sought to convert more worlds as they had done to Jotunnheim, and set his eyes upon the earth, whereupon war with Asgard began, and raged for over a century. King Laufey was my father. In the aftermath of the war, I being very small by the standards of Jotunns, and my mother a traitor for having tried to contact Nifelheim in the last stages of the war with hopes to find other means of ending it before the violence escalated too far for her own people to recover from... Well, I was left to the elements, in a temple, to die. Odin found me there, and chose to bring me, along with the the weapon Laufey had stolen, back to Asgard with him. I believe it was his own stubborn pride, and the clear love for me that my mother, Frigga, developed very quickly and irreversibly, which persuaded him to raise me as his own son, rather than willingly inform me of the truth of my nature, for as long as he could help it. Instead, I discovered it myself, very late in my life, and quite by accident.

MARTIN: I can see how that would be rather devastating to find out.

LOKI: Context, at the time, made it all the worse. It was several years ago, when Odin had, in what I still to this day am uncertain was genuine foolishness on his part, or some attempt to test myself and Thor, arranged the ceremony for Thor to be crowned king of Asgard. Knowing Thor, at that time, to be a brash, war-hungry fool who still too easily mistook recklessness for bravery, I feared this outcome and renewed warfare the likes of which Asgard had been blessedly free of for so long. I had no one who would listen to my doubts, who did not accuse me of jealousy, rather than genuine concern. I thus arranged a minor act of treason to prove my point.

MARTIN: You—committed treason?

LOKI: Only a little, really. I knew it would harm very few, in theory.

STARK: He sort of invited a few frost giants into Asgard’s weapons vault to let them try to steal back the Casket of Ancient Winters. A side note: seriously, none of their weapons have non-antiquated names except maybe one called the Destroyer.

MARTIN: How did you do that without anyone suspecting you?

LOKI: [Low laugh] Magic, Miss Martin.

STARK: It’s sort of his deal.
LOKI: Not only mine.

STARK: [Throat clearing]

LOKI: Their theft was unsuccessful. They were immediately disintegrated by the guardian of the vault, called—as Tony mentioned—the Destroyer.

MARTIN: How did this foil Thor’s being crowned?

LOKI: Oh, it happened right in the middle of the ceremony, and rather threw things into sudden chaos, because the All-Father detected their arrival immediately. Timing is everything, you know. Even seeing that the attempt was unsuccessful, was not enough to prevent a violent argument immediately, between Thor and Odin, in which the All-Father at last realized that Thor was far too eager to take Asgard right back into a state of perpetual warfare without hesitation, and retracted the crown from his son’s grasp. It was, in a word, perfectly elegant.

MARTIN: So where did it all go wrong?


STARK: [Laughter]

LOKI: I swear, more than half of the worst troubles I have ever gotten into, in my very long life, were due to pulling his arse out of the fire, and this was no different. He, in all of his... I can’t call it wisdom. Even now, I cannot. Thor decided that we—meaning I, his dear friend Lady Sif, and their comrades in arms known as the Warriors Three—must go to Jotunnheim immediately and confront them demanding to know how those three Jotunns got into the weapons vault, and why they had suddenly gone after it again. I could do naught but play along, and try to handle damage control, lest Thor incite another war, get himself and his friends killed, or more likely both.

STARK: All while not letting on that it was you who had let them in.

LOKI: That was the easiest part. No one still alive in Jotunnheim knew either. I’m no fool, Tony.
STARK: I dunno, this sounds like a comedy of errors so far, to me.

LOKI: Well to you, of course it does.

STARK: You’re the put-upon voice of reason surrounded by fools, no, I get it. No wonder you get along so well with Pepper.

LOKI: [Laughter]

MARTIN: So what exactly happened? Did you all actually go to Jotunnheim?

LOKI: Regrettably, yes, we did; although I do not regret it now as much as I did shortly afterward. We did run into King Laufey and a few squadrons of his troops—all male, rather inexplicably. Jotunn women are among the fiercest warriors in all the nine realms. Perhaps my mother’s betrayal caused him to fear them a little more and distrust them amongst his soldiers’ ranks, but I digress. Laufey suggested that the house of Odin was full of traitors, and after a bit more arguing and posturing between him and Thor, I had just persuaded Thor to leave, when one of the soldiers insulted Thor’s masculinity, and a fight broke out. We barely escaped alive, all due to my quick thinking, because Odin arrived just in time to prevent us all being overtaken and murdered.

MARTIN: Your quick thinking?

LOKI: I informed a temple guard to tell Odin of our intended destination, just before we left. I knew he would panic and show up armed to the teeth, and be the only chance Asgard had left to prevent renewed war with Jotunnheim; although Laufey did declare war regardless, but given he had no weapons capable of attacking Asgard at the time, it was a rather moot point. Odin then took us all home via the bi-frost.

MARTIN: I imagine that a scolding of sorts followed all that?

LOKI: Mostly for Thor. I did try to defend him somewhat, but was growled at incoherently for the mere attempt, and gave it up as a lost cause. The rather more unexpected part of the whole event was Odin banishing Thor to earth, stripped of all his powers, until he could prove himself sufficiently worthy to again wield Mjolnir, which previously hadn’t had that particular stipulation applied to the wielder, which in turn, seems to me rather short-sighted, don’t you think?

STARK: It’s okay, Loki dearest. I can’t pick it up, either.

LOKI: Can it, Stark.

MARTIN: Ignoring the comedic opportunities there... How did his banishment effect you?

LOKI: Oh, the usual. It turned all of his friends against me, for they suspected I was merely jealous of his... Something? I’m not even sure, any longer, what exactly I’m meant to be jealous of. While Odin initially raised us to believe we were both born to be kings, probably out of some vain idea of reintroducing me to my Jotunn heritage while I might be young and malleable enough to be a good puppet-king of Jotunnheim one day—which he rather missed the boat on, possibly due to Frigga not wishing to see me go and being shrewdly manipulative in ways I can at least respect for their artfulness—I never honestly expected to have a throne. I am the younger of two sons and Asgard is not exactly an easily divided kingdom. It’s simple common sense, really. I was rather content, being manipulator from the shadows until the casket incident and Odin’s confession.

MARTIN: Casket incident?

LOKI: Well... [Throat-clearing] During the battle, in Jotunnheim, one of my opponents seized me by the arm. The cold of his touch was sufficient to shatter my armor and leave my forearm bare under his touch. To any Aesir such as Thor, this would have burnt their skin black with frost-bite, but instead, my flesh changed to the same blue hue as my opponents. It is a biological reaction to threat, or extreme cold, amongst Jotunns with an elemental gift for ice: their skin changes to blue, their eyes turn red, their skins become a bit tougher and denser, and they can wield ice as an extension of themselves. My skin changed, as though this Jotunn and I were one and the same—right before I snapped out of my shock and killed him. After return to Asgard, I initially thought that I must be cursed, but that was the more optimistic thought: that I was being punished for my wrongs as a traitor, instead of lied to all along, by those I trusted most. I was confronted by Odin in the weapons vault, when he found me touching the Casket of Ancient Winters and exposing myself to its cold to see the transformation again, and try to confirm some of my theories. I demanded the truth, and he informed me that he had adopted me with intent to return me to the throne of Jotunnheim and bring about more permanent peace and understanding between the realms, instead of renewed warfare as Thor had just begun, which he cited as an event which ruined those plans for good.

MARTIN: You sound rather angry about that, even now.

LOKI: I still am, in truth. I loved that man as my father, aspired to his example, or what I had
believed to be his example, for all of my life. He too was a trickster, and still is, though few are sharp enough to still see it; and yet, in all that time I had learned and improved upon all his tricks and sought his approval, he had never truly seen me as his son; even after all that time, he still looked at me and thought I was to be a puppet monarch to further the interests of the Aesir among frost-giants, and his foolish pride had let him believe that still possible, only until Thor began hostilities with them anew, and he then blamed Thor, for that impossibility.

STARK: It would’ve been much better if he’d let you in on the game earlier and acted as a partner with you in it, rather than chess-master, basically.

LOKI: Yes. As a pawn, left in the dark about my own nature, not only was I less a known quantity to him than I had ever imagined, and drastically underestimated in my capabilities and my natural disposition, but I was also considered either too fragile or too potentially disloyal to be informed before then of my true heritage; I am still not sure which is the truth, nor which is more insulting to contemplate.

STARK: Which is why you lashed out a bit and between that and Thor’s banishment weighing on him, Odin got a case of the vapors?

LOKI: [Snort] He fell into a catatonic state, long overdue as it is normally a yearly occurrence he had been trying to avoid in the face of so many dramatic events occurring in such a short span of time. It is called the Odinsleep, and that restive state is vital to regulation of both his life and powers, and the life-forces channeled through all the nine realms of Yggdrasil.

MARTIN: How did you respond to that?

LOKI: [Throat-clearing] Well... I was shocked, actually, and horrified. I called for help. Once he was stabilized under healing magics, my mother, Queen Frigga, urged me to take my place as king, while Odin slept and my brother was banished. Her assurances and insistence, as well as some lingering spite toward Odin and desperation to prove myself, drove me to accept the throne, while she watched over Odin and contributed to his recovery with her own powers.

MARTIN: Your mother must have also known your true nature all along, though, correct?

LOKI: Yes.

MARTIN: You’re very careful not to refer to Odin as your father, however.
LOKI: He has lost the right. She has never loved me with less than her whole heart, and her keeping that secret from me was out of love and selfishness, which I can more easily forgive than pride, ignorance, and lack of care at all for the truth of me, and all that I am.

MARTIN: Would she normally have taken over?

LOKI: Oh yes. On every previous occasion Odin had gone into the Odin-sleep, she ruled when he did not, while he took that necessary period of rest. The throne had never been handed to Thor or I before, certainly. She was the only one entrusted with regency, even temporary.

MARTIN: You must have been rather shocked, then.

LOKI: I was, yes. I was also losing my grip, actually. It is... as a mage, particularly one of my age and experience, all the power I possess about my person, and the very foundation of my control of my magic in all that power, is a sure knowledge of who I am, and what my will is. My will consists of what I want and need, and what I consider to be suited to my purposes, and thus requires a surety of knowing who I am, and where I stand, in my own life’s narrative as I see it. Does that make sense?

MARTIN: Mostly, yes... I think.

LOKI: I know it can sound vey strange, to people unfamiliar with magic of my sort, which most of earth’s populace are. Tony showed me how some technologies here on earth respond to human brain-waves, or in some cases are integrated into neural circuits. Magic is like learning to use such an interface, but with much more sensory feedback. It’s as much a part of me as my limbs and my senses.

MARTIN: I think I see. And you control it the same way anyone would control a limb?

LOKI: Yes, but it is a little more abstract. If I do not believe without hesitation that my magic will do as I will it to do, then it becomes clumsier, and less responsive. It is the confidence of self-knowledge and expectation which allows for any refined control.

MARTIN: Sort of like how an athlete slipping into “the zone” mentally performs better than one who is caught up in anxious thoughts?
LOKI: A fair comparison, yes. When that confidence is lost, control and execution of even well-known spells becomes difficult. In my case, as a mage, that confidence is anchored in place by introspective self-awareness, self-knowledge, and feeling in control of my own life. Volatile emotional states, in mages, also cause our magic to become more volatile as it responds to our subconscious distress, which can be disastrous if it’s not contained.

MARTIN: I see. And you were experiencing a lot of instability, at that time.

LOKI: Yes. When I found out of Odin’s lies... Well, there went a major cornerstone of my identity as I had always thought I knew it to have been, suddenly ripped out from under me. My confidence in my own self-knowledge being shattered beyond my control, my magic began to be far more difficult to wield and contain, and the more difficult it became, the less confident I could feel in my own capabilities as a whole, which exacerbated it all still further. The strain of maintaining control wore on my psyche, giving me no time for the introspection needed to recover my self-knowledge. It burnt me out from the core, and the creature I was on the exterior, seated on the throne, was one whose actions I guided through a haze of pain, irrational paranoia, and visceral hatred brought on by feeling like nothing short of an animal in pain.

MARTIN: All because of your magic?

LOKI: And Odin’s lies, yes.

STARK: By the way, if anyone has just tuned in: magic is sort of a real thing. If you don’t believe me, please look to your left.

[Startled noises from within the studio.]

MARTIN: Oh! God. How did you do that?

LOKI: I...

STARK: For anyone who missed that, or didn’t look left: those who did just saw me grinning at them from approximately six inches away from their face. Yes, every single listener.
MARTIN: Yes, people are calling in a lot suddenly. I’m afraid, one or two legal threats will doubtlessly be amongst those calls.

LOKI: Included in that illusion was a calming spell to prevent any heart trauma, I solemnly swear. You’re all fine. I’m an expert.

STARK: That was actually magic, incidentally. No mechanical means of distribution.

MARTIN: Wait... was that Loki, or...

STARK: Well, I’m hardly known for quite that sort of magic trick, am I?

MARTIN: Admittedly no. So you haven’t learned any tricks of the trade from Mr. Lie-smith?

STARK: Well, I’ve learned a lot about magic, and I know a lot of how it works.

MARTIN: But no spells of your own?

STARK: Well, in Asgard, actually, there’s not much difference between the sort of things I do with machines and what they classify as magic. Right, Loki?

LOKI: [Throat-clearing]

MARTIN: Are you all right, Mr. Lie-smith.

LOKI: I’m quite fine, yes. Sorry. I got momentarily distracted.

MARTIN: Oh... okay.

LOKI: He’s quite right; although magic for those who actively use it is about as personal as, for example, the machines and systems operating within his own home. Just as basic computer programs
respond to commands based around a programming language, magic within a mage responds to emotional and psychological states. Consider the way that the musical score in a film or play might increase in volume, pace or shrillness depending upon the mood of the scene a director is trying to portray; usually it is fitting, but when things fall apart, the sounds become a cacophony, disjointed from the visual imagery, tricking the mind and making unfolding events harder to piece together. When a mage’s foundation of control is eroded, particularly while one is in a highly emotional state, the coherency of that mage’s own personal narrative falls apart. We lose track of who we are and what our purposes are, and without that anchor to steady us, it becomes painful to hold in the powers which normally obey our will, for we no longer know what that will should be and so it threatens to run wild and whip through us and anyone and anything nearby, casting all about like dry leaves in a storm.

MARTIN: Oh, wow.

LOKI: In that mental state, I did not... see events concerning Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three very clearly. Nor did I respond as I should have; instead, I lashed out, like a cornered animal, and I did not do justice to that throne while I held it.

MARTIN: How, exactly, do you feel that you failed, then, as a king?

LOKI: I was too much in pain, and afraid of my own failure and of perceived betrayals, that I convinced myself only the most brash, Thor-like destructive behavior against Asgard’s enemies would prove my loyalty and worth. It became an obsession to me, that only something so extreme could possibly make my ends seem to be worth the means it took to achieve them. I came up with a solution, which I thought would bring about a form of permanent peace, and punish Laufey and his followers for all the millions of deaths they had wrought when they smothered all of Jotunnheim in ice. It was not a sane plan, and I did not consider it so even then by my own standards, but at the time actions like Thor’s (which always seemed like insanity to me) appeared to be more often rewarded than when I tried to be more sensible and reserved. My hesitation and caution having been eroded by my desire to end the pain I felt, I rushed headlong into that plan, which I still regret doing, even now.

MARTIN: You lashed out against Jotunnheim somehow?

LOKI: I did.

MARTIN: How did you do it?

LOKI: Well... before it began, I had visited earth to bid my brother goodbye, and I may have misled
him into belief that his father was dead. His friends asked me to end his banishment, which I refused, causing them to go against my orders and seek him out on earth. This hastened along my plans considerably. I invited Laufey and his own soldiers to Asgard, and tricked them into believing they could have the casket, and Odin’s life. When Laufey made an attempt to assassinate Odin, and I stopped him with lethal force, by which time Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three had returned to Asgard. As I reassured our mother that Jotunnheim would pay for what they had done, Thor arrived, and we fought. I fled away, hastily converted a major piece of Asgardian infrastructure into a weapon, aimed it at the world of Jotunnheim, and fired. Thor and I fought further, and he destroyed the bi-frost and the rainbow bridge both in order to stop the destruction I had begun, but not before it had taken many lives. Odin caught us both before we fell off the last remains of the bridge. He held Thor by the arm, and Thor himself held me aloft where I was still gripping my spear. I... made clear what my intentions had been, and was told succinctly that I was wrong and had done wrong. With that having shattered the remains of the twisted hopes I had clung to in my madness, I chose to let go, and fall into the distortion of time, space, and magic all, from where the bi-frost, Asgard’s means of traveling between all of the realms of Yggrasal, had shattered in the midst of firing, and I fell very, very far.

STARK: The next thing we heard of him involved theft of a top-secret mystery power-source, here on earth, before the invasion of New York, but he met Thanos somewhere in-between there.

LOKI: In-between is an apt descriptor for the place, as well as the time.

MARTIN: How badly did that fall affect you? You’re very strong, as we all know. There is footage of your fight against Captain America, in Germany. It’s been enjoying renewed internet fame, lately. You, ah, fairly wiped the floor with him, before Mr. Stark appeared.

LOKI: It was a long fall. In truth, I do not know how long it lasted, or if linear time could even have been properly determined, as any form of measure while I was caught up in it, but it felt constantly like a descent downward, despite my having little or no idea which way was up at any point in time throughout. Of the fall itself I recall scorching heat, and aching cold, intermittently, and agonizing pain as I strained with all of my power not to be vaporized or shattered by either extreme. I also experienced various other horrors not fit for sharing with polite company, which haunt me to this day.

MARTIN: That sounds a little Lovecraftian.

STARK: I showed him a bit of Lovecraft for that very reason.

LOKI: It is an apt comparison. As a result of all that, I was barely alive even before I landed very hard in a forsaken pit of rock on what seemed to be a half-dead world, where gravity was selectively suspended in creative stairways and spires. I created a considerable crater, almost cracking through
into the air below one of their largest floating platforms of stone. A few of the Chitauri, a race then new to me, and whose gruesome faces caused me considerable panic in my half-hallucinatory and fever-weakened state at the time, dragged me out of that pit and up into the oily moonlight, then down into a laboratory. I was kept there as a research specimen by their master, the Other, for a long time.

MARTIN: The... Other what?

LOKI: I know, it’s such a ridiculous name, but he insisted on being called ‘The Other’ for reasons I don’t even care to understand any longer.

MARTIN: Oh, I’m sorry. That is a bit odd.

LOKI: People of that creature’s degree of psychological disturbance are seldom sensible of their own eccentricities being patently absurd, after a certain point. Trust me, I’ve met far too many such people, in my time.

MARTIN: You said they kept you as a research subject?

LOKI: Yes. A mere biological specimen. I was only given time to recover between rounds of experimental trials as allowed them to satiate more of their curiosity concerning what I am capable of. It was a deeply unpleasant experience.

MARTIN: You were tortured.

LOKI: As you would define it, yes. To them, I did not have enough worth to even be considered above the average lab rat, at that time, so it probably would not have occurred to them to consider it so.

MARTIN: Are you all right, Mr. Stark? You look rather pale.

LOKI: Tony?

STARK: Fine. I’m fine. Paste, right?
LOKI: [A low laugh] Yes. While still conscious.

MARTIN: Excuse me?

LOKI: Nothing at all. Just reassurance.

STARK: [Cough]

LOKI: I survived their various experiments and trials, and once they had learned all that they felt they could learn from my biology, someone finally asked me what my name was. It was noted, and a few days later I was given clothing, and brought into a proper medical ward to begin physical recovery. They had heard of me, and once I could walk unaided again after a week or so of far better sustenance, quarters and treatment overall, I was brought before the being known as Thanos. He asked me if I knew about a device called the tesseract, and of course I did. It was a long-lost trinket of Odin’s, but before its loss, I had made considerable study of it, and even studied under those who had made creation of the artifact possible and taught Odin himself all of its workings. He showed me where it was, on the now-distant planet earth, and all of the tremors it was giving off as humanity experimented upon it. I was able to tap into its energy, even half a galaxy away, because I knew the tesseract, and it remembered me, in its way. All artifacts of sufficient age and power have a sort of mind of their own, or occasionally minds, plural, and it was... afraid, of Thanos. It was uneasy, being subjected to his rapt attention, and as such he could not call to it, as I could. I could use it to return closer to home, but not alone. I required aid and the only ones around me with the power to provide that aid had been torturing me for several months, but I am not called the god of lies for nothing.

MARTIN: You played along, then?

LOKI: Yes. I knew what he wanted to hear. I knew that petty ambitions were ones he would be happy to take advantage of and, having had time in quiet and all-too-humble misery to recuperate, my anger and spite toward my captors had given me renewed purpose, however cracked and still slightly unstable. I knew who I was, who I needed to be, both for myself and just for that particular audience, and precisely what I wanted to achieve. As such, I lied.

MARTIN: What did you tell him?

LOKI: I told him that I was the rightful king of Asgard, betrayed, and that while the harm his minions had done me was vast, I might forgive it, for a chance to burn the place my traitorous brother had loved more than his own kingdom and myself.
MARTIN: I sense this was parody of what you thought others believed you might say, back in Asgard?

LOKI: Quite right. Sif, and many other warriors like her in Asgard, would sooner believe that than anything more true I might utter in my own defense. They perceived in me little more than jealousy of Thor, and while I do admit I felt some—what younger brother never did?—there was always far more to me than that.

MARTIN: What did Thanos offer you, for your revenge?

LOKI: It was clear enough that he believed “ruling the earth” would appeal to me, and even expected me to request it, just based on how obviously he was fishing for it, when we spoke. Thus, I made it seem that such a thing was indeed my interest: to subjugate the people whom my brother loved for their freedoms and the beauty and tragic brevity of their lives. I bargained with Thanos, in little ways, led him to offer the entirety of the Other’s Chitauri armada, every last Chitauri body the Other had created and all their forces, to my command, if I would only open the door for them, with the tesseract, and then turn it over to the hands of the master of their master: Thanos himself. He believed, rightfully, that the tesseract could open a portal to let in even their largest ships.

MARTIN: Yes, you mentioned, in your first rather impromptu press release with those paparazzi, that you deliberately kept it smaller? Have you any proof of that?

STARK: Mine, and Dr. Selvig’s work confirmed it. Also Dr. Bruce Banner acted as an independent confirmation after the fact. Selvig had designed the portal device to open a door as vast as he could. Loki tweaked the design before implementing it, with results every New Yorker might remember. When I steered a bomb through that portal and saw the other side, there were huge ships there, way bigger than could make it through that door, which was one of my first clues that something really wasn’t right about the whole setup. There were some trying to retreat, but it was too late, and we wiped every one of them out.

LOKI: [Wistful sigh]

STARK: And this little shit is still proud of getting us to do that FOR him.

LOKI: I am. It was masterful work. I do regret that I did not get to see it myself.
STARK: I usually regret that I did.

LOKI: I... am sorry, for that.

STARK: [Quiet throat-clearing]

MARTIN: You did make further logistical arguments for how you could have more successfully implemented the invasion, if you had wanted to, but have you ever thought of ways you could have made it less successful, and caused less collateral damage?

LOKI: I have. I will not begin to suggest that mistakes were not made, or that lives lost to the Chitauri were necessary losses. None of it should have been necessary, and I cannot say that my life being spared, and my psyche intact, was truly worth the cost of others’ lives.

MARTIN: Do you regret that loss of life? I mean, given I’m used to interviewing people with life-spans of the shorter, mortal variety, I did have to think about this question differently, with you. You live for so long, and have so much affect on people and whole worlds that single human lives surely seem lesser, to you?

LOKI: It is difficult to say. As you suggest, it’s a matter of scale. I might yet have a few millennia to save more lives than I have taken, even slowly, with only a few behavioral improvements, but my very nature makes me rather chaotic and unpredictable to most people. I am not a safe bet, but I am capable of things most humans would never dream of. That does not excuse my actions, where they cause tragic and unnecessary loss of life, but I have much left to do, and am grateful to still be alive and able to pursue that.

MARTIN: Do you consider yourself redeemed, at all, by the aid you’ve provided toward protecting the earth from the likes of Thanos?

LOKI: Not at all, no. That was all part of entirely selfish deal-brokering between myself and Mr. Stark, when he revealed to me that he knew I had deliberately sabotaged the invasion. He may have also further threatened to ally with Thanos long enough to aim him at Asgard, then turn the Kree and their allies upon him when he was weakened by Asgard’s forces and unsuspecting of betrayal. It would have worked, and we both knew it, so he offered me a chance to instead ally myself with the Avengers, which I declined.

MARTIN: You declined?
LOKI: I had little interest in the high morality content of the rest of the team, but Mr. Stark had
shown himself more flexible, and capable of keeping up with machinations and the whole playing
field of interplanetary political power-brokering, on par with myself. I thus declined to ally with the
Avengers, and offered instead to ally with Tony himself, no more and no less.

STARK: I figured I could live with that. It gave us both more room to maneuver, diplomatically and
otherwise.

MARTIN: How is it you were able to trust him, Mr. Stark?

STARK: Thor had already told me about an interesting quirk shared by everyone who lives for long
enough in Asgard to be considered a citizen. Asgard has magic basically flowing through all of
everything, saturating the place more than most other realms, so it’s in the air and food and water:
everything. A lot of those magics are of a balance-preserving nature, which affects people as well as
things like seasonal weather patterns, crops, even animal and Aesir fertility rates. There’s also some
balance-of-power aspects that are more subtle, like the the king being weaker when people trust and
approve of him less, and stronger when confidence is high. Along those lines comes in this
convenient little oath-breaking rule: any god of Asgard who swears a solemn vow, and promises to
do something, they have to do it. If they actively resist doing it, they undergo an agonizing series of
symptoms like their blood boiling in their own veins, theoretically up to the point of death but no one
has lasted out the pain long enough to find out, even after millennia of people in Asgard living with
this little quirk.

MARTIN: What promise did you make to him, Mr. Lie-smith?

LOKI: Actually, it was Tony who outlined the more detailed terms. I merely agreed to them.

MARTIN: Mr. Stark?

STARK: I saw it as a fairly sound investment, after having that talk with him.

LOKI: I think you said something like [Tony Stark impression] “Allies share plans, you know. And
information, and resources. That’s part of the fine print here. You don’t pull disappearing acts or fail
to explain the reasons behind your actions to me, from the moment you know he’s coming and
inform me of it, until he’s dead at your feet. Also, you accept input and modify plans when it’s
important, unless you can come up with better options.” [Normal voice] The death in question was
Thanos’, which I insisted on delivering personally, as one of my own requirements for the deal.
STARK: Damn, you really remember word-for-word?

LOKI: Don’t you?

STARK: Well, yeah, that’s how I know it was word-for-word.

MARTIN: You specified the alliance would start... when, exactly?

LOKI: When I had detected Thanos and had a timeline for when he would arrive. It took about three years for that to happen, the first year or so of which I spent imprisoned.

MARTIN: How exactly did you get out of that prison sentence in order to be seen fighting alongside Thor in England, against the being the public knows as Malekith.

LOKI: My brother was forbidden from leaving the realm of Asgard with the artifact Malekith most desired. Malekith’s forces did considerable damage to the city, and while they did not successfully steal what they came for, they nearly killed my mother, which I would never forgive them for attempting.

MARTIN: Did that allow him to trust you, somewhat?

LOKI: [Laughter] No, not at all; however, the artifact Malekith was after, called the Aether, had inconveniently stored itself in the blood of Dr. Jane Foster, which led to her being in Asgard in the first place. Our father was outraged by her presence and involvement, and my mother’s state took quite a toll on him. Thor knew that Asgard would risk too much, letting Malekith try to attack them again, and even then the artifact in Dr. Foster’s blood would have eventually destroyed her. He was desperate for an alternative plan, and came up with the idea of luring Malekith to another realm by taking Dr. Foster away from Asgard, and striking out at Malekith once he had drawn the Aether out of her, leaving both Malekith and the artifact vulnerable. It wasn’t going to work, I knew, but I was enraged by the injury done to Frigga, and he needed me to get from one realm to another without the bi-frost, so I let him free me from my prison; although the cuffs he then applied to me were inconvenient.

STARK: I wish I could’ve seen your face when he managed that.
LOKI: I transported us to Svartalfheim. We tricked Malekith into believing I had betrayed Thor and Dr. Foster, creating an illusion to make it look as though I had cut off Thor's hand before he could call Mjolnir back to him for use against me, and throwing both of them before Malekith, asking only a seat from which to watch Asgard burn, in exchange. Conveniently, because his most trusted second had earlier broken all of the other prisoners out of Asgard's cells, except myself—I seemed to frighten him—during their attack on Asgard, he was able to confirm that I was no ally of the All-Father.

MARTIN: Then you attacked when he drew out the Aether.

LOKI: Yes, and stopped Malekith from absorbing it not at all. He left the world and his Kursed lieutenant was left behind to kill us. He nearly succeeded, but I managed to trap him within the blast-radius of one of his own weapons. Almost immediately after, Dr. Foster, whom I had been shielding from the blast bodily, put the cuffs back on me before I realized she even had them, which I respect her for in retrospect, but at the time, I didn’t react well, and Thor might have struck me. I reluctantly followed Dr. Foster and Thor as they sought shelter from an oncoming sand-storm, and was pleased to discover a gravitational anomaly within the cave they had chosen—a byproduct of the rare alignment all of the realms were coming into at the time, which she and Dr. Erik Selvig have written much about in the scientific community—which I was able to manipulate sufficiently to take us back to earth. Dr. Foster quite surprised me, after that, by quickly coming up with technological means to bring about more of such anomalies at will within a certain radius, and we used that to our advantage, eventually destroying Malekith before he could spread the more violent aspects of the Aether throughout all of the realms like a cancer.

MARTIN: At which point, you quietly took opportunity to exit stage left?

LOKI: [Laughter] Yes, quite, after managing to twist one of her anomalies to remove key sections of the cuffs about my wrists, with a bit of more refined magical tweaking. I was then free to flee at my leisure, and immediately seized upon that opportunity, heading to my daughter’s kingdom in Helheim to recover and enjoy the pleasure of a place whose ruler would never extradite me to Asgard even if they asked nicely. It was at her urging, actually, that I made diplomatic contact with Nifelheim for the first time, and eventually was welcomed into their kingdom as kin to their most influential leaders.

MARTIN: Really?

LOKI: Yes. In part, it was gratitude. I had taken the Casket of Ancient Winters with me, when I fell off the remains of the rainbow-bridge, and managed to keep ahold of it, and see to it, before I opened the portal for the Chitauri, that one of my oldest friends carried it, however well-disguised, to my daughter for me. She returned it to the Three of Nifelheim, who stand higher in rank than their monarchy, as a gift of good faith, and told them it was I who had made that possible.
MARTIN: Why give them that weapon?

LOKI: While highly weaponizable, the Casket was not originally designed for war-like uses. It is a sacred artifact for them, the heart of every winter their frozen world will ever encounter, and The Three who created it did so in order to channel the raw elemental powers of that world, which changed them into the first Jotunns to have icy elemental capabilities in their very nature, and their blood. Any other Jotunns who came to Nifelheim and equally revered the severe beauty of winter there, as was common before Jotunnheim was so tragically frozen over, they could choose to stay by becoming a citizen under the Three, who used that casket to gift similar elemental powers to those who wished to live there without threat of the cold potentially killing them. Any offspring of people so converted bore the same powers and nature without alteration.

MARTIN: Wow. That’s actually kind of... strangely beautiful.

LOKI: Nifelheim’s nameless city is a very peaceful, contemplative place. Strange beauty is a specialty of their nation.

STARK: I’d like to go there, sometime.

LOKI: I... I’d like that, as well.

[The host requested that it be noted in the transcript, that the look on Loki’s face at this point in the interview was distinctly a bit besotted, despite the man’s otherwise impeccable composure throughout all the rest of the interview.]

STARK: Yeah, that look, right there, is why television wasn’t our first choice, for this. I don’t want to share that with anyone else more than necessary.

LOKI: You are an ass.

STARK: You love me anyway.

MARTIN: How... exactly did that happen? If I might ask?
LOKI: Slowly, unintentionally, with the both of us distrustful and disbelieving most of the time, to the point of being moderately embarrassing in retrospect.

STARK: Well, I guess it started several months before Loki detected Thanos incoming.

MARTIN: Was it just sheer distance, which made the travel time for him so long?

LOKI: Yes. He had far more advanced means of travel than most in this region of the galaxy have even now, but he was far out on the opposite spiral arm of the galaxy as our own. It's actually quite a feat that he made it here at all.

MARTIN: But that was a feat you knew him to be capable of?

LOKI: Know thy enemy. I studied his fleet very closely, before I left his region of space.

MARTIN: And what were you both up to, in the time before you again met up... earlier than previously agreed-upon, by the sounds of it?

STARK: My actions from that time are pretty well documented, except the work I was doing to prepare for the Thanos thing, most of which is still classified.

LOKI: I spent most of my time in Nifelheim, but also spying on other cultures from our region of the galaxy, including the Kree. I tried to make sure nothing too volatile happened to weaken them before I had a chance to persuade them to aid in my cause against Thanos. When another year or so had passed since my escape from imprisonment, I also began to wander this planet, and get to know all of its strengths and weaknesses a bit more from the ground-up, as it were. When I heard rumors of some people attempting to achieve the means to construct a copy of the cosmic cube Thanos knew as the tesseract, I became a bit less passive.

STARK: A weapon anything like that, on earth, would not help us in the stability and defensibility department even now, but especially not if we were also going up against Thanos, down the line.

LOKI: As such, I made a few enemies amongst criminal organizations more used to being the enemies of people like S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers.
STARK: I noticed.

LOKI: As I knew you would. Thus, I may have shown up in his lab to discuss such relevant matters with him, soon after that. While our agreement was not officially active, I was still bound to actions which would not prevent that alliance from ever occurring, which meant that I could still do him no harm. I was a little surprised when he worked that out quite so quickly.

STARK: It didn’t change much, really. We both just kept up the same monitoring we had been doing all along, but occasionally met up every month or so to exchange notes and discuss overall strategies; although he did helpfully reveal to me that the Ten Rings was not as dead as I thought they were, and that AIM was a lot younger than the whole Ten Rings organization itself, which had hidden behind them to look like a ruse, so that when AIM fell, everyone believed the Ten Rings went with them.

LOKI: He was rather disturbed by the knowledge.

STARK: Also, we might have started flirting a lot by that point.

MARTIN: Oh?

LOKI: We did not share a very traditional romance.

STARK: Strictly speaking, it was more like enemies with benefits, since we conveniently could trust we wouldn’t be murdered by one another while the alliance was still pending. Plus, we did, and still do, get along like a city on fire intellectually speaking.

LOKI: Between our mutual physical and intellectual attraction, as well as the both of us being rather hedonistic and possessed of a certain inability to deny ourselves something we want just because it’s ill-advised and socially deviant... well. No one who knew either of us very well was actually surprised to find out we had become sexually involved, fairly frequently.

STARK: Well, Rhodey was, but that was because I explained the whole thing to him after having a minor panic attack realizing I’d been accidentally monogamous for a few months without noticing.

LOKI: Was that the night I met him?
STARK: Yeah.

LOKI: No wonder he looked quite so stunned.

STARK: Well, you also looked stunning. Not as stunning as presently, but that’s personal preference.

MARTIN: Am I... missing something?

LOKI: I am a shape-shifter. I was female, at that time.

MARTIN: Oh. You... you can do that?

LOKI: [Voice now notably feminine] Yes I can.

MARTIN: F-for those listening, yes, I can confirm he did just change into a woman.

LOKI: And?

MARTIN: If you were wearing that dress, I can understand even a seasoned military man being a bit taken aback, upon being told you were... you. Do you mind if we get a picture? For the website?

LOKI: Go ahead.

MARTIN: Do you do this often?

LOKI: No, but it has been very handy, for passing unnoticed in public places, before now. I mastered this form for that purpose, and also a healthy measure of sexual curiosity in my youth. I am-[Voice returned to normal masculine tones, along with his physique.]-far more comfortable being myself, as all shape-shifters do tend to be.
STARK: For the record, I prefer him *au naturale*. In every sense.

MARTIN: I’m sure that many listeners were wondering about that, yes.

LOKI: Were you not?

MARTIN: To be frank, no. Not seeing the way you look at each other.

[A pause]

MARTIN: So... how did the pair of you go from determination to avoid romance, to your current, rather obviously affectionate relationship?

LOKI: We... Well...

STARK: The accidental-monogamy thing was an eye-opener for me. After breaking up with Pepper, I’d slipped back into old habits only a little more toned-down and picky than before, so I knew it wasn’t any lingering effects from that, because once the relationship was gone, the monogamy went with it. I figured out that I was... satisfied enough not to actively seek out anyone else. It wasn’t until a few months of doing it that I even quite realized I’d developed a habit of turning down people who actively hit on me, even really gorgeous ones. Coming to the realization that it was because I genuinely only wanted Loki, at that point, was deeply disconcerting.

MARTIN: You have anything to add to that, Loki?

LOKI: I... was unaware he had been as unwavering as I, in an equally subconscious manner, until it was pointed out by one of the Avengers later. I myself had been too busy to flirt with anyone else, and focused sufficiently on my revenge plans that no one else was interesting enough to catch my eye. I blamed my own monogamy, throughout, on the convenience of access, as it were. I let myself assume that it was similar for him, because no other answers seemed quite believable to me.

MARTIN: Other answers?
LOKI: I categorized them as “that way madness lies” sort of thinking, let’s say.

MARTIN: Meaning genuine interest in you on his part?

LOKI: Yes.

STARK: We both did that a lot, with a lot of things, for a long while, there. Part of it was, once Loki did show up in Avengers tower at a team meeting and announce that we had about six weeks until Thanos showed up, we didn’t exactly hide what we had going on. Some of the others leapt to the immediate conclusion that I was going to get hurt, which led to both of us emphasizing that we’re just not the sort to get attached like that. A lot.

LOKI: Yes. There was a matter of pride, as well as personal paranoia, on both our parts. We have both been presumed, in the past, to be vulnerable to others just because we happened to be having sex with them, to the point of developing habitual dismissiveness of all such concerns.

STARK: Even though, for once, they might have had a few valid points. Natasha, if you’re listening: you will officially never hear me admit that ever again. Same to you, Steve. ESPECIALLY to you, Steve.

LOKI: Perhaps because my convenience-based excuse for monogamy was more water-tight than could be said of Tony trying to make an excuse for his own actions, or perhaps because I simply was too stubborn in the face of hopeful looks Thor sometimes aimed in our direction-

STARK: Particularly after he got you into a drinking contest and managed to start making amends with you and all.

LOKI: —that too—but for me, I managed to avoid the realization of just how much I might be inclined to keep you, Tony, for rather longer; although in retrospect there were a few near-misses, particularly when I found out you were looking into prolonging your own life, and concluded that you might be manipulating me to that end.

STARK: Except I didn’t want the golden apple of youth and all. Pretty adamantly.

MARTIN: Pardon?
STARK: It’s not easy to become a citizen of Asgard if you’re not from there. Doubly so if you’re, you know, mortal. Usually it’s by marriage that anyone from earth would even be considered, with only about three exceptions in history, all of them mages. They’re... isolationist on that front, but citizens of Asgard do have access to golden apples like the myths suggest. I wouldn’t even make this sort of announcement to the world at large, if it weren’t generally impossible for anyone from earth to reach Asgard that Odin and Heimdall don’t like, unless you’re Loki or one of his kids.

MARTIN: You... you have children? Well, you mentioned your daughter, but not...

LOKI: I have a son, as well: Fenrir. No, he has no intention of swallowing any stars or moons, in this solar system or elsewhere.

MARTIN: Is he actually a wolf?

LOKI: Most of the time. It’s his preferred shape.

MARTIN: So he can shape-shift, like you?

LOKI: Yes.

STARK: I’ve met him. He’s very cool. We get on. I haven’t had as much time to really get to know Hel, but she tends to be busy ruling her kingdom, and all.

MARTIN: Yes... I know that you and Thor are princes, Mr. Liesmithe, so how exactly did your daughter Hel become queen of Helheim?

LOKI: She was specially chosen, by a force more powerful than any in Asgard. More than that, I will not say.

MARTIN: Also, is Helheim... well, in the mythology isn’t it the land of-

LOKI: For the sake of avoiding any potentially volatile religious discussions in future interviews, I
decline to comment further on the nature of Helheim. And I will continue to do so, from here forward.

MARTIN: Right. That’s... probably a pretty good idea, actually.

STARK: Back to the apple thing, which is going to be its own dramatic issue, I’m sure: they provide longevity, strength, and durability. Basically, anyone who consumes them is equally resilient to disease, the passage of time, and physical abuse as any Aesir or Jotunn, and also just as strong and, within a few weeks, also just as dense.

MARTIN: Dense?

LOKI: Aesir and Jotunn particularly, but also other more long-lived races throughout the nine realms, have a greater mass, particularly in relation to our size, than is at first obvious. I actually weigh about two-hundred and forty kilograms.

STARK: Over five-hundred pounds, America.

MARTIN: I’m surprised that chair supports you.

LOKI: I am able to use a number of spells which compensate for my weight, some of which currently protect this chair’s structural integrity. With those spells in place, I can step on a scale and weigh one-hundred and seventy pounds.

STARK: Also, those spells came in handy for my own personal structural integrity. Magic is great, by the way.

MARTIN: Past tense?

STARK: I might have tricked Odin into giving me only the rights I wanted, as a citizen of Asgard, but we haven’t really gotten to that part of the story yet.

MARTIN: We... will definitely have to come back to that, though. In the meantime, there was suspicion, Mr. Liesmithe, that Tony might be interested in an apple?
LOKI: I had believed, upon his mention of wanting to prolong his own life and intent to find means to do so, that I might be being manipulated. I was incorrect. He was simply that tempting naturally, rather than toward any particular goal and that was actually a more uncomfortable sort of thought than the alternative.

STARK: I was a bit confused by the whole thing, there. I genuinely couldn’t figure out how you expected me to be manipulating you.

LOKI: Truly?

STARK: I remember running it through my head, thinking like, “All I did was mention the longevity thing, but Loki having access to that doesn’t make the means achievable automatically. It’s not like he’s blackmail-able or anything, and there’s not any other way I could get that sort of theft done for me. How even-” and then you distracted me with more sex and I sort of determined not to think about it, subconsciously.

LOKI: Because “that way madness lies”

STARK: Well, any direction you or I go in is more likely to lead to madness for us being aimed at it, to be fair.

LOKI: True, but you know what I mean.

STARK: I do.

LOKI: Just over two weeks before Thanos’ arrival, Thor bludgeoned me with blunt and undeniably accurate dissection of my behavior and emotional state in such a way that I was forcibly made to realize I was already far more deeply attached to you than I had dared believe myself even capable of, broken as I am.

STARK: Wait... the night you took him out to dinner to chew him out over the-

LOKI: Yes.
STARK: You’re serious. He actually turned the tables on you? I mean... you?

LOKI: [Sigh] Yes, he did.

STARK: How?

LOKI: [Throat-clearing] He pointed out my fondness for you. As we both tended to do, I emphasized that my interests were purely carnal and intellectual, and suggested he was a naive fool and delusional for perceiving anything more. I may have accused him of being biased by his desperate hope that something, anything, would make me appear less heartless and refreshingly alone than I was then content to be. He rather shocked me by responding that he was [Thor impression] “not so desperate as to wish to see your heart broken when that man destroys himself before you can admit how much you want him to be a more permanent fixture in your life.”

STARK: Okay, that kinda hurts my feelings.

LOKI: You do have a well-known collection of self-destructive tendencies.

STARK: Says the pot to the kettle.

LOKI: How do you think I recognize them so well? Many of them match or compliment the ones in my own personal collection.

MARTIN: How did you respond to Thor’s accusation?

LOKI: With spite and disbelief, of course, but he eventually managed to get me to listen by sheer persistence and solemnity. He informed me that he was not under the misguided apprehension that I was in love with you, because he was more convinced that I was too afraid to let myself do so. I tried to argue, but he knows me too well, and too easily recognized what I myself could not see then. He... stated that he recognized the look on my face when you walked into a room, because he had seen it before. He recalled well the distrust and hope I had viewed Angrboða with, after she had already caught more than my interest, but before we had built enough trust to accept that she was within reach.
STARK: You mean when you and... OH.

LOKI: Yes, then. When I had everything to lose, as it were.

STARK: Wow, um.

MARTIN: I’m missing something.

LOKI & STARK: Yes.

MARTIN: Classified, then?

STARK: Yeah, a bit. Uhm. So you called bull****?

LOKI: I made a valiant effort to do so. I failed, in the end. He was, to my lingering chagrin, entirely accurate.

STARK: Really?

LOKI: Yes. It was most disconcerting when that realization was followed by your near-death within mere days, when the Ten Rings abducted you from the middle of a crowd.

MARTIN: I remember that news story. Afterward, it was announced that the Ten Rings were destroyed entirely by a combined task-force of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers. There was also a detailed press-release hardly anyone seems to remember about AIM being taken over by them after Aldrich Killian’s death, instead of AIM being the heart of the Ten Rings as the Mandarin farce had suggested. We’ll add links to those features to this interview page, as soon as possible. You were working with the Avengers at that time, then, Mr. Liesmithe?

LOKI: I was. I provided them a wealth of intelligence concerning the Ten Rings, including locations of various bases and facilities unknown to them before. I then took it upon myself to kidnap their leader’s daughter, after dismantling AIM, and offering him a trade: I would return her alive and not-maimed, in exchange for Tony being handed over to me immediately.
STARK: I was sort of dying, at the time.

LOKI: And that alone almost caused me to kill everyone else in the room instantly.

MARTIN: [Throat-clearing]

LOKI: I would apologize for disturbing you, Miss Martin, but it would be rather insincere. I am not sorry for this. I protect those I care for deeply with a degree of ruthlessness that I do not expect most people of Midgard to understand or approve of. I am no hero.

MARTIN: I think that’s very clear by this point, yes.

STARK: We got out. He took me to Asgard, and I had a long recover time there. I met a lot of the family, though.

LOKI: There was some mild drama.

MARTIN: And once you recovered?

TONY: We scandalized a few people, got the last puzzle pieces into place, and went to war in the general region of Jupiter.

LOKI: Our allies lay in wait there, to ambush Thanos’ fleet. Myself and several other mages, mostly from Asgard, transported some of the Avengers into the core ships of the fleet, to take them down from within. Tony and I took the flagship ourselves, from which Tony hacked most of the gliders housed within the larger carrier-vessel, installing a hostile auto-pilot program which would cause those smaller, highly maneuverable ships to recognize and protect his allies, and attack our enemies. I attacked The Other, rendered him into paste, and then confronted Thanos.

TONY: And then lost him when all of our allies, mostly the Kree and another civilization which wishes to remain anonymous, closed in all around his forces and he realized he’d already lost. His fleet was going nowhere.
LOKI: I joined Tony in the glider he had occupied with intent to leave the flagship, and we gave chase. He, and other hostiles and deserters of his fleet, fled the battle aimed for earth, but we had arranged for a network of Aesir warriors and mages to keep earth’s skies clear, aiming any enemy vessels toward uninhabited areas and informing S.H.I.E.L.D. of every incoming ship.

STARK: Thanos crash-landed, Loki had aimed my auto-pilot at New York while I wasn’t looking and jumped ship, so I had to un-hack the glider to get it cooperating again. I sent a done to observe the showdown, though.

LOKI: After a bit more violent fighting, I tricked Thanos into practically killing himself.

STARK: It was very gross. Not suitable for polite conversation, even by my standards.

MARTIN: More so than, uhm, rendering someone into paste?

LOKI & STARK: Yes.

MARTIN: That’s impressive.

STARK: It was.

LOKI: Thank you, Tony.

STARK: Then you vanished with his decapitated body over one shoulder and his head in a bag, along with the grim reaper herself.

MARTIN: Pardon?

LOKI: I mentioned that Thanos was in love with Death. Death was not exactly unfond of him, in turn. I made a deal with her. It was complicated.

STARK: Basically, he went off of everyone’s radar for a couple hours. Seriously everyone’s.
LOKI: I was then delivered within my daughter’s kingdom, still screaming with the agony inflicted upon me, which was the pain suffered by every single person I have ever killed: a parting gift from Death, for killing her lover. That was the last part of a very lengthy ordeal. Only two hours passed in real time, as it were, but for me it had been made to feel closer to half a dozen decades.

MARTIN: Why, exactly?

LOKI: I walked Thanos to his rest. The path was not a lonely one. I deeply wish it had been. I will say no more than that.

MARTIN: I... have no idea how to even begin to respond to that. So we’re good, there.

STARK: His son—who was sort of aware of my infatuation with Loki, because apparently to someone with the olfactory capacity of a horse-sized wolf, I was really obvious—told me about that, a few days later, when I met him in Asgard.

LOKI: Then, after some very necessary recuperative downtime, I began to visit Jotunnheim and map what I could detect above and below the ice alike.

MARTIN: Why?

LOKI: Thanos was not the only goal I had been making plans toward.

MARTIN: What other plans did you have?

LOKI: I stole apples from Asgard, for one. I gave one to Thor, as part of a boon owed him, and he gave it to Dr. Jane Foster. They plan to marry within the month.

STARK: Of course, you knew Dr. Foster wanted to celebrate.

LOKI: I did.
STARK: And had found a bakery that her interns had connections to.

LOKI: Perhaps.

STARK: And maybe there was a wolf in baker’s-assistant’s clothing who quietly used very subtle means to lure Dr. Foster, Thor, and Darcy all there at just the right time, and maybe suggest a theme for the baked goods to bring to Avengers Tower for that celebration thing.

LOKI: [Throat-clearing]

STARK: And maybe the cute baker’s assistant took it upon herself to add a personal touch in the form of golden apples for each of the Avengers, real fruit painted to match the one Dr. Foster had already consumed, by that point.

LOKI: Well... [Cough]

MARTIN: This sounds promising

STARK: Steve’s had his shield on it, lightly cut into the skin, Thor’s had Mjolnir, Clint’s had arrows and a quiver, Natasha’s had her Black Widow symbol, Bruce’s had a chemistry set, and mine had the Iron Man faceplate on it. They were beautifully painted, all of them. Except mine.

MARTIN: He... tricked you?

STARK: He did.

MARTIN: You sound a bit pleased.

LOKI: That has taken time. I assure you, at first, he reacted very differently.

STARK: I sort of assumed he was playing me somehow, or trying to force me into making some sort of deal to learn how the damn thing even worked, because I’d told him I didn’t want the thing before that—which had sort of been true at that time, but after that I had sort of changed my mind because
the three other possible methods I’d been trying turned out to be dead ends for me, which happened before the apple thing. So I was already sort of considering asking for a deal anyway, but the “tricked into it” part set me off. I didn’t get it.

LOKI: I did try to explain.

STARK: I know, and I fucked up, and then you hung up before I could fix it-

LOKI: Actually, I crushed the phone. It was an involuntary muscle-spasm.

STARK: Right. That. And then you sort of finished hijacking a fire-giant and ran off to Jotunnheim.

MARTIN: That part needs some explaining, but first, why were you two on the phone?

LOKI: We had made a secondary agreement, before the first one ran out. I needed a resource from one of the Avengers’ enemies, in order to, as Tony put it, “hijack a fire-giant”. Tony didn’t know about the fire-giant part actually, but had guessed my plans for Jotunnheim, and so I agreed to contact him once I had committed that theft and left their enemy vulnerable. This led to me calling his phone shortly after he realized that the apple he had consumed had not been as false as the others.

STARK: I was a bit distressed. We had a communication failure. I accidentally left him with the impression romantic interest was so far from my thoughts that I couldn’t see that he wasn’t trying to make a deal that time around, and then, well, he got really angry and before I could backpedal sufficiently, given I was in shock, he said goodbye and apparently crushed his phone.

LOKI: I was also a bit distressed, and facing a daunting task ahead of me in Jotunnheim.

MARTIN: Yes, do please explain that. You mentioned that you now occupy a high political position there, in your paparazzi confrontation?

LOKI: Yes, which was complex to earn. To begin, before the apple incident, I had made surprisingly peaceful and even gracious contact with the people of Jotunnheim, including my half-brother, who now occupies the throne. Once he was assured that I had no interest in usurping him, we were able to communicate freely and openly, and I even began, to my surprise, to respect him, despite the two of us having never before met, and all prior knowledge I had of him seeming to indicate he was very like our father. I was pleased to be incorrect, on that front, and in time, after speaking with many
tribal leaders and others amongst his people, he and the others agreed to help me thaw their world, despite most remaining unconvinced that I might be capable of doing so.

MARTIN: You... thawed all of the ice?

LOKI: With the aid of a dangerous prisoner formerly locked away deep under the earth in Siberia because he was too powerful for Odin to destroy by any means he could think of, and also because he was a valuable consulting resource on occasion, yes. He was a fire-Jotunn known as Surtur. I used his natural fire, leading him to chase me across the surface of their world with intent to steal from me a key to the manacles and chains I had left on him which bound his magic, to thaw the miles-thick ice that coated their world, restoring lakes and oceans, as well as whole land-masses.

STARK: Also nearly dying, a bit.

LOKI: And I do again thank you for informing Thor and Hlín in time for them to come rushing to my aid. Over a month without sleep had indeed begun to take its toll upon my endurance.

MARTIN: You can go that long without sleep?

LOKI: With the aid of a golden apple halfway through? Yes. I was, however, almost hallucinating by the time aid arrived via the bi-frost. They were sent by Tony... who had also nearly died, in a manner that still angers me.

STARK: Odin didn’t like the idea of Dr. Foster being Aesir, or marrying Thor. He sort of took it upon himself to arrange a means to potentially end that, and also get back at Loki. He did that by means of a spell which drove one of Loki’s oldest friends, an Asgardian exile, out of her mind with pain and the distortions-of-thought caused by a love-spell aiming her at Thor. She used be in love with him, destructively, but had been over it for long time. Odin undid that, and she went crazy. Well, way beyond the scope of her pre-existing crazy, in any case.

LOKI: I still can’t believe she even [indistinct muttering, possibly swearing]

STARK: It wasn’t her, Loki.

LOKI: [Muttering in an unidentifiable language]
STARK: I tried to get between her and Thor, and I succeeded. I tried to get through to her, since I had successfully gotten along with her when she helped us against Thanos, but she was... she was in a lot of pain. She stabbed me with one of Loki’s daggers, coated in her own poison, and said it was a gift from him.

LOKI: [Still angrier muttering in the same unidentifiable language]

STARK: Eventually, we all worked out that the dagger itself was suspicious. Thor recognized it as one Loki had told him was lost in a wager, but it had the pommel of a different dagger added on, of a style he uses more often now than he used to. The poison...

LOKI: I use only my own poisons, and potions, and any other concoctions of a magic nature. I trust no other’s work, after too many personal betrayals.

STARK: Right. Dr. Banner remembered you mentioned that to him. So did Thor, and Hlín. Between that and the pommel of that dagger... I eventually worked out what Odin did. I was really, really pissed off about it.

LOKI: Had I the power, he would be my second regicide.

STARK: And, arguably, patricide.

LOKI: No. Not any longer.

MARTIN: [Cough] This took an unexpectedly dark turn somewhere.

STARK: Yeah, tell me about it. Anyway, so I worked out the whole thing, and I saw an opportunity or two in it. I went to Asgard, I told Odin that I had no idea how Loki planned to benefit from my apple-consumption, but I was suspicious and wondered if he had any answers for me. He didn’t, but when I asked to keep the perks, he offered me a deal: help him capture Loki, and reveal his plans, and in return I’d become a citizen of Asgard. I accepted.

MARTIN: But you...
STARK: I had plans. The Enchantress he had weaponized via love-spell was connected to him by means of the spell he’d cast. He loaned me that connection, so I could track her movements. Before I left, I told his wife what he’d done, and she agreed to help me with my plans when I told her all of them. The Enchantress has a very loyal lover I knew of, and Frigga helped me locate him. I found Fenrir in the bakery shop he still worked at, for complicated reasons, and persuaded him to take me to him, since Frigga couldn’t. I got word that Jotunnheim’s thaw was over and Surtur was dead, and sent the Enchantress’ lover after her, telling him to persuade her to go to Loki, promising he could help.

LOKI: I had scarcely awoken from a recuperative rest in the wake of slaying Surtur, when she arrived, mad and shattered and apologizing profusely. I was already panning to unweave the spell upon her when she finally told me what she was apologizing for—what she had done.

STARK: Loki...

LOKI: I’m fine.

[A pause.]

LOKI: I let her live. I removed the spell. As soon as she was back in her lover’s arms, I was struck by the bi-frost, and I heard your voice, Tony.

STARK: Was I at least saying “this is a bad idea” or something?

LOKI: You were. I was then incapacitated by a pain-inflicting spell, and chained and muzzled. Odin announced a list of alleged crimes, and I was dragged down into a prison cell to await trial the next day.

STARK: I then argued with Odin. He was pissed that I’d lied a little and let Loki disenchant the Enchantress, and I called him a lousy king or something, and persuaded him that he didn’t want me as a subject. We renegotiated, so I’d retain apple rights in exchange for the successful capture, but nothing more than that. Then, once Loki’s hearing started, I did some very sneaky things resulting in all of his chains being unlocked but not removed, without anyone noticing, while I debunked, item by item, every charge Odin laid out against Loki. Frigga helped by further condemning her husband for his own actions against the Enchantress, Thor, Dr. Foster, and me.
LOKI: I was still muzzled, for most of that time.

STARK: I was saving the best for last. And I didn’t want you possibly interrupting before I confessed being in love with you in front of an entire kingdom, and all. Then cue all the chains dropping, and getting rid of the muzzle, and Loki took us back to the tower.

LOKI: Cue extremely emotional confessions we have no plans to repeat on the radio.

STARK: And now here we are, a couple months later. Other drama has happened since then, but we’ve handled it so far.

LOKI: And we intent to continue doing so.

MARTIN: And, personally, I don’t envy anyone who might try to prevent that, frankly.

LOKI: Oh good. I do hope the rest of the world will be of a similar mind, for the sake of their own health.

MARTIN: You’ve already been careful in, aside from the nature of your relationship, and the fact you’re sort of a figure from a pagan pantheon, trying not to too directly offend some of the religions of earth, I did notice.

LOKI: I have no intention of dissuading anyone of a monotheistic faith from belief in whatever god they believe is the creator of the universe, but I know more about the history of cultures in this galaxy than are dreamt of in most earthly religious philosophies. I’m sure that will cause some conflicts, down the line, but humanity is nothing if not adaptable. Those with faith among you who might be listening, I respect your devout convictions and ways of life. Those who believe things about the tales in their religious texts, which they accept as fact, but which directly contradict my own knowledge of history, science, magic and the workings of the universe? Well, I cannot say that they will like me, or what knowledge I might have to share with them, given I am older than christianity itself and know for a fact this planet is a few billion years old, for example. I can and will promise that all I have spoken here about the likes of Thanos, about the other life out there, in this galaxy, was as true as most history books you currently trust, and still more accurate than half of Wikipedia.

MARTIN: [Laughter] Isn’t that all rather damning with faint praise?
LOKI: Only a little. I know my existence alone makes a lot of people on this planet uneasy, especially those who may be religious, but after your world has since then encountered others even stranger still than myself, I have to hope that minds are already open and receptive to change, in this world.

MARTIN: I have to ask about the nature of sexuality outside of earth, of course. However awkwardly.

LOKI: Of course. In Asgard, sexual activity is not condemned unless there is a lack of consent, which also includes the violation of anyone whose consent is compromised by means of their being too young to make such a decision, by magic, by chemical intoxication, by use of threats or aggressive coercion, or by outright physical force. So long as the parties involved are consenting adults according to the law, there is no stigma, whether the adults involved are a man and a woman, a man lying with another man, a woman lying with another woman, or three or more people in any various combinations. Sex is simply seen as a healthy form of intimacy, which can also result in children if both parties are so inclined and have compatible biology to support it, or a mage (and possibly a surrogate, depending on the situation) inclined to aid them if they are not fully compatible, biologically, but still wish to have a child with one another.

MARTIN: This despite the overall culture still being patriarchal?

LOKI: I won’t suggest the culture there is without flaws. Aesir do tend to prize masculine ideals of the sort Thor embodies rather more than men who are slightly more feminine. I am considered, for instance, slightly unusual in my own behavior, comportment, and taste, despite the majority of my lovers—roughly two thirds of them, in past—having been female, and most men who approached me seemed to be under the impression I would be, hmm, submissive.

STARK: [Quiet laugh]

LOKI: I’m actually quite within the norm, however, by the standards of Jotunnheim and Nifelheim. In fact, I might be a bit unusual, by shape-shifter standards, amongst their cultures.

MARTIN: How so?

LOKI: Jotunns have a higher percentage of their population not only with powerful gifts for magic and mage-craft, but also shape-shifting. It is not considered unusual for anyone with that gift, regardless of their social and political rank, to have a fluid gender identity and express different masculine and feminine traits depending upon how they happen to feel at that point in their lives. It’s not odd for a Jotunn born male to take a new lover, and happen to be in female form while indulging
in sexual activities with them, nor does it actually raise any eyebrows if, while in that form, he becomes pregnant and carries his offspring to term.

MARTIN: Oh... wow. That’s... very new.

LOKI: Not really. I guarantee you there aren’t actually a vast number of people in Scandinavian countries too surprised to hear this.

MARTIN: Really?

LOKI: Yes.

MARTIN: That’s sort of fascinating.

LOKI: Also, Nifelheim is a matriarchal culture, thanks in no small part to The Three, who founded the first Jotunn city there, and who still act as an executive body beyond the rule of their monarchy.

MARTIN: And they also have this sort of fluid idea of gender?

LOKI: They do. For the record, despite mythic precedents, I have never been pregnant myself, nor do I have any plans to be.

STARK: I’m glad of that, actually.

LOKI: That makes two of us.

MARTIN: I did not expect this to come up, but thank you for sharing. I know it’s no one else’s business, but that doesn’t stop callers from around the world causing our phones to ring off the hook in the other room, burning with these sorts of questions. Human nature is inherently curious, I suppose.

LOKI: It is generally one of your more redeeming qualities in other contexts, at least.
MARTIN: [Laughter] Yes, I suppose so.

STARK: I’ve still been in more awkward interviews.

LOKI: Of course you have.

MARTIN: Aside from religious and societal concerns, I’m sure you’ve both given thought to the political climate as well. Mr. Liesmithe, with you being as powerful as you are, just as a force unto yourself, but also with your interplanetary diplomatic connections—I’m sure you’re aware that some nations of the world might feel threatened by you, and by your staying in the United States preferentially, in particular.

LOKI: I am no ally of the United States, nor any particular nations, states, political groups, religions nor creeds of earth. That, I can swear to you. My actions are my own, unless they are to do with the rest of the reams, and they are not interested in the individual nations of earth, only the overall health and prosperity of your world as a whole, until such time as civilization on this world makes trade and commerce with your realm easier, as you learn to reach out and join the rest of the galactic community.

STARK: Working on it.

LOKI: As for any fears relating to possible weapons I might possess... Well, I would hardly be involved with Tony Stark if I intended to share anything dangerous and potentially destructive with the general populace. Just as my lover no longer sells weapons, I myself have no plans to artificially advance or regress technologies of this world in any manner that does not benefit the whole of this world, rather than any single nation thereof, and even then not to any extent which would cause social or political upheaval; in any case, it is against inter-realm laws for me to do otherwise, given the earth’s status and level of development insofar as technology and culture.

MARTIN: Inter-realm laws?

LOKI: Technically, that section of laws, shared by the nine realms all, which are actually a part of Galactic Law, but that’s far too complicated to explain, here. I will be introducing more on that subject to this world via diplomacy, over the next couple of months.

STARK: You will?
LOKI: Do you not trust me?

STARK: You’re kind of to diplomacy what Pepper is to accounting, legalese and fine print: of course I trust you. When are you starting that?


MARTIN: Well... this has certainly been an enlightening experience.

STARK: I should hope so. We running out of time now?

MARTIN: Yes. We’ve actually gone over our allotted time, but no one seemed to complain in the least whatsoever. Not even Fox News, despite our content, this afternoon.

STARK: Good.

LOKI: Thank you for having us, Miss Martin.

MARTIN: It was an honor, and honestly rather thrilling. You two are... very strikingly suited to one another, I have to say.

STARK: Thank you.

LOKI: I had a very pleasant time. You have my gratitude for your patience and calm.

MARTIN: And this concludes our interview with the dangerous but charming Mr. Loki Liesmithe, and the infamous Tony Stark. Thank you, to all of our listeners, for listening in on this historic occasion.

~~
“It is very difficult, I will have you know,” Loki said, after teleporting them back to the penthouse, and beginning to slowly back the inventor toward their bed, “when you blame me for a small but breathtakingly elegant bit of spell-work in the middle of an interview.”

“I had a feeling you’d like that.”

“I do,” the trickster purred.

“It must’ve been about as distracting as your politically astute sincerity. I hadn’t expected-” Tony was cut off by the god’s mouth on his own, the kiss slow and deep and bone-meltingly molten with tenderness and desire both.

When the kiss broke, Loki purred, “I want them to know our story. I want them to know what lengths we’ve already gone through for one another, and how deeply I do love you, and that you are mine.”

“I worked that out,” Tony panted. “That didn’t make it any harder to resist kissing you the whole damn time.”

“Resist no more, th-”

The inventor kissed him again, and kept kissing. Clothes were banished, and he pivoted them to push the god back onto the bed and pin him there, close and just a bit too firm and hungry to be quite gentle, but it came quite close.

They rocked together slowly, breathing harsher, but their movements unhurried, where they simply lingered close and pressed together still closer, mutual arousal trapped between their stomachs and growing hotter with the slow undulations and little grinding motions they began to inflict on each other, just to earn a little gasp from Loki, or a helpless moan from Tony’s throat. There was no urgency: only appreciation and a languid, lazy heat.

The kiss didn’t break until they were both spent, panting together.

“Shower?” Tony suggested.

“Have me against the wall?”

“Well, if you insist.”

He laughed when Loki nipped at his lip sharply to reprimand his flippancy.

~~

That night, all of the leaders Loki had visited in dreams the previous night, dreamed of him again: every last one of them.

Again, Loki appeared to them. With a fierce smile, he asked each and every dreamer, "Did you doubt me?"

They found themselves unable to lie.
Then he asked, "Do you still doubt me?" Again, they were be unable to lie, even to themselves. To those who did not doubt him, he assured that he would leave them alone so long as they did nothing directly against him, or those he loved, or those otherwise under his protection. Those who did not...

He convinced further. There were so few of them, he no longer truly needed the aid of Dream to keep up with them all, but the endless one’s presence was still a welcome relief, easing what would have eventually strained his mind to maintain.

Eventually, one by one, the last dozen of them came to understand his intentions, and have no doubts left that he could hurt them far worse than they could ever hope to hurt him, but that he wouldn’t, unprovoked.

They were, when he next asked, "Do you still doubt me?" thoroughly convinced.

All save one, whose dreams had resisted tampering, for too much of Loki’s own magic in their construction had been detectable.

But Loki had, after all, expected Doom to have his dreams more shielded than any other political leader on earth, and tried to think but little of it. Whispers would still reach Doom, he knew. They always did.

Still, within two nights of hard work, and peace with every other nation of the world well underway: Loki considered that a victory more masterful than any war could have ever brought him.

~~

“Thank you,” said the trickster to Dream. “I had feared that you would think my requested boon to be... overmuch.”

“You kept me out of a second imprisonment. Given what long incarceration did to Morpheus, and what great damage his absence did to the Dreaming, your aid was vital, to me.”

“I know a sound investment when I see it,” Loki murmured. “I also did not wish to know what might have happened to me, in the long run, had I not at least made an attempt.” The god glanced around toward the thin back of the librarian, who lingered near to them. The keepers of the Dreaming were more protective than they had ever been before, in the wake of the old Dream’s imprisonment and what it did to their lives, and then his death so relatively soon after their Morpheus had returned to them. “The rest of the Dreaming is not naturally vengeful, perhaps, but I did not want their resentfulness aimed at my person. There is no running from dreams.”

Dream of the Endless inclined his head. “I knew that to be a large part of your motives. As such, the protective nature of your request, and the peaceful means by which you may have diverted warfare, struck me as unusually honorable, from you. You are very different from the younger god you once were, and all the more different still from the Loki who resides in the minds and myths of men in this universe.”

“He was never me.”

“He began as the shadows you cast, in some ways.”

“I was never born, in this universe, to cast them,” Loki said slowly.
“That makes less difference than you might think.”

“All that I know, is that perhaps meeting him taught me the best and worst of myself, as seen from the outside by cultures and peoples not my own,” the god admitted. “You knew that.”

“Morpheus did; however, I find it unsurprising that he did, and that you have become aware of it, too, now.”

“Did he truly lose his eyes?”

“Time, and retellings, will return them, however slowly and painfully,” Dream said. “He had to have eyes for snake’s venom to sting, and while Odin is one-eyed, and Baldur’s brother was blind, Loki’s keen sight has long been a part of him.”

Loki-the-dreamer nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“His future, and his fate, are not yours.”

“They were right about my daughter, in many ways.”

“But very misguided, concerning your son.”

“I was forewarned, and fore-armed, because of that; I do owe him that.”

“Does that potential for change not also apply to yourself?” Dream stepped closer. “I do not see the future, as my brother Destiny does, but I know the borders between Dream and reality, and between myth and true prophecy, better than most. You are no blood-brother to Odin. Baldur is not his son in your universe any more so than you are, by blood, and he does not mean to your people what he meant to mankind, either in your past, or in the stories our Loki is a part of. You may suffer downfalls of your own, but none quite like the version of you humans developed, by retelling tales out you at campfire- and hearth-side.”

Loki stared up at him for a long few moments, and exhaled a breath he had not realized himself to be holding. “I thank you.”

The tall, pale figure nodded to him, and rested a hand on each of his shoulders. “Go in peace, little god,” he said, his eyes seeming to fill all of Loki’s vision for a moment.

All at once, this time, the trickster felt the Dreaming fall away, time re-engage, and a whirl of color and light and whispered promises that he would remember, even waking, he would remember. It was owed him.

Sitting up sharply, Loki awoke to pale morning light, in eerie quiet.

“Bad dream?” the inventor beside him mumbled, bleary.

The god stroked his hair, carding long fingers through it slowly until Tony huffed quietly and began to settle back to sleep. “No. Not at all.”

“Good.”

Loki smiled, low and wicked. “Yes. Yes it is.”

Quietly, JARVIS projected words onto the wall before the bed: You have four calls waiting, from Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, sir.
Slipping out of bed, the trickster left the room and picked up the phone, near the front of the penthouse. “Mr. Putin called first, I presume?”

“He did, Mr. Lie-smith.”

“Excellent. I’ll begin with him. Make appointments with the others for within the next few hours, leaving me at least forty-five minutes with each.”

“Yes, sir.”

~~

Tony was disturbed, four hours later—after some particularly fine rest and then one hour on the phone with Pepper trying to explain deadly serious international political things at him until she grew frustrated with caffeine-free brain and demanded he call her back after he had some coffee—to find Loki having a conference with half the leaders of the free world and several usually cast in less than flattering light by the media machines of the free world, all of them on display panels surrounding him, hovering in the air and supported by Loki’s magic. The inventor’s ears struggled with the sound of the trickster’s voice. When All-speak was being aimed at enough different people from different native tongues, it tended to start sounding a bit strange to Tony, lately. Loki seemed to think it was due to the inventor perhaps beginning to pick up some of it, from his visits to Asgard. No one else, after all, seemed to find it odd.

To Tony, it was like bits of eight different languages were all bleeding through a little, and though he still understood something like their equivalent English translation at the core, in Loki’s voice, the syllables of the other languages were more like whispers so loud they almost infringed upon it, and the fact those whispers were also in Loki’s voice, just a little quieter, made the results a little disturbing.

The trickster glanced up at him and winked with a smirk.

Catching the glitter of illusion, Tony knew that the politicians, all watching the god so closely, certainly hadn’t caught that part. Then, slowly, he realized that Loki was discussing terms for interplanetary treaties of non-interference with Loki himself, Asgard, Jotunheim, Nifelheim, and the Three, and his jaw dropped open slightly. After a few long moments of staring, he decided that he was nowhere near caffeinated enough to process this madness, and made his way over to the coffee machine.

Once halfway through his second cup of coffee, he slipped out of the room again and called Pepper on his cell.

“Uh... try explaining the political things again?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. is saying things are way too quiet, globally, and they’re all a bit freaked out, and want us to be really careful about this for a while. That’s the short version. Do you remember the rest now?”

Tony thought about it. “Yeah, more of it than I understood the first time around, definitely. I might have figured out why it’s so quiet. Well, I’ve figured out part of it, but fuck if I know how he did it.”

Stark Industries’ CEO exhaled a sigh of deepest relief. “Oh good, so it’s just him that’s up to
“JARVIS? Join the call. Tell us exactly who all Loki’s been chatting with this morning, please?” the inventor inquired.

The AI obeyed. The list of the first six longer conversations with individual world leaders alone had Tony very pale and Pepper audibly breathing louder with manufactured levels of near-calm. The added list of others Loki was currently video-conferencing with left the two primary heads of Stark Industries a bit speechless for over a full minute.

“Tony,” Pepper said, very quietly, “I am very glad that he’s on our side.”

“Me too. I…” He cleared his throat, uncertain if he was more terrified or turned-on.

“You’re both insane, though,” the redhead added quickly.

“Absolutely,” Tony agreed, with feeling.

“How did he… how, Tony, how?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t, but I plan to find out, because goddamn. I don’t even know what he’s doing!”

“JARVIS,” Pepper inquired lightly, “what is he doing?”

“In all conversations so far, it seems he has some prior understanding of all of these people,” the AI said. “He was expecting their calls, and in video conferences, it’s clear they all recognize him, and more than half of them showed micro-expressions indicative of fear, resentment, and/or resignation. They all seem to be, without deviation, willing to accept his promise to be allied with no single political or religious organization on earth, and that he will not bring advanced technologies to earth beyond what is approved by something... it is either a treaty or a constitution of earth’s planetary rights, which he seems to still be explaining to everyone in the next room, under something called the Shadow Proclamation. He summoned copies of that document and all of its terms, in multiple languages, and has had me send them to every nation of the world, for them to review. It seems he plans to tour around the globe for half a day at a time for the next month or so, to make public appearances and receive official signatures from all nations, as well as the Catholic church, the Kremlin, and the Dalai Lama, among others.”

“Send me a copy in English, please, JARVIS?” Pepper requested immediately. “Tony, come to my office. By the time you get here, I should know about enough to start breaking down what this will mean for the company.”

“But I need to-”

“How long is the document JARVIS?” the inventor asked, on a hunch.

“It is roughly twice the length of the Art of War,” the AI explained.

A long pause followed, from Pepper’s end, as Tony smiled ceiling-ward.

“You have two hours,” she said. “And bring Loki.”

“Yes, Miss Potts,” the inventor said, smiling but sincerely obedient.
When Loki concluded his international video-conference, he calmly asked JARVIS to schedule any further calls of a diplomatic nature for tomorrow afternoon. That was all he had time to say before Tony Stark appeared before him almost fast enough the trickster thought he teleported, after which Loki found himself forcibly pinned with his back against the bar counter.

“Yes, dearest?” inquired the god.

“Explain,” Tony said seriously. “Whether what follows after that results in reward or punishment right here in the next thirty seconds after you’re done explaining, depends entirely on what you’ve been up to.”

Loki’s mouth ran dry a moment, and then he smiled, broad and warm. “I called in a favor,” he began.

“A favor?”

“Yes. Dream-walking only gets me so far, you see.”

That, Tony quickly deduced, explained why he hadn’t visibly noticed Loki getting up to... whatever this was. “Go on.”

“There are... beings far more powerful than gods and even Mistress Death in existence, to begin,” Loki said. “One of them was... unexpectedly trapped by a creature called Cthon, when I was about a millennia younger. I had met his previous incarnation once before, and was summoned by the guardians of his kingdom, who requested I make an effort to rescue him, in exchange for the debt of one great favor only the likes of he could grant, whenever I might need it.”

“Who was it?”

“Dream. He is the embodiment of the whole concept as exist in most of the multiverse that’s made up of the sort of universes that roughly resemble our own universe in physical laws, beginnings, and endings,” Loki said.

“He?” Tony inquired.

“This facet of him. Should he be killed and another take his place again, they might very well be of another sort,” Loki suggested. “Beings like you and I can only see one facet at a time, dependent on who and what we are, when it is in our timeline and those timelines of the seven Endless, and what universe we are from. It’s very complicated.”

“Endless?”

“Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, the twins Desire and Despair, and Delirium—who used to be Delight,” Loki listed. “They are known to few, in our universe. It is hard to say whether those who do know of them are lucky, or unlucky, but we’re certainly rare. My own interactions with them being from two separate universes entangled at the edges of their astral planes by complications surrounding the death of the other universe’s first incarnation of Dream—well, they’re still further complicated, and there is some considerable temporal distortion involved. Dr. Strange apparently was brought into the same distortion phenomenon only a few years ago, so even those who fell with me...”
through the rift when I first met Morpheus were apparently pulled from different times as well as different locations. Odin will be pulled through, too, within the next century or so, though no one there would tell me why I didn’t meet that version of him at the time of the rift, despite the fact that event is technically their past.” He shrugged helplessly. “Eventually, it will repair itself. Except technically it already has. Except for a few little doors dream-walkers and others who frequent the astral plane might find, if they know where to look.”

Tony stared at him, blinking in incomprehension. “I’m lost.”

“The important part is that, from the perspective of Dream, his first incarnation met me when I was only a few centuries old. I, along with a few dozen other mages from throughout this galaxy and a few of our nearest neighbors, went into coma-like states for weeks, though to us it felt like only a day; although, it turns out that none of those comas actually seemed to happen at the same time in this universe. Why we were drawn down into that too-deep rest, and into the Dreaming of a neighboring universe, I can hardly begin to explain, but we were, and so far as I can tell each one of us has since done something vital to one or more of the Endless in that universe or our own, in the time since. I was summoned almost on accident, much later; the call had been unspecific. They only wanted someone capable of, and willing to, free their second incarnation of Dream from Cthon’s cage for him. I did so; although I believe, to Dream himself, less than half a century had passed since I met his previous self, but thinking about that causes my skull to ache.”

“Chthon in their universe?”

“Ours. The version of Dream from our universe, I have never met.”

“This is the weirdest shit, Loki.”

“I know, but if not for that, your planet would be at war right now,” the trickster sighed. “Or well on its way, on religious grounds alone.”

Tony hesitated. “That... might be a fairer assumption than I thought about full, with the paparazzi thing.” He frowned a bit at the trickster’s pointed look of mild disapproval. “You didn’t actually complain!”

“I hardly had the time.”

“Neither of us did.”

“Precisely why I have done what I’ve done,” Loki said.

“Which you still haven’t explained.”

The god took a deep breath, and began, “Well... I went to Dream to collect the debt I’ve been holding onto for about a millennia, and presented to him my scheme. He surprisingly agreed to it, and as such every political or religious leader on the planet with sufficient clout to lead any sufficient number of people against us dreamt of me the night after the paparazzi incident. With Dream’s aid, each individual received the same formula: they dreamt that they were in their office, or at prayer, when I appeared before them, and explained that I would not be an ally to any political or religious entity or organization on the planet, as long as none of them, in turn, declared me their enemy. In each dream, there was some light argument with them, during which I inevitably revealed knowledge of one of their darkest secrets, of the sorts that could undermine their power and control and position, and similar knowledge about one of the people closest to them. I spoke no threat, only mentioned the matters so they knew that their secrets were known to me, and then told them that it was not only their dream I visited, but all of their peers, and/or leaders...”
He then explained the follow-up dreams, completed just that past night, and listed all those who had doubted him, and how he had persuaded them.

Then, still holding Tony’s gaze, he asked, “Do you disapprove, Tony?” He sounded genuinely hesitant, expecting some censure.

“If somehow people find out about this?” the inventor asked, his voice mild.

“Few would believe them. Fewer would be willing to admit they had gone along with it, lest their own secrets be under threat. Even if enough resisted, and came clean with those under their power, I could simply swear my word that to do such a thing as influence so many dreams at once, is beyond my capabilities to achieve,” Loki said.

“Because it is,” Tony mused.

The trickster nodded solemnly.

“You. Are. Amazing,” the inventor breathed, his voice a little strained with awe, before he rested his hands on either side of Loki’s face, resting his brow against the god’s. The whole revelation had left him shaking, suddenly aware of just how wrong this might have all gone. “I’ll need to know about that treaty you’ve sent around.”

“I can tell you now if.” He was cut off by hurried, urgent kiss, which melted all of his lingering tension and nerves away, all at once, melting any lingering fear of reprisal or condemnation of his actions. He kissed back sweet and pleased, a low moan catching in his throat.

Tony pulled back. “Seriously, good. Yes. Very. I didn’t even realize, or think-”

“I know.”

“I wish you’d let me in on it earlier, but at the same time, I’m too relieved to care.”

Loki settled his arms about his gloriously mad inventor. “You aren’t going to accuse me of brainwashing the leaders of your world?”

“The fuckers deserve it. We only have about an hour before Pepper wants to chew you out over that treaty and probably have you explain a lot of it,” Tony said. “Just by the way.”

“You have a few suggestions for how I should use that time?”

“Yeah.” the inventor kissed him again. “Yeah, I do.”

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Pepper looked a bit pale and drawn by the time Tony made it into her office, Loki in tow, and she stared at the trickster as though he were responsible for making her feel far more small than was remotely comfortable.

“Level 6,” she said, her voice a little strained.

Tony reached her desk very quickly. “Pep, what is it? What’s wrong?”
“You’re stripping us of some really reassuring protections, here, Loki,” she accused, ignoring the inventor’s hand resting over hers.

“Only a few,” the trickster said. “You gain the right to know what those rights are, and the right to request protection from the Shadow Proclamation, if threatened by outside forces like myself. Before this, while alien races could be prosecuted for their actions against you after the fact, or threatened with such reprisals to bid them think twice before acting, if all of your world leaders can agree to these clauses, you can join the galactic community and bring yourself out of isolation and ignorance.”

“Woah, what?” Tony spun around.

“As a Level 6 planet, races must make contact with earth before landing here,” Loki pointed out. “Level 5 planets have a number of clauses which allow them to be safe-havens away from most of the galactic community at large, so long as any extraterrestrials who land here keep to themselves and do not meddle with the history and development of the planet’s communities and peoples. This has caused you more trouble than you may know.”

“This sounds like something out of Doctor Who,” Tony said.

“It may well be, sir,” JARVIS added, from speakers at the edges of Pepper’s desk, sounding amused.

“One or two of their writers may have slipped that in,” the trickster admitted. “It won’t help my initial believability in the U.K., too. I should reveal them or something.”

“You really think this is a good idea?” Pepper asked. “Convince me.”

Loki lowered himself into one of the two chairs in front of her desk, and began to do so. As he spoke, Tony eventually also sat down to listen, and to question. It took over an hour of examples and arguments, discussion of various articles in the documentation, and long explanations from the god of mischief, but eventually, understanding was reached.

“Okay,” Pepper said. “Let’s talk international tour.”

Loki inclined his head toward her in concession. “I’m all ears.”

Tony looked between them. “I am so glad I have you both on my legal team. I feel suddenly invincible.”

They both shot him moderately scary smiles.

He didn’t even pretend that didn’t turn him on.

Pepper stopped several long seconds before Loki did, and realizing they were both distracted, she asked them to stop and pulled up a calendar. “Planning. You’re not in this alone this time, Liesmithe. JARVIS, populate what he has scheduled so far.”

The inventor and the god leaned a bit closer to look.

“Show the media events I’ve arranged too.” After a moment, she passed the StarkPad to Loki and pointed out the overlap. “Fix those.”

“Yes, Miss Potts,” the trickster conceded, his smirk only a little chagrinned.
Chapter End Notes

I would apologise for the absurd multiverse shenanigans and borrowing a thing from Doctor Who, but it would be insincere.

Also I'm no longer 100% certain this will only be 21 chapters, or if it might wind up more like 23. We'll see.
On the Deadliness of Method Acting to Mages and the Perks of Being a Cypher With a Heart People Can See

Chapter Summary

When the foundation of a mage's power and control is self-knowledge and self-awareness, what perils might it pose such a creature to wear too many false-selves for too long at a stretch? Tony doesn't like the looks of it.

Also: Jotunnheim Calling.

Tony never again wanted to be in the same room as the president of Russia and the god of mischief, he discovered. Loki had a strange sort of respect for the man that was somehow deeply disturbing, and despite the Russian's imperturbable stoicism, it was clear that he both resented the trickster and was reluctantly impressed by him.

When sitting opposite one another, they played intense psychological chess fierce enough Tony sent Natasha the footage (he later found her in front of the television that night, watching the hours-long diplomatic meeting with popcorn and a bottle of red wine, looking fascinated) and while Loki won, and didn't enjoy the game with Putin as much as he usually did with a certain mad inventor, there was a disturbing coldness about them: the politician callous about human rights beneath a veneer of civil rhetoric, and Loki casually dismissive of them—mostly in a manner that suggested the politician himself was inherently disposable to him, but also with an edge of ruthless practicality that set the mad inventor's teeth on edge.

Tony's only consolation was that the U.S. president, as well as several representatives from the EU, were even more deeply discomfited by the whole ordeal. Watching Loki interact with the government of Iran, by contrast, was the highlight of Tony's week; just as he had been with Russia and the U.S., the trickster was surprisingly polite and tactful, while also pulling no punches when it came to religious disdain toward his lifestyle. He didn't bother arguing their logic; he just coolly informed them, repeatedly, that he was subject to obeying galactic secular law alone, which did not favor their arguments in any way. Galactic law, conveniently, had clauses which actively opposed any ill-treatment of diplomats based on religious beliefs and laws which forbade any behaviors for strictly religious moral laws, rather than anything which caused physical harm or the infringement of rights of any sentient beings. Loki easily proved that his romantic relationship did no harm, and infringed the rights of no one on earth, with the support of legal teams both local and interplanetary.

Slowly, the planet earth came to terms, psychologically, with being the country cousins of the universe, rather than the center of it. There were no alien conquerors proving their superiority; there was one tall man, a trickster god, who strolled into the public eye and smiled like he knew just how shamefaced he was about to make centuries of theologians feel, as soon as he tied the last diplomatic bows in place, and let the fact of his existence, and that of the greater galactic legal and trade communities that had been surrounding them—and, in fact, deliberately ignoring them in most cases—for millennia.

Tony was interested in watching that play out. He and his father before him had accomplished things which made men question themselves and humanity and their beliefs before, but never like this. The scientific achievements of man could be rationalized or dismissed as needed by fervent believers, no
matter how some in the scientific community spent time all but shouting themselves hoarse trying to explain that the earth was so much older than a dozen millennia, that Adam and Eve most likely never existed outside of stories; or that it was impossible to either stop the sun in the sky, or stop the earth around the sun, without destroying all life on earth’s surface.

Men could be ignored.

Strictly speaking, in terms of legal status as an extraterrestrial and a shape-shifter whose gender was a matter of whim to alter and thus could not technologically be defined by science, law, or church if the trickster didn’t want it to be—Loki was no man. He was still, to the people of earth, like a sort of god: not one to dedicate a religion to, for he would not waste the magic to keep up with even just listening to any significant number of prayers let alone answering them, nor the sort to admire as one might admire a hero or a force of good in the universe. Before the eyes of all in Midgard, Loki was a force of nature, a being from the stars who sauntered down to earth to claim Iron Man as his mate, and calmly tell the most powerful people in the world—just by casual allusions to eons of history the earth had no part in and by explaining to them their status in the galaxy in accordance with galactic laws, and the whole existence of the Shadow Proclamation—“Everything you know is wrong.”

It could be argued that, underneath the veneer of apparent civility, most of what Loki tended to tell anyone on earth who would listen might be summarize as: “Now, do grow up. The eyes of the rest of the galaxy have just noticed your world, most of them for the first time. You are protected from the worst among them, but the fact remains that you have more allies on this planet, than off of it. It’s about time you children learned to properly get on, don’t you think?”

His silver-tongue, of course, twisted the words into more digestible turns of phrase, often leading his chosen marks to believe that they themselves reached those conclusions all on their own.

Tony admired the trickster’s skill, but after a few days of it, something shifted in the air around Loki. It was not his posture, or his expression, when he was playing a part; his performances, if anything, became still more subtle and nuanced, even in the face of the sort of leaders who had called for genocides against foes and neighbors, or those with secrets Tony could only guess at, because Loki would only whisper in their ear—unwilling to touch them beyond cursory hand-shakes for the sake of appearances, but he never flinched from them, visibly, always acted as though he could not feel imagined slime upon his hands where they had touched his skin—and they would suddenly look as though their world had crumbled.

It didn’t surprise Tony much at all, half a week into Loki’s tour such that he was on the opposite side of the globe from whence his tour had begun, when the first few senators, cabinet members, and one or two others Loki had whispered to in those first two days, fell out of grace catastrophically and publicly.

Some of it, when he looked at the stories in more detail, did almost make him physically ill. Loki had smiled at them, like they had nothing to fear from him. He had gotten their signatures where necessary. Then he had quietly arranged for any and all of their living victims to have a chance at vengeance.

A few of those he had whispered to, less high-ranking (but questions were rising now, pinning such possible crimes against them as made the inventor’s skin crawl) were killed in sudden, violent accidents that were not even faked.

Unless possibly by means of a bit of damned-difficult-to-trace magic.

It took Tony a full day and a half to realize, when it began, that Loki wasn’t touching him. It took him still longer to work out that the trickster didn’t seem to realize he was doing it, nor did he seem
consciously aware that he was developing a habit of staying on the opposite side of the room as Tony.

And still, Loki’s performances remained immaculate, almost frighteningly so. He picked up the nuances of even complex cultural etiquettes with ease, and seemed to understand the unique mindset of any new city within only a few minutes of observing some of their more crowded streets. Once so indoctrinated, all he needed to do was fix his attention upon his marks, and find just the right approach to reach into their minds and coax them into flattery, or trust, or sympathy, even anger if he so required it. He pulled their strings with apparent effortlessness.

Tony knew a lot about just how much skill, focus and effort goes into making something seem effortless. It still took him a while to sense—just beyond the cusp of hearing, and both more visceral and ephemeral than physical touch—what it was about Loki that seemed off.

Some of the most important early lessons that the inventor had picked up, concerning magic, had been letting himself sense Loki’s: close and calm, dense and full of carefully maintained flow of energy which sounded like the echo of an endless waterfall. That was Loki, to him.

He managed to corner the trickster slightly between a section of bar and a buffet table, too many people blocking any polite means of escape, when he was aware of something he had thought was a ringing in his ears.

“Do you hear that?”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “Hear what?”

Tony had looked at him, and suddenly it hadn’t been just sound any longer. It felt a little like sandpaper, and sounded like an engine with a manual crank and an operator losing the ability to keep the pace quite steady, causing the rhythm and vibrations of it to clunk in an off-balanced manner, like it might be broken.

It occurred to him all in one second that Loki’s occupation as god of lies was more dangerous than he had thought about, before, for a mage. Hlín had spoken of Loki’s tricks with an odd sort of disdain Tony hadn’t been able to place until now—there had been fear and concern lurking beneath the disapproval. Suddenly recalling hints the elder mage had dropped, about Loki and long-cons not boding well, even a story about one of her other students who had begun life as a performer in Vanaheim, and could never perform magic during a show, because he was too distant from himself.

Add in the sort of people Loki was dealing with nonstop lately (the sort he would usually disdain, but still reluctantly admire their determination and sometimes the cleverness of their tactics) and often gently cajoling and charming them, as though he were their friend, and thus, in a way, he had become everything that people of Asgard had thought he would, when they thought the very worst of his darker tendencies...

“Nothing,” Tony said. “Comm in my ear malfunctioned,” he lied, with perfect ease.

More than anything else, Loki not catching even a hint of the lie, and instead only nodding and looking away, something oddly restless and uneasy suddenly crossing his face as his eyes darted about the room for his next mark, told the inventor he was right.

The god of lies was officially in too deep.

This didn’t bode well.
After a full week of performing petty parlor tricks, and diplomatic maneuvering like a snake of quicksilver, weaving through the tangled briars of old war-wounds around the world—the thorns of dogma passed right through his scales and left them unmarred; to ancient atrocities he paid his respects, letting the aggrieved see their own emotions reflected across his features for being shiny and reflective and passingly sympathetic had always been among his talents; and in doing so he would win over both sides of every wall and border he did cross, like tangling the fingers of their respective leaders in the deceptively light thread of Gleipnir, ready to be pulled tight and unyielding at a moment’s notice—and Loki felt himself beginning to grow deeply restless and spiteful.

Too much false-smiling, after all, bred oh so much bitterness, particularly when the games got too easy, the fools too depressingly dim to even pose sufficient challenge to keep him focused. It was a sign of victory, or should have been, when things grew only easier as time wore on. The effects of the dreams he had woven had become concrete, and the weight of such unanimous conviction that Loki was not to be provoked amongst such a number influential and charismatic leaders around the globe as had never been able to agree upon any single subject at any point before in all of human history, had taken its toll on the psyche of the global populace; the rebellious earth turned passive, almost expectant. It was not that he was considered harmless, for that would have been amusing, but there was more deference than the trickster had truly expected. Where it once might have been soothing to his ego, he was now almost offended by the game losing savor so soon, already slipping into tedium.

It made his skin crawl and itch, and it became harder and harder to focus on events that seemed increasingly gray and distant. It had to be because they were dull, surely; although perhaps that did not quite account for the leadenness of his limbs even long after his returns to Avenger’s tower. The only distraction from that was anger, or cerebral preoccupation; all other options seemed to make the itching under his skin still worse. Even being around other mages for brief periods back in the tower, like Hlín and even Tony, began to give him a headache, which disturbed him, but he was too occupied now, he told himself, to dwell on that; thus, he avoided them as best he could.

He could sense Tony watching him more closely over the past few days, but didn’t notice quite what about him might be worth such increasingly close scrutiny, until one day in the lab when Tony unexpectedly rested a hand across the back of Loki’s neck and the god flinched at it, the buzz of turbulent chaos under his skin making him feel suddenly all too aware of himself, and just how deep down his thoughts had begun to drag him. He hadn’t even been aware of when the inventor entered the room, but now his every nerve all but sizzled with sudden burning desire to flee, which he only barely resisted.

Tony hesitated only a moment before trying the touch again.

The trickster tensed, wanting to struggle, but forced himself to turn his head to meet his lover’s gaze with his own.

“You feel like a live-wire.”

“Yes.”

“Or like you’re about to explode. Not in a fun way.”

Loki tried to push the rolling office-chair he occupied away from the inventor, but the hand on the back of his neck gripped a little tighter, and he emitted a low snarl.
“It’s not just under your skin. It’s your magic, too.”

The god froze, trying to keep his breathing smooth and calm. He hadn’t had an episode of upheaval like the one currently boiling up within him now—and oh, fool he felt, for not having seen it, but he had thought himself past this, by now; it had used to be so effortless, and he had thought that recovery would be complete with Thanos’ death—since he had escaped the prisons of Asgard. “It is.”

“Touch isn’t helping.”

“No, it is not,” Loki confirmed, his voice stiff.

“Too bad, because I’m not letting you go until I know you’re okay. What is this?”

“It should be nothing. I know precisely who I am, and what my needs are,” the god snarled, eyes snapping shut as he squirmed slightly, the awareness-of-flesh caused by Tony’s hand and the calm hum of the other mage’s power, making his own instability all the more obvious than it had been before. The contrast was too stark, and being forced to feel it quite so closely and intimately was only exacerbating the violence of his own reactions deep below the surface, widening the gulf between the inventor’s calm and Loki’s building upheaval. “If you let go, I will not run,” he vowed, his voice gravel and desperation.

Tony’s hand moved, instead gripping the fabric of his shirt-sleeve, rather than touching his skin.

The god instantly relaxed a few notches, but still fairly vibrated with tension.

“What set this off, do you think?”

“I know not.”

“I think I might.”

“Enlighten me, then,” there was more vitriol in his tone than he had intended, but the inventor didn’t even blink at it, just kept watching him steadily, and somehow that stung worse than if he had made Tony flinch: that the inventor already saw how he couldn’t contain his pain, which always felt like weakness.

“You’re so good at getting into people’s heads, especially bad ones, that when you’re caught up enough playing the game and getting things done, you shut down the parts of you that would normally be disgusted by their turns of thought, their ignorance, and their desires, because reacting to those things as yourself, in-the-moment, would scare them off too soon, before you’ve done with them,” Tony said slowly. “You don’t notice it. You’re too focused on your goal, but you’re too sharp for those things to go unnoticed. You collect them for later use as leverage, and sometimes you do feel disgust enough that you’ve even arranged a bit of payback for some of the worst, but only those you could spare without leaving a trail—don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“You’re suggesting I need to embrace the sensation of disgust?” Loki said flatly.

“I’m saying that the more you keep shrugging off those things from horrible people and keep moving on to the next without taking the time to acknowledge the awful things you’ve been staring into, the more you grow in tune with the way they think, Loki. You’re a mimic, and you start to reflect back at them what you detect under their masks, to reassure them.”

“That does not mean I am carrying any qualities of their’s beyond the time it takes me to fool them,” the god snapped.
“You haven’t come within ten feet of me for three days, unless I manage to corner you, and even then you’re shrinking away from me. You don’t do shame, so it’s something else.”

The trickster met his gaze again, swallowing tightly around the knot of unease that threatened to form in his throat. “I frightened you,” he said quietly. “In Russia.” He then smoothed back his hair with an unsteady hand. “Well, frightened only very little, but disturbed you. You looked almost ill.”

“That wasn’t toward you. It’s the changes I saw in you when you fixate on other people like that, so drastically different from yourself. I know it’s false, because I know you, but it’s like the uncanny valley principle. It’s impressive that you’re so good at that, but it’s also kind of like watching you put on someone else’s face, when it’s someone I know, but I can still see you moving under it,” Tony said. “I don’t like losing sight of you, but you’re a good enough actor and shape-shifter and con-artist that you do really become another person, given enough time putting on that kind of show, and you make that so real it’s hard to see you, even when your face is still yours.”

The god felt some of the churning tempest under his skin abate a little. “They are not unlike me. Many of them.”

“In tactics and interpersonal chess, maybe, but you see deeper than that.”

Loki frowned. “I do.”

“And that feels?”

“Like slime,” he said slowly, as though just realizing it. “I believe... I need a shower. A very long shower.”

“Good idea, for a place to start.” Tony’s hand reached for the trickster’s, and hesitated, starting to pull away, but Loki didn’t let him, taking hold firmly.

“Help me drive this away,” the god whispered, his eyes squeezing shut against the painful buzzing in each eye-socket at the contact, but it wasn’t nearly so strong as before. It was still uncomfortable, but he needed the anchor more than he would dare admit to.

“You’re okay with touching, then?”

“You’ve yet to recoil, imaginary slime aside, and me being myself aside, so yes.”

“Loki, look at me.” He waited until those poison-green eyes opened for him. “You are who I want. That’s what all this is for. You can scare me, but you sure as hell can’t scare me away from you.”

“You hardly know that,” the trickster said quietly.

“I’ve seen you leap into a dragon’s mouth and pierce it with hollow ice-javelins that you filled with salt just to add to his misery. I’ve watched footage of you slitting your own throat with glee, more than once, and dragging a knife through your own guts in spite of your own pain just for the pleasure of Thanos’ suffering,” Tony said coldly. “I found the remains of the Other after the battle, when we searched the ships for any remaining survivors, and your spell was still there, and bits of nerve and muscle were still twitching and writhing, and your seal in the middle vibrated with silent screaming until Hlín put him out of his misery. I’ve seen what sort of creatures press in around too-powerful explosions around the ass-end of the galaxy Thanos was in, when I carried a bomb through that portal and I know how much worse you must’ve seen of it when the tesseract pulled you through back to a familiar branch of Yggdrasil.” He shrugged, then. “And so now I’ve watched you make nice with some of the worst people on this planet with the least accountability for their actions, and smile at them, and touch their hands like you weren’t even aware of all the blood and horror they’ve
caused, but I know you are.” He felt the trickster try to pull his hand back sharply then and tightened his grip.

Voice acid, the god snarled, “Some hero you are, then!”

“You’re not here for my heroics anymore than I’m here for the goodness of your soul, Loki,” Tony said.

“You follow me into the dark, and I will lose you,” Loki hissed.

“Is that what this is? I thought it might be that you’ve been unwilling to touch me because you feel too much like touching them—and all they symbolize and all that you see when you silently hack into their brains just looking at them—and then touching me, would be insult to us both, because you haven’t taken the time to really look at them without diplomatic tunnel-vision and shudder, recalling just how different they are from you and how deep those differences run.”

Loki flinched hard, breath hissing out through his teeth. “Stop.”

“Right now, what scares me is how you’re more willing to think about running from me than facing yourself to stop the pain,” the inventor said, his voice lighter, like he was just realizing something. “Oh. Oh, shit. You’re actually afraid that you really are like them, and don’t want to see it.”

The trickster cringed hard, almost sending his chair reeling away, if not for two firm hands not his own gripping the arm-rests. “I said stop!” he snarled.

“Oh fuck no,” Tony growled back. “You wanted me to bring you back a bit, but I can’t do that if you’re afraid to self-observe. You need to.”

“If I cannot?”

The inventor grabbed his wrist hard.

Loki swore, the chaos suddenly rushing loud and cacophonous in his ears; then he realized it was because Tony had made his own power perfectly still for a few moments, like the surface of a deep reservoir, far from any wind. Compared to that, the trickster felt acutely aware of his own power being made a maelstrom, tightly concentrated around the churn of loathing far too deep beneath the surface. “Let go, please, let go.” He cringed further when the inventor tugged his chair forward and pressed their foreheads together, one of his legs settling between Loki’s on the edge of the seat. “You’re. Causing. Me. Pain.”

“That’s all you, sweetheart,” Tony responded. “I’m just making you more aware of what you’re doing. Stop, please. I need you here.”

The god’s breath caught for a moment. Something threw off the engines at the heart of the chaos, just for a few moments. “Say that again.”

“Loki, I need you,” the inventor said, slow and sure.

“Why?” The question fell unbidden from his lips. He hadn’t even consciously thought of it, until it met his own ears.

“You need to ask?”

“I need to recall.”
Tony let out a shaking breath. A long pause followed.

The trickster began to tense again, muscle at the corner of his jaw twitching. “Right,” he said, magic beginning to flare up with intent this time. Unsteady to an embarrassing degree, but still responsive to the sudden coil of panic and something like humiliation commanding it.

Positively bristling, the inventor shattered the half-begun teleportation spell with a flick of his wrist. “No you don’t, Silver-tongue, just give me a minute,” he snapped. Then, after a few deep breaths, his own panic sharp enough to send adrenaline coursing through him, but he stayed steady. “Please, Loki. Words aren’t easy for me, here.”

“You were doing well so far.”

“At talking about you. I’ve been studying you, because I can’t not study you, whether you’re here to observe or not. You’re the most complicated, broken mess I’ve ever met, and all your broken edges fit right in with mine in ways that don’t make sense—or they shouldn’t, but they do anyway, just gloriously so—and I can’t find a single facet of you so far that I don’t want in my life, except these ones that cause you to hurt yourself like this, and it’s worse because you’re trying to spare me pain at the same time, like you’re afraid of what I’ll do if you let me see all of you, and you’re afraid to hurt me, and I do not like that, anymore than you’d want to see me hurt for your sake,” Tony snapped, before he could manage to filter it.

Another, only slightly shorter pause followed.

“See?” the inventor murmured. “I... just needed a minute to catch up.”

Loki let out a shuddering breath, his whole body shaking. His eyes were tightly shut, and his fists were clenched.

“Loki?”

Sliding his head a bit to one side, never breaking contact with Tony’s skin, the god nuzzled downward slowly until he could bury his face in the inventor’s neck. When one of Tony’s hands settled on the back of his neck, he only relaxed a little bit further, though the tremors intensified.

The inventor let out a breath of his own, low and relieved. “Good to have you back,” he murmured.

“I do not wish to be too much like them. You are correct,” the trickster said quietly.

“Then you won’t be.”

“But when you saw me start—” he stopped dead, throat and eyes burning. He tried to ignore the sensation of tears escaping his tight-shut eyelids.

Tony’s brow furrowed and he shook his head a little. “Public performance alterations are one thing, and while seeing you fake it and suddenly bits of yourself come back out through the falseness is disconcerting, it’s not because you’re more similar to your marks than I’m already aware of. It’s that there’s only glimpses of the real you, like you’re barely still there. Don’t you dare think any of your core nature has to change. Ever. I like it. I like you, dammit.”

“Have I not already altered myself so?” the trickster’s tone was bitter.

“I was under the impression you became more yourself, not quite the old one you were, but also healing a bit from the wreckage of all things post-fall,” Tony said slowly. “If that’s not the case, then it’s my turn to have an insecure breakdown.”
Loki’s hands settled on his hips. “I would not have healed so well without your influence. You allow me to be more myself than anyone else I have ever encountered.”

The inventor sighed heavily. “Good.”

“But I... as you say, I tend to... alter myself to suit my goals?”

“You can’t play me like you can them. You know that. You can’t be someone other than yourself at me without me calling bullshit, unless I feel like playing along because it’s not actually serious.”

“I cannot?”

“Would you be crying on my shoulder right now if you could?”

Loki considered.

“Keep in mind I’ve spent this entire time calling you on your bullshit.

The trickster half-smiled against the inventor’s skin. “...No. No I would not be.”

Tony turned his head to kiss the god’s neck lightly. “Good.”

“Games with you are all the stranger for it. I feel, at times, as though I have a more limited arsenal, and yet, I would not have it any other way.”

“Makes for more close-quarters combat.”

“And I do love to have you close,” Loki responded, his tone lighter.

Tony felt some tension uncoil in his own shoulder muscles, at that. “Convenient, then. I’d prefer to keep you that way.”

“I am yours.”

“You’d better be. Fair trade, and all.”

“Hm?”

“You’ve had me for ages.”

Loki lifted his head and seized the inventor’s face in both hands in a movement both sudden and gentle, a breathless noise escaping him at the complete lack of resistance when he guided Tony’s mouth to his own, lips parting almost instantly as they collided, soft but not tentative, and the kiss grew very deep, very fast.

Melting into the contact utterly, the inventor let Loki support him, one arm locking about his waist, his body sliding down in the chair slightly until there was room for Tony to settle his knees on either side, of the god’s hips. The initial urgency trailed off quickly into something headier: slow, achingly tender, and something else... something important, but Tony was too busy enjoying the easy give and take of it to quite manage coherent thought enough to name it.

When the kiss slowly waned and they broke apart, the inventor felt his heart skip a beat so violently it ached, because that third thing was written all over Loki’s face. It might as well have been a flashing neon sign, or a punch in the face, or a shot of the world’s most heart-warming upper injected right into his veins. Holy shit he’s in love with me. The great Tony Stark might have felt a vaguely ridiculous fluttery sensation all through his body. He could still feel chaos and storms, but the sounds
were more distant and while still hardly peaceful, Loki’s magic didn’t feel like rasps against his own.

“You have such power over me,” the trickster said quietly.

Tony brushed the pad of his thumb along the edge of one of the god’s ridiculously perfect cheekbones. “And you trust me with it.” It wasn’t quite a question, but it might have easily been.

“I do.”

The words struck the inventor’s brain at an extremely unconventional angle, by the standards of one Tony Stark. He considered the thought, and carefully set it aside for later consideration, preferably with the aid of a bottle of scotch, and maybe Pepper after he’d gotten a sufficient buzz going that he could even put the thought into words. “I like that.”

“You just thought of something,” Loki said, eyes narrowing a little, but he smiled a little despite himself. “What was it?”

“Dunno yet,” said the mad engineer. It was true, really. Mostly. Nothing that insane and out of the blue could possibly be more than a flicker of inspiration: the makings of a concept around which to build a project, not even a clear idea of the project itself.

Oh shit it’s a project now.

“You mentioned a shower?” Tony offered, suddenly a bit desperate for distraction.

“Reigning in... all of that, was a bit more draining than anticipated.”

“Bath, then.”

“Wash my hair?”

The inventor considered. “Return the favor?”

“Of course.”

“Deal.”

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Natasha knew Loki’s skills, as a trickster and a god of lies and all, but his words, to her ears, should have stirred wars, by rights. As skillfully as he maneuvered and manipulated, Natasha could still hear rustling sounds around him, at times, that weren’t made by wind or anything more visible either. She could sense a steady set of eyes, very intently focused on the god of lies, by the way she instinctively kept out of line-of-sight with any windows when he was around. She had been at war—the most silent, sinister kinds of wars, all overlapping rather than linear, in fact—for so long that she could almost taste smoke already.

She watched the trickster on the news, and occasionally footage from JARVIS hacking the security footage silently wherever the god went, to the knowledge of only very few.

Natasha knew that the AI did the same for Tony, and for Pepper Potts, though his attempts to keep up with Rhodey had caused the soldier to get in trouble a few times, due to the more dangerous
places he tread, and JARVIS restricted himself to Rhodey’s suit alone, after a while. To some extent, JARVIS followed the other Avengers, too, but not as thoroughly. They were, Natasha mused, awarded more privacy than those JARVIS considered, in their way, his closest family. It was not lack of care, she knew; he was simply aware that he was not close enough to them that his presence and more constant observation would not be considered rude—and not a little creepy—were he human. Natasha respected that, and had told him that, on a few occasions, accompanied by no little bit of gratitude.

Watching Loki on the world stage as a full-fledged diplomat, Natasha had tried to pinpoint the sources of her unease. It should have been easy, reading the faces of even the most stoic politicians, to detect some defiant fear, some loathing, something more volatile than politely restrained dislike.

She had found nothing conclusive.

Her bones still itched with the deafening absence of war drums, which made her feel more and more uneasy. If it was no one in the spotlight, no one obvious—or even those the opposite of obvious, like the dangerous people Loki met with after those lavish parties, often after Tony went to sleep: the sort that S.H.I.E.L.D. and INTERPOL both had dictionary-thick dossiers on, who ran shadow organizations (not strictly illegal, given they were all government-funded through tangled and twisted channels) that the general public would never know the names of, throughout the world—then no one would see this one coming, whatever it was.

Then just last night, Natasha had skirted security at an event Loki attended, and checked a few line-of-sight areas in the nearest buildings.

She had found five dead snipers. Two from Hydra, and one from the Hand; the others had been from a smaller, more religious terrorist group.

It’d been then she had recognized the quiet for what it really was.

Someone was biding their time, and didn’t want anyone getting to their prize first.

As a result, Natasha Romanov could not sleep, the night after.

Avengers tower was very quiet. She asked JARVIS to give her access to all breach-able areas of the tower, and a few other areas she suspected might be breach-able in ways neither she nor Tony had thought of yet, but which her own experiences and instincts told her might still be weak-spots.

As he always did, on nights like this, JARVIS acquiesced.

Black Widow began making her rounds.

Tony had asked her about it once. He had started to notice that on nights she took these strolls, things tended to happen after the first one. She didn’t always make subsequent ones, too, but the more little signs that she kept glimpsing of a potential storm coming—Regimes fall every day. I tend not to weep over that, I'm Russian—the more she could not rest easy, some nights.

This was her third night running her usual perimeter-checks, since the night of Loki’s radio interview.

She walked through the tower, silent as a shadow. She wore thinnest black gloves of a material Tony had designed for her, to let her feel every detail of a surface she touched without leaving a mark, or disturbing even debris as lightweight as dust in her wake. She did not quite touch the surfaces, her
hand hovering perhaps an inch above them, but the spells Tony had come up with, and even successfully explained most of the mechanics of to her, let her feel every object, down to the size of a human hair in fineness, as though it were just a little more solid and resistant to her touch than it actually was.

She ran her not-quite-touching fingertips along the seals of doors and windows, whole doors, and around some maintenance-access panels, here and there.

Moving up from the upper basement floors, to the ground floors, she found nothing out of place. The lockdown sections, which formed the the core of the building from the first floor up to the labs, were severe enough that she did not fear anything penetrating any of them that wasn’t the Hulk, or someone throwing the Hulk particularly hard; in either case, her own methods for detecting more subtle means of entry, would be a little pointless. She trusted Tony’s designs enough for that.

So she skipped ahead, to the first floor above the labs.

Halfway around the outer perimeter of that floor, something made her still: a very quiet metallic noise. She tapped the nearest wall (three taps: one long, two quicker) in a silent signal to JARVIS that she had heard something. She had arranged it with the AI after an incident with The Hand, last year.

She knew, then, that JARVIS was listening for the most subtle of little out-of-place noises.

Words projected on the nearest wall suggested silently: an insect, I believe.

“Then exterminate it,” Natasha whispered, barely audible even to herself.

A quick sound followed: it should have stayed quick, but struggle followed, and then a small pop, again a bit too metallic.

“JARVIS?”

“A well-camouflaged spy unit, it would seem. I did not detect any metal within it at all, until attempting to crush it.”

Natasha sighed. She considered whether or not to wake Tony, then recalled how he had been watching Loki all evening. “Has he gotten Loki back to more normal levels of self-awareness?” She had been one of the inventor’s consults in the Am I crazy, or does he seem like he’s maybe a bit off, to you too, the last few of days? department.

She had noticed them both being distant, but only once Tony mentioned other factors, of a mage-like nature, had she stopped mocking the mad engineer good-naturedly for his fretting, and eventually agreed that yes, something was indeed off.

“He has, I believe,” JARVIS replied.

“Seal that thing into a lockdown box, one of our better ones, and keep it under close observation, until he wakes up properly tomorrow,” she said, and continued her rounds; although she was sure that whoever had sent that first bug had made any other devices of their around the tower either retreat, or stay too still and too unobtrusive to be detected. It still soothed her mind enough to get in a few hours of sleep into the late morning. She did not dream.
True to his word on the subject of exhaustion, Loki had fallen asleep not long after bathing. If his (admittedly fuzzy, after a certain point) memory was to be believed, the trickster might have requested to be carried to the bed not long after he had hastily summoned his sleep-clothes. He was fairly certain that he hadn’t succeeded at being carried, but had succeeded in keeping most of his skin covered from the navel down, which was a small victory of a different sort.

Loki’s first attempt to quietly remove himself from the bed was met with Tony’s arms about his waist gripping more tightly and a low huff against the back of his neck. Loki’s second attempt involved a bit of spell-work, which was swiftly negated by a few well-aimed counter-reactions set off by the mad inventor.

“We have work, Tony.”

“Nope,” he said flatly. “Cancelled all of it with Pepper last night. Official excuse is things heating up in Jotunnheim again ahead of schedule. You’re taking a day off.”

“I hardly require such coddl-” He inhaled sharply when Tony’s teeth nipped a spot along his left shoulder-blade that never failed to inspire a tremor of interest, especially accompanied by clever fingers stroking along his right hip-bone all-too-lightly. “Nngh.”

“Oh no, this isn’t all about you, honey. This is me being selfish. Get used to it.” He then rolled the still-sleepy god under him, pinning Loki’s wrists to the sheets on either side of his head. “Three days trying to figure out what was wrong, able to feel something off with your magic, worried and scheming and hoping you wouldn’t run.”

Loki swallowed thickly. “I won’t run from you.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I won’t run where you can’t chase me, then. Not if I can possibly help it.”

Tony relaxed a little, and kissed him, brief and light. “You’d better not.”

“I did not mean to scare you.”

The inventor shot him a mild glare.

“I meant, this time, that I did not intent for you to feel afraid for me, rather than of me, Tony,” the trickster reassured, with a self-deprecating half smile.

“This time.”

“You do not wonder if you might scare me away?”

Tony considered, his head tilting to one side slightly. He knew that he scared most people, intimidated most people. Even Pepper had been scared, at times—not for herself, never for herself, with him, but for what he was capable of doing to others. Those sort of things wouldn’t scare the likes of Loki away, but other things might. Tony’s self-destructive tendencies, his inclinations toward self-sacrifice, his ability to destroy even people terribly close to him when he had been betrayed...

“Probably not as much as you, given centuries you’ve had to collect your experience, but I’m not immune, no.”

Loki nodded, his smile faint and self-deprecating. “I should fear you, for what harm you are capable
of doing to me. What sway you have.”

“So I’m noticing.” He released the trickster’s wrists, settling over him, arms tucked tight against the god’s sides as he supported himself primarily on his elbows. “Lucky for you, Loki dear, you have one of the most hedonistic and selfish moral compasses available, and you’re the only one I’m not set at too high a price to afford.”

“What price, exactly?”

“Oh. One heart of Loki, god of mischief.”

“You’ll trade such a fine thing, for a mere myth? A rumor?” Loki teased, fingers trailing down one side of the inventor’s neck.

“It helps that I’ve seen it.”

“Have you, now?”


“Possibly.”

“I can’t say I’ve smelled it, but what exactly would it smell like, anyway?”

“Heavy machinery, forest fire, coffee, spices, and a hint of coconut oil,” Loki said easily, recalling all the scents he associated with the mad inventor himself.

Tony snorted. “And taste?”

“I have, as you know, a way with words.”

The inventor rolled his eyes. “It’s been mentioned.”

“I still have none which can do justice to the taste of you.”

“You sly, flattering bastard.”

“It’s true.

“Silver-tongued lia-” He was cut off by a much deeper, more thorough kiss than the previous one. It left him a little dizzy, when Loki pulled back.

The trickster looked deeply thoughtful, licking his lips. “I can’t say you taste quite of cinnamon or of coffee, maybe slightly of smoke, but the flavor is too smooth for that. Before the apple, you still tasted just faintly of palladium, but that’s now gone. Extremis, too, altered something, but I cannot say it is like heat or metal, only intensity of something else like it that I cannot name. You do not taste of apples, nor any other fruit most of the time, but if you’ve had anything to drink with even a hint of citrus in it, of any kind, you taste almost but not quite like pomegranate and sage, but only very briefly, before you begin only to taste of yourself, and eventually of us both. When you have exerted your magic, you taste a bit more like electricity and toasted coconut. When you are angry, or afraid, or have been fighting, you taste a little of sweat and copper and rosemary, for some reason. You see that I have words aplenty to describe the way your mouth tastes, but they conjure only the most vague impressions of the actual experience.”

“You are seriously the most attractive person I have ever had sex with,” Tony said, with a reverent
sort of breathlessness. “I’m keeping you.”

“Oh good.” Loki nipped at his bottom lip. “I do require maintenance, however.” He rolled his hips up against the mad inventor, slow and deliberate, letting his lover feel every inch of his appreciation.

“Do you now?”

“I’m sure you’ll find it no trouble.”

As he felt miles-long legs bend up and wrap loosely about his hips, Tony couldn’t help the low groan that escaped his throat. “Oh, you’re trouble, alright.”

“No wonder you can’t resist me, then.”

“No wonder I love you,” the inventor corrected, and caught the god’s mouth with his own, a little lazy and appreciative almost to point of worship at first, until Loki’s tongue slipped into his mouth like a conqueror and cajoled him sinfully with more heat, and just a little more roughness, perfectly domineering even as his legs moved a bit higher up Tony’s waist and gripped him just a little tighter.

After three days of nerves and worry and plotting and diagnostics, the inventor felt blissfully drowned in the physicality of it as his hands began to wander and Loki began to writhe, making the best encouraging noises as his lithe snake-hips gave a slithering upward grind that made Tony emit a low, shuddering cry into the trickster’s perfect mouth. Seconds later, he wasn’t sure if it was himself, or Loki, who had banished the god’s pajama pants and his own boxers, but they were certainly gone, and Loki undulated his hips again the exact same way, and Tony moaned brokenly in response and panted, “Rushed much?” when a thrust of his own hips made the trickster gasp and the kiss break off for a moment.

“I need you to fuck me like you own me,” Loki shot back, eyes bright and pupils wide and dark.

A little shudder ran from the inventor’s skull, down through the rest of his entire body, leaving him feeling a little overheated, and his brain possibly almost short-circuited a little. “Do I own you?” he asked, his voice a bit rough.

Loki sat up a bit on one elbow and gripped the back of Tony’s neck hard, tugging him back in closer and dragging him a bit further up Loki’s body too. “Body and soul, Tony Stark, I would be yours, for as long as you will take me.” The movement dragged the sheets away from their bodies. The trickster released Tony’s neck in order to trail those same finger down the inventor’s arm to his hand, which Loki guided to rest lightly on his left hip. “I’ve already learned that, without my noticing at first, I have already begun to trust you more than I wholly trust myself, but you do take such care with what is yours. There is no better way to preserve myself, I believe, than to be owned by you.”

Tony’s mouth ran dry. “Only you could make putting yourself into someone else’s possession sound selfish.”

“Well, I also know that you give as good as you get, and reward a little trust, from those you care for, with all of your heart, so how better, in turn, to claim you, than to entrap you so?”

“And of course you can also make it sound selfish, and manipulative, and correct,” the inventor mused, leaning in to trail kisses down his neck slowly, making Loki sigh and become deliciouslypliant under him. It wasn’t often the trickster gave himself over entirely, and even less frequent that Loki was so inclined to outright demand what he wanted, when what he wanted was to be broken open a while.

“It also suits you,” Tony added, “to suggest those intentions when you already know you couldn’t
get rid of me if you tried, because I’d chase you, and I’d never stop.” He smiled against the god’s skin as he felt Loki shiver at that, and then nipped at one nipple just sharply enough to make him gasp and arch closer—and that was when something caught his eye.

Tony hadn’t noticed it the night before. He blamed the ridiculous amount of bubbles Loki had summoned for his bath, and distinctly recalled looking away for only a moment as the trickster left the water, before looking back up and seeing Loki fully dry and wearing pajama pants.

“You bastard, you hid this,” he growled, but his tone was startled and disbelieving more than censuring, as he slid down along the god’s body and traced his fingers over the black ink marring Loki’s pale skin, right along the line of the god’s hipbone. “You actually—you-”

Property of Tony Stark

An utterly incoherent collection of syllables escaped Tony’s throat.

“I wanted to be more fully conscious, and physically capable of appreciating your reaction to the fullest,” Loki responded with savor, long fingers of one hand carding through his lover’s hair like a prince proud of his beloved pet, until the inventor met his gaze sharply, with suddenly very wide, dark eyes, lowering his mouth to cover the word Property and bit down sharply, sucking at the tender skin when a small noise escaped Loki’s throat and the hip under his mouth pressed up against him, seeking more. “Yesss, like that,” the god hissed, fingers gripping at Tony’s hair more tightly.

For a moment, the inventor was almost drunk on the strange, novel emotion welling up through him. It felt familiar, yet strange, like he’d spent a long time trying to unlearn it and never fully succeeding because a part of him so deeply relished it. He had never been able to apply it to another person before, and the power of that made his whole body tingle and his blood rush, and he could tell from the way Loki squirmed and gasped and felt cooler under his hands that he was subconsciously heating up in a very literal sense, too: fire that seemed to thrum through his very bones.

Mine.

It shouldn’t have been so simple as seeing his name sewn under the skin of a god with ink and just a hint of magic to preserve it against Loki’s healing powers—and he could feel that, taste it almost, where his tongue dragged across that tender skin—but it really was.

Every life he had entangled up with his own, even those he loved and desperately needed and counted now as his only family, weren’t really his. They never really felt like his he could own. Call it the product of all the years of time he had spent, while growing-up and and then mostly-grown-up, wherein those he tried to care about stayed in his life as fleetingly as his triumphs (each of those lasting only as long as it took his father to tear them down with criticism and demanding that he do better, whereas people were even less predictable about when they would fall away), all culminating in his decision to build a reputation as a bed-hopping ne’er-do-well, which chased off almost everyone in his life except Obadiah and Rhodey and Pepper. After that, when the events in Afghanistan and his decision to stop making weapons had made Rhodey disbelieve his intentions so painfully, he had felt alone entirely except for his impossibly-perfect-friend-and-personal-assistant and Obadiah, only for the last father-figure, in whom he’d had only the most cynical of faith, to turn against him too, and far more murderously. Deep down, he had been waiting for Pepper to leave ever since and hadn’t even believed she might really stay until she had lingered even months after their romance fizzled out and he felt kept, but never dared to believe he was allowed to own in return. She was of his family, but not his, not like this.

Tony hadn’t even realized it, until right now, holding Loki’s gaze, biting hard enough he knew the god felt pain but the Loki only made another hissing sound heavy with want and whispered Tony’s
name. The high gasp the trickster gave when Tony finally released him was music to the mad inventor’s ears.

“You’re really mine,” Tony purred, and his voice was low and possessive and full of dark velvet heat. It almost didn’t sound like himself, but it did, and there was visible evidence just to his right—as he ran his tongue across the tattoo and slight bruising around it, at Loki’s hip—that the god of lies really liked it.

Sensing the shift, Loki felt simultaneous thrill and nerves that made his whole body shiver at the way Tony’s hands ran down his thighs to push his legs apart. Then a higher noise of shock and stinging pleasure ran up from his hip as he felt a whisper of magic from Tony’s touch, centering on those tattooed words, sensing the threads already interwoven into them and giving them strength.

“T-tony,” the trickster gasped.

“This is a gap,” the inventor whispered. “It’s not just keeping the ink from fading, you wove something here: a big gap in your defenses.”

“You’ll be able to find me,” Loki said. “My magic will never hide me from you.”

“You could unweave it.” The words escaped before he could stop them and he winced at how they muted his buzz.

“It’s your name, in your writing, if you look close. I would need you to remove it.”

Tony stared up at him for a long few moments, breaths quickening.

Then Loki cried out even as his head smacked audibly back against the headboard as Tony shoved him up and back and swallowed his cock in one motion, right to the hilt, and proceeded to lay his claim thoroughly. All suction and focused application of pressure and friction, it didn’t take long before the inventor’s onslaught had Loki outright whimpering and struggling to writhe, only to find himself held very tightly in place, helpless to have any affect on the pace save his voice.

His voice, he employed to great effect, softly pleading, praising, and swearing, with varying degrees of coherency. His fingers were tangled in Tony’s hair, not steering him, but urging him on and seeming inclined to not let go of him. He was anchored, like this, wet heat engulfing him and Tony Stark humming low in his throat and swallowing so pressure rolled down his length like a tidal wave and Loki lost words entirely when two magic-slick fingers pushed into his opening, not even thinking to struggle, now. He couldn’t remember why he should struggle, save perhaps to try and get more of those clever fingers now applying fricative pressure over just the right places, making him almost sob as the inventor’s cheeks hollowed out, mouth now moving up and down his length almost in time with the thrusts of Tony’s hand.

Loki wasn’t actually sure when his breathless chant of, “Tony, Tony please, oh fuck, Tony-” changed just slightly to, “Take me, please, Tony, take me, love, please,” but he was certainly aware when Tony noticed, by the way each thrust into him got a little rougher, a little harder, and the inventor’s mouth slowly pulled back and away, sucking so hard and exquisite that Loki’s eyes rolled back in his head for a moment and he emitted a ragged whine when that mouth release him with a low pop.

“You,” Tony said, “Are.” He licked across the tattoo again, and then up at an angle until he reached Loki’s sternum. “Mine.” His free hand released Loki’s hip, the other still driving into him, now faster. The freed hand soon busied itself by stroking Loki’s cock at the same sweet-rough pace as Tony’s lips brushed the trickster’s lips and he said, “Come apart for me, Loki. Just come.”
Helplessly, the trickster fell apart with a strangled cry, his hips bucking hard into the inventor’s ministrations, but before he had even quite rode out his orgasm, Tony pushed his legs up and out, hooked one knee over each shoulder and drove into him with his cock, making the god falter, then almost scream with pleasure and ache, as he was driven over the edge hard and then far past it until he was trembling and barely able to keep panting shallowly as another orgasm began to build almost before the first was done fading. “You hurt so exquisitely,” he managed to gasp.

“Fuck, Loki,” the inventor moaned, with a full-body shudder, leaning closer, pushing the god’s legs further up and apart as he did so. He could feel the trembling shakes of Loki’s body under him, the jerks and twitches of near-painful pleasure, and rode him through it, hard as he could, hissing as Loki’s nails raked down his back hard enough to draw blood, only for the wounds to heal rapidly with a little crackling rush of heat. He turned up the heat just a little further and felt the trickster deliberately drop his own temperature.

Pale skin darkened to blue and Loki’s lust-dark green eyes became red, and both of them hissed and shuddered with the temperature change as Tony increased his own heat to compensate and scanned the gorgeous god under him. Tattoo still visible even when you’re blue, holy shit, he didn’t say, because as soon as he processed what he was seeing, his mouth automatically caught Loki’s again, tongue sliding in deep and with intent to conquer.

Loki played with him, matched him, even as his breathlessness belied just how close to another climax he was getting.

Tony reached between them and grabbed the trickster’s cock, stroking fast and tight until the god cried out softly into his mouth, and the inventor tasted frost, and came too, but kept moving, despite his own discomfort, intent on dragging this out, and rewarded by Loki shaking like a leaf, like Tony’s heat made him shiver. He could hear Loki trying to form words, but never let the kiss stop long enough for them to fully form.

Long-fingered hands moved all over him, pushing and pulling, squeezing and scratching, but above all claiming every inch of the mad engineer that Loki could reach from his current position. Tony reveled in the reminder that this one owned him, and was his to own. The thought almost set him off again, but he held back, slowing his pace enough to make Loki’s nails scratch at his lower back in attempts to speed him up again, but Tony didn’t. He broke the kiss to hiss in Loki’s ear, “You want more, Loki?”

“Always, with you.”

“Good.” He took hold of Loki’s knees and steered them as he rolled both of their bodies sideways. Then Tony knelt, legs tucked under him, with Loki draped across his lap. Then he let go of the god’s knees and trailed spell-work up along Loki’s arms, along with his fingertips, drawing those long limbs up. Leather straps from thin air wrapped about Loki’s forearms, so they were pressed together from wrists down to elbows, and the knots where they tied off on either side there were bound to the top of each of the bed’s four tall bed-posts by thicker cords, keeping his arms suspended above both their heads. “Then take it,” Tony commanded, one hand stroking the trickster’s tattooed hip.

The god tested the surprisingly strong bindings, and grinned, mouth half-open as he panted. He arched up, pulling a bit on his restraints for leverage, and then rotated his hips slow and sinful as he descended, grinning at the ragged moan the movements drew from Tony’s throat. “Sit up closer,” he demanded in a rasp.

Tony obliged, until they were pressed against each other as close they could manage, and he caught Loki’s mouth again as the trickster’s body began to undulate, serpentine grinding motions more prominent than more direct up-and-down drag, and all the more sinfully good when Loki squeezed a
little tighter around him.

With his own arousal trapped tight between their bodies, Loki was subject to more pressure and friction, the more he sped up his pace, and the deeper he drew Tony into him, and so he held nothing back until they were both breathless and still kissing with ever-growing desperation. He held out until Tony seized his hips and began to speed up the pace still further, moaning into the god’s mouth as he did.

Feeling Loki tremble against him and go bowstring-tight with one more intense climax, Tony struggled to hold out, and managed it until all of Loki’s inner muscles tightened around him and the god broke their kiss to gasp, “Please.”

Tony’s world went white for a few moments after that.

It took them both a few minutes to slowly come back down. Fire faded from under Tony’s skin, and with it the trickster returned to his paler appearance, green eyes hazy with satisfaction.

Then Loki banished the bindings about his arms without much effort, and pushed Tony back until he was splayed out bonelessly across the mattress, at which point the god settled on top of him like a tall, gangly blanket, arms tucked on either side of the inventor’s ribcage and his forehead resting on his sternum.

Tony stroked his back idly, as they both caught their breaths, then settled his arms about the trickster’s waist when he felt the god’s arms grip his sides a little tighter. The huff of relief and comfort Loki gave in response warmed him through in the most absurdly content manner, and he almost couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so relaxed. It was almost cosy.

“This is why we can’t have nice things, Tony thought hazily.

“What sort of news?” Loki asked, understandably muffled, given he didn’t lift his head from its current resting place.

“Rather, a device found in one of the corridors around the labs, near the Avengers’ living quarters. It was disguised as an insect. I could not detect any metal within it until Miss Romanov heard it skitter, brought it to my attention, and asked me to exterminate it. The device fought back rather more impressively than anticipated. The remains await you in your lab. They seemed to partially self-repair, but damages to it, namely the splitting of it into four parts, one of which was crushed beyond any repair, seemed to hinder that well enough, I’ve discovered. The device no longer seems to have energy reserves left and should be safe to dissect and study as you may wish.”

The trickster god emitted a rumbling sound that would’ve been better suited to his wolf-shape.

Tony tried and failed not to be aroused by it. “You need to make that noise in bed more often... but maybe not immediately.”

Loki chuckled and lifted his head enough to nip at the inventor’s chin. “Perhaps I will stalk you as though you are my prey, and then devour you, too.”

“You make that sound unfairly appealing.”

The god looked down at him with something a bit like wonder. “I do love that it is so easy, with you.” He dropped one more kiss on Tony’s mouth: brief and gentle. “But I would know who or
what is spying on your tower, now, and wouldn’t you, too?”

With a mock-disappointed sigh, the inventor admitted that he would. He allowed Loki to disentangle and slip away, but not without following close behind him, after they were dressed, and headed down to the lab.

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They wound up spending a few hours on the bug.

It was, without question, a bug. Exoskeleton and all, but instead of guts and such inside, it’d had a folded-up metal core, somehow concealed from JARVIS’ ability to detect. It wasn’t magic that Loki could find, but if it was tech, Tony and JARVIS couldn’t work out the hows and whys there either.

The metal compounds inside the thing, and the organic false-exterior, were both made up of common enough materials that any of the Avengers’ enemies from Hydra, to the Hand, to Doom, to even interplanetary threats might have commissioned the thing. Tony wouldn’t have even been too shocked if Oscorp might have had design input, given their affinity for bugs and reptiles over the past few years, but it was genuinely impossible to trace.

And it was a damned clever, simple, and elegant design, too.

“I don’t like this,” Tony murmured. “I’ve tried all sorts of things to keep insects out of the whole tower without involving an awful lot of poison or really expensive redesigns of whole floors using materials capable of sensing the little things moving about in the narrowest available spaces, but those are so expensive that even my bank account aches at the prospect of using that sort of thing for more than half of this tower. What are the magical options here?”

“If they were actual insects, instead of organic shells grown skillfully around a metal device which drives them, it would be much easier,” Loki mused. “I know plenty of means to banish such skittering creatures, but these being so artificial, they will resist. A spell large enough to encompass the whole of this tower could still be too thin in the smallest of spaces, through which something so small might... slip...” His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he trailed off.

“You’re getting an idea.”

“I could make your tower particularly attractive to spiders in all but the places frequently visited by people. Lure them into all of the spaces in-between,” Loki suggested, “and banish them selectively from most other places.”

Tony grimaced a bit, but looked thoughtful nevertheless. “Creepy, low-tech, simple, and pretty effective. The only problem might be these bugs defending themselves against spiders the way they did against JARVIS.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll place the spells to bring the spiders before we leave, then collect one or two arachnid specimens they will be releasing into Jotunheim within the week, as they rebuild the ecosystem. One of them, notoriously, has a venom capable of dissolving even steel. We can experiment with it upon the alloy this captured bug contains, to make certain it will be effective, then release only a very few of their number throughout the tower, carefully bewitched to patrol around the only the spaces surrounding the Avengers’ quarters, and also magically altered to prevent them breeding, so as not to doom your planet.”
“We might want to warn Clint about his crawl-spaces about to be crawling with spiders, I guess,” Tony mused.

“I see absolutely no reason for that,” said the trickster.

“We’re low on anti-venoms.”

A petulant sigh from the god of mischief followed. “Damn.”

“So how do you summon spiders?”

Loki grinned, fingers already a glow with anticipation. “Watch and learn, darling.”

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There were unforeseen complications two hours later.

“Why’d you stop?” Tony groaned, shoulder-blades still pressed against the glass doors to the penthouse balcony. Loki was between his legs and had been opening the inventor’s jeans with his teeth and tongue alone with he had suddenly halted. “Is the world ending?”

The trickster continued to stare at a point above Tony’s head.

Slowly turning his head to look, too, the mad engineer almost screamed in an unmanly manner, but managed to restrain it and swear a bit shrilly instead, stumbling away from the glass.

On the other side of the glass, a man decked out in what appeared to be tailored red-and-blue spandex clung. The bug-like lenses of his mask actually seemed to match his facial expression underneath a bit, narrowing as his eyes narrowed. Tentatively, he knocked, like he wasn’t sure why he was doing so. It was clear that he couldn’t see them on the other side of the glass.

“Thank you, JARVIS, for initiating privacy mode,” Loki said idly, snapping his fingers to return Tony’s shirt to the inventor’s body.

“You’re quite welcome, Mr. Lie-smith. It would seem that the neighborhood hero known as Spider-man is requesting entrance.”

Tony burst out laughing, and couldn’t stop. He eventually stumbled back and collapsed into the nearest armchair, still laughing, as Loki (still slightly flushed, hair a mess where the inventor’s hands had rucked it up a bit, and not wearing a shirt) opened one of the doors to the balcony, which only caused Tony to laugh harder.

Leaning out of the doorway and peering up at the young mortal, who recoiled abruptly up the glass with a sound like a yelp at the mere sight of him, Loki said, “I will have you know that I was quite occupied.”

Spider-man hesitated. “Uh... sorry? Don’t smite me? Are you still in the smiting business? Can I opt out based on being sort of not a viking?”

The trickster appeared amused, at that. “Why are you here, little spider?”

“Well... you see... I’ve got this extra sense, ever since being bitten by a genetically modified and
slightly radioactive spider and all, that usually lets me know when something dangerous is about to happen. It’s sort of tingly. Your whole building is currently causing a lot of really intense and uncomfortable tingling, but only when I’m away from it. What is up with that?”

A pause followed.

“Is Tony Stark in there laughing at me?”

“Hysterically,” Loki deadpanned.

“So he knows what’s up?”

“Yes, and I may be at fault, I’m afraid. I may need to examine you, in order to make you immune to the effects of the spell I’ve recently placed on this tower to safeguard it,” the god sighed. “If only to prevent you returning to this balcony anytime soon, now you are aware that someone knows the answer to your problem.”

“Thank you for helping me instead of killing me for interrupting your sexy times?” the mortal hero said, like he wasn’t sure how definite that really was.

“Come inside, please,” said the god of mischief, not all that reassuring.

Reluctantly, Spidey did so, jumping down off the glass and stepping into the room, closing the glass door behind him. He looked over to Tony Stark, now doubled over with his head between his knees and wheezing with helpless, breathless giggling. “Is he okay?”

“He will get over it one day, I’m sure,” Loki drawled. “Remove your mask, please. I need to see your eyes.”

“Uh, woah, dude, I just met you,” the hero said, backing away sharply. “I have an identity thing, okay? Can’t the mask stay on?”

“How comfortable are you finding this tower so irresistible?” the trickster responded flatly.

“Promises are a thing with you, right? I heard the interview,” Spider-man said. “What about him? Post-apple and all?”

“I haven’t made many oaths since then because I kinda don’t want to test it at the wrong time,” Tony admitted, a bit breathlessly, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “Oh, man, this is priceless. I did not think your pseudonym was so literal, kid, damn. I just thought you were a particularly gifted mutant with a hero streak.”

“No, no, I’m a bit more complicated. You know many super-powered mutants?”

“Dozens, by this point,” the inventor said. “They’re very cool, actually. Just, uh, don’t argue with Wolverine about his taste in cigars.”

“I usually just tell him he smells bad,” Spider-man admitted.

Tony chuckled a bit at that, shaking his head. “Look, I’ve got no interest in unmasking you. You sound... ridiculously young, and you’re probably in over your head enough as it is, right?”

“All the time,” Spidey said, eyes widening a bit pointedly.

“I swear I won’t reveal your identity to anyone without your permission or sincere desire that I do so,” Tony said, and felt an uncomfortable tingle down his spine. “Damn that felt weird. I’d better get
the hang of All-Speak sooner rather than later, I think that actually worked for you, kid.”

“I promise you the same, little spider,” Loki said. “I have no quarrel with you, nor interest in making your life more difficult, as of yet.”

“Okay... damn, this is weird. You’re both weird and a little disconcerting, I want you to know,” Spider-man said, and pushed his mask up and back. He grimaced a little at the surprise on the god’s face and the inventor’s alike. “Look, I swear I’m legally of age to drink, don’t look at me like that. I’m not that young.”

“You’re a brave fool, I suppose,” Loki said, not actually very insultingly, tapping the underside of the young mortal’s chin and staring into his eyes as though searching for something. “Would you be willing to state your name for me?”

“You are kind of being really creepy.”

Tony cleared his throat. “It’s a magic thing. Names have power, and allow a kind of insight, from where he’s actually looking. He’s not doing that because you’ve got pretty eyes, because mine are way prettier; he’s genuinely sussing out just how human you are and how much of you might be a bit spidery.”

“Oh, well, that’s reassuring,” the boy lied. “I’m... I’m Peter Parker.” He flinched a little at the way Loki’s eyes glowed a molten green at that.

“So you are,” the trickster said. “Very interesting.”

“Wait, from the Bugle?” Tony asked, a bit too keenly. “You sly dog. That’s a whole new level of selfie-game.”

“Please shut up. I’m kind of reeally creeped out right now,” Peter said, an edge of panic in his voice. “Everything is tingly and telling me I need to get away from you very fast.” He twitched a bit, unable to help fidgeting, suddenly.

“Good, yes. And how about... now?” Loki waved glowing fingers with a shower of faint sparks. The young mortal stiffened, then slowly relaxed. “That... is actually a lot better. What did you do?”

“It’s a matter of reminding your system of your humanity, and the fact you cannot fit in the places I currently require the protection of spiders,” Loki murmured. “Hold still just a moment, please.” He rested his palm on the hero’s forehead.

“Why, what are you-” He cut off when there was a sudden, blinding flash of green. “Ow! My eyes!”

“Sorry,” the god said, but sounded amused. “Remain still.”

“Why still?”

“Just a moment longer.”

“How the fuck are you doing that?” Tony asked.

Peter’s eyes snapped back open and swiveled toward the inventor, who was suddenly standing much closer, seeming to be looking around and through the younger man rather than at him. “You can see what he’s doing?”

“Yeah. It’s a knack, let’s say.”
Loki snorted, and smirked, but said not a word of contradiction. “Done,” he said, pulling his hand back.

The young mortal shook his head a bit, blinking away all lingering dizziness. “Yeah... the weird feeling is gone. Why do you need spiders, anyway?”

The trickster grinned wide and sharp. “I don’t suppose any enemies you’ve fought, of recent, have technology embedded in a chitinous exoskeleton which is capable of preventing any metal-detectors from being able to identify the metallic core of the little machines?”

Peter supposed that he should’ve known there would be a catch. “Uh... I use my own stealth sort of spy-bots, and a few of them have gone missing lately, but that’s about it.”

“How were you fighting against when you lost them?” Tony asked.

“Are you certain they were not simply destroyed?” Loki added.

“When they’re destroyed or too damaged, they send out an alert signal. The ones I lost just dropped off the map entirely, like they got hit with a small EMP or something,” Spidey said. “They’re small, able to spread out flat and glide short distances, but also cling to just about any surface, even glass. I lost the first one while helping out the Fantastic Four against that Super-Skrull thing last week, but the few I’ve lost since then have just been at random while I was distracted, fighting the usual baddie-of-the-week out of Oscorp’s defiant reject barrel.”

Both the inventor and the god looked shrewdly thoughtful, at that, exchanging glances eloquently, despite not saying a word.

“Is that helpful?” Peter asked.

“Possibly, yes,” Loki murmured.

“How did it avoid metal-detectors?” the younger hero asked. “I mean, I imagine you’ve got some protective scans that look for out-of-place bits of metal, however small, all through this tower, right?”

“We don’t know how it managed that,” Tony said. “You wanna take a look?”

The trickster cleared his throat, glaring at his lover pointedly.

Peter Parker was deeply disturbed to observe Tony Stark blush very slightly.

“Look, you can have me at your mercy the rest of the night, after,” the inventor promised, grinning brightly. “If we need sustenance, we’ll order in.”

The young hero looked between the two of them quickly, a bit disconcerted to see the thoughtful and predatory expression on the god’s face, and the challenging, slightly eager one on Tony’s.

These were, he decided, slightly scary people. An exclamation point was added to this when he was abruptly teleported along with them down into Tony Stark’s private lab without so much as a by-your-leave, which left Peter reeling a bit.

“How...” He trailed off, staring around the lab. “Do you need an intern?” he asked, with sudden, deeply fervent interest.

“Depends, kid. Take a look at this and call it a job interview.” Tony strode over to the containment chamber with the still-in-multiple-pieces specimen in it, and summoned a holographic model of the
damaged version, and a couple of three-fourths-complete mock-ups of what it had been like before, based on the detailed post-damage scans and the initial pre-extinction-attempt cans JARVIS had made of its exterior.

“Oh wow,” Peter darted over immediately, examining each hologram raptly for several seconds, after which he pulled a Spider-tracer from his belt and proffered it to Tony casually. The inventor looked it over, and held it up for JARVIS to scan.

Seeing the model, and handing back the original, Tony whistled. “Impressive work, kid. Very finely put together.”

“Yeah, the internal metallic structure of this bug of yours is based off my tracer, pretty heavily, but the rest of it is very different. I designed mine for partial flight-capabilities and the legs of them provide steering to that end, but this thing is designed for seek-and-spy style espionage. They took advantage how thin and small my design was to take the opportunity to expand on the mechanical bits along the bottom to give its limbs greater dexterity and mobility, and also encase it in an organic shell.”

He pulled the re-constructed metal interior hologram closer, squinting a little. “There’s something else added here in the carapace, it looks almost like the self-destruct trigger in mine, for if someone tries to take them apart, but based on the remains, they didn’t use what I do. It look completely unfamiliar. Maybe a tiny field-generator of some kind?”

“Too small,” Tony said. “And I don’t know any fields that could prevent metal-detection.”

“There were no strange energy signatures until the device was threatened,” JARVIS informed, making the intern jump slightly. “Those that it did emit were very distorted, but after they passed, I was able to detect metal.”

“Not magic?” Peter asked.

“None I could detect,” Loki said.

“And there’s no way to ‘erase’ traces of magic?” Peter inquired.

The trickster opened his mouth, then closed it again, seeming to have a sudden epiphany. “Magic is so very revealing of one’s identity, isn’t it?” he mused.

“You have an idea?” Tony inquired.

“I have a few, none of them pleasant,” Loki said, then shook his head. “Just a feeling, really, more than anything.”

“Liar,” the inventor said flatly.

“It looks nothing like his usual designs,” the trickster muttered, turning the hologram of the damaged spy-bug with two fingers. “Too small, too few defenses, not enough power. It looks more like a Hydra design, mostly, but they have nothing to do with either the Fantastic Four, or the Skrulls. That said, it’s purely stealth, purely for watching and waiting...” He began to pace around the table, never taking his eyes off the images of the little mechanical spy.

“You’re thinking Doom?” Tony inquired.

“I am,” Loki sighed.
“You’ve kicked his ass before, though,” the inventor reminded.

“Precisely. He will have learned,” the god intoned gravely. “That is what he does.”

With reluctance, Tony admitted, “Yeah, very true.”

“You’re right that it doesn’t look like his design, though,” Peter pointed out. “He learns, but he doesn’t change his whole style for anyone, practicality be damned.”

“Also true,” Loki mused. “I will have to give it more thought. Thank you, Mr. Parker, for your insight.”

“So... about that intern position?” the younger hero asked.

“Send your resume to Pepper Potts. I’ll leave your name at the front desk downstairs so they know you’re to be taken seriously,” Tony said. “I’ll put in word for you, which will go a long way, but she has final say.”

“It is... a paid internship? Right?”

Tony eyed him with a half-smirk, noticing the earnest hesitation, there: not greed, but sincerely worried about paying bills and probably tuition. “Yeah.”

“Oh thank god. Right... how do I get out of here?” He took a half-step toward the door and froze when Loki managed to magically compel his mask to cover his face again. “Uh... what.” Then he vanished.

“You sent him to the roof?” Tony asked.

“He seems fairly mobile,” said the trickster, stalking toward him looking like a hungry panther.

“Now... I believe you said something about being at my mercy?”

The inventor swallowed thickly. “Yeah... I did.”

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It was several hours before they had to give in and order food before considering another round.

In the lazy quiet as they waited, with Loki pressed against his back where they lazed on the couch, Tony said lightly, “You haven’t said anything about when I might get my tattoo.”

Loki stiffened against his back, but not in the fun way.

The inventor turned his head sharply. “What?”

“You—needn’t.”

At that, Tony pushed back bodily until Loki was pressed against the back of the couch, then clumsily managed to get up, turn around, and re-settle with his legs on either side of the trickster’s hips. “You weren’t nearly as uneasy about it before. You’ve thought about it, though?”

Loki nodded. “It is... more than you asked for. To wear my name, within my seal, to be so linked to
me—even I wouldn’t be able to easily remove it, without causing you great pain, should you change
your mind.”

“Loki...”

“You’re very young, Tony,” the god whispered. “It would be-

Tony covered his mouth with one hand. This was a subject he’d been thinking about ever since the
apple incident, and he wasn’t going to waste the opportunity to vent a little. “I can deal with pain.
From you, a lot of the time, I like pain more than I ever really have before, and that’s a little
terrifying, but I love it anyway. I get that I’m not even a century old, and by Aesir and Jotunn
standards both, that’s barely adolescent, psychologically, even despite having reached sexual
maturity and all, but it’s different, with me. I don’t feel that young, because unlike you, or any Aesir
or Jotunn otherwise, I never expected to live even this long. That does things to you, being mortal,
that you won’t understand quite fully anymore than I understand why you think I’d let you get away
with anything I didn’t want, just because agonizing pain might be involved if somehow, somewhere
down the line, we start to grow apart and decide to take our names back from each other’s skins.” He
swallowed thickly, not liking the cold, hollow sensation that thought alone left him with.

 stroking the pad of his thumb across one of the god’s cheekbones, Tony continued, “I know, right
now, you want to apply that seal to me to protect me, and let me call on you without having to even
say your name, if there’s an emergency. You’re also trusting me, pretty incredibly, with access to
your power despite me being pretty damned new at the mage thing and you having way deeper
reserves than I do, which I barely understand how you keep in control of. It would also be
possessive, but I know you better than to think you’d do anything to alter my brain or my heart;
you’d gut yourself first. So you mean that it would do something like give others the instinctive
impression than I’m taken, that I’m yours, and that nothing they do will change that, and you know...
I’m not at all averse to that.”

Loki sucked in a breath shakily. “Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

The trickster eyed him for a few long moments, then, smiling slow and sincerely appreciative. “I love
the twisted ways your brilliant mind often works, Tony.”

“Same to you,” Tony said, and kissed his forehead.

That was when the elevator chose to ding loudly. Natasha appeared, carrying a few pizza boxes and
a bottle of red wine in a bucket of ice.

“I knew she’d try to seduce us both one day,” the inventor announced.

“I’m here to talk security, and ask why Clint is cowering and muttering about horrible spider colonies
in the tower crawlspace,” she countered blithely, stepping out of the elevator and approaching them.
She set pizza and wine both on the couch, not even blinking when the inventor summoned three
wine glasses from apparently out of nowhere. She also didn’t seem in the least perturbed by the mad
inventor remaining in his place in the trickster’s lap with no apparent inclination to move. “Explain
the spiders.”

“A low-tech solution to small bugs we can’t detect getting where we don’t want them,” Tony said.
“The little things will probably start defending themselves in a more volatile fashion, but with
JARVIS on the alert for any odd energy signatures and the like, they can then be exterminated by
him if they get much further.”
“By the time we return from Jotunnheim, we should have a further weapon or two, borrowed from their ecology, to add to those traps,” Loki added. “Carefully sterilized, of course.”

“That... is very creepy,” Natasha responded.

“But effective, so far. We’ve caught about three that freaked out once they were netted up,” Tony pointed out.

“Five now, sir,” said JARVIS.

“See?” The inventor pointed ceiling-ward. “Progress.”

Once Loki obligingly banished the cork from the wine-bottle, Natasha poured each of them a glass and passed them out. She swirled her own thoughtfully. “And you’re both leaving for Jotunnheim tomorrow?”

The pair nodded, Loki sipping his wine, then swirling it a few times quickly, and sipping again with a bit more satisfaction, sufficient to make the super-spy roll her eyes at him a bit.

“Security updates will go to you and Pepper, mostly,” Tony said. “I’ll be reachable in case of anything too disastrous.”

“Already worked out an interstellar cellphone plan?” the assassin teased.

“Oh, ages ago,” the inventor assured.

“Good, then,” Natasha said, standing up. “I’ll leave you to whatever intensely emotional moment I interrupted.” She took her wine with her back toward the elevator.

“Thank you, Natasha,” Loki called, leaning around Tony slightly to set his wine on the coffee-table.

“Neither of you get killed,” she called back, as the elevator doors shut.

“Aw, I think she likes us,” Tony crooned, then looked back down as Loki’s hands slid under his shirt until the spot the arc-reactor used to be was between them, framed by his thumbs and forefingers.

The god glanced up at him, questioning.

Tony nodded. “Yeah.”

Loki’s tongue darted across his lower lip. “Once you have seen more of Jotunnheim, I think, and I have perfected the seal design.”

His mouth gone dry, the inventor could only nod again, and agree breathlessly, “Yeah. Yeah, good idea.”

Then they ate pizza, and eventually left for Jotunnheim the next morning.

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This time landing in Jotunnheim, Tony hadn’t been expecting to land somewhere so far above sea-
level that his ears popped, but he did.

Then he realized they were on a cliff, not close to the edge but still very able to take in a rather startling view.

They were on the outer edge of a mountain-range overlooking rolling hills that continued more to the north than the south, which seemed to have more plains until it met the horizon. Most of the landscape looked wet, yet empty. The main sources of color were from soil contents differing in swirls of earth-tones—black clay, sandier red earth streaked with burnt umber hues, slate gray and paler traces of limestone or chalk deposits—over the miles and miles toward the horizon. Covered only in tocks, stone, soil, and occasional bodies of water, the land looked very bare, except for the hills, when Tony looked closer.

Green was creeping over the tops of the furthest hills to the northwest.

“"There were once forests here older than any of those in Alfheim, which themselves are older than civilization in the nine realms,” Loki said, after wrapping a spell around them to block the noise of whipping winds at this altitude.

“Wouldn’t they have been left behind by the ice?” Tony asked.

“They were. As rare specimens of their kind, and valuable materials for the power still present within their wood, they have been collected. I gifted some of the raw materials to a few circles in Alfheim, and suddenly another hundred earth-mages appeared, eager to see how they might ‘help’ us.”

"I can imagine," the inventor murmured. "How does that work, exactly? The wood being all sorts of long-dead, I’d think dead trees would stop collecting power. I have enough trouble thinking of trees as powerful conduits and resources as it is when they’re alive."

"Consider fossils: time causes the old matter to be replaced by the new, while retaining the same overall shape and form. Trapped under the ice, the power trapped within the wood was not replaced, but the powers within it, trapped over time, change their nature, again while remaining within the same shape. It is almost like a distillation process, for the magics within the wood, and the elves are keen to study the effects that all that time, in conjunction with extreme cold, had on such ancient things. They might be dead and drained, as you suggest, or some might have strange powers never before seen by any mages."

"Did you bring me here to show off?"

"Only a little." The god turned from the view and walked toward the mountain behind them. He proceeded to stride through an apparently solid wall.

"Total showoff," Tony muttered, but followed.

Stepping through the same invisible door Loki had, Tony sucked in a breath.

They stood on a broad landing platform, far wider than the cliff-edge they had left behind, into something resembling a hangar, carved into the side of a mountain. The ceilings were very high, and faint blue light only began to trail up the walls as they walked forward along what appeared to be a landing strop.

“They, uh... had ships?”

“Long ago, yes. They did trade with the rest of the realms by means of their own, which even I don’t fully understand, as of yet. The hangar here, as you might notice, is empty. Tarja asked me to check.
She believes the ships carried many off-world, either scattering them amongst the rest of the nine realms, or perhaps further still. We have found the wreckage of some, but not nearly all, where the ice prevented the very last from escaping.”

Tony’s fingers itched. “Any of the ships very intact?”

Loki chuckled. “One, yes. It was the last one left in this hangar, when I ventured here. We’ve since been using it, of course, but it is in need of repairs. Its basic functions are intact, but off-planet travel is probably beyond it, for now.” He paused over a metallic section of the airstrip, and waved a hand, causing the metal panel to raise like a trapdoor. Tony could see nothing but darkness below. “Tony?”

“Yes?”

“Welcome to Jotunnheim.” He then pushed the inventor sharply and sent him tumbling down into the dark.

It took Tony several moments of alarmed swearing before he realized there were air-currents buffeting against him along his fall and, to an extent, controlling his trajectory. The rest of the fall, after that, was much more enjoyable, once the inventor was aware that the free-fall wasn’t actually uncontrolled. After a minute or so, the air grew almost too strong, and the inventor lightly shielded himself against it for the sake of his clothing and hair not suggesting he had been tumbling with more than air for company.

Then the fall abruptly halted, with Tony hovering over a large well-lit platform. Where the air was coming from, he couldn’t tell, but he could see threads worked into the stone around him, and strange sigils that seemed to be affecting the air, and himself as a sort of passenger. Once his feet were under him, the cushion of air fell away and he landed not-jarringly on his feet.

The light around him turned red and hummed at him warningly, until he stepped away, toward a paler-lit section nearby. Loki then landed in the same place the inventor had, looking not even a bit ruffled by the whole trip.

“Okay, so maybe that’s really cool,” Tony admitted. “You’re still a jerk.”

Loki only laughed softly, and led him down the nearest corridor.

“The self-lighting tunnels: is it all magic, or is some of this alive?” Tony asked.

“It is not quite a life-form, but it is grown almost organically. The lines you see are veins of crystal grown throughout the walls.”

“Huh. Neat.”

The corridor itself soon led to a more open hall, with a very high ceiling. There was some traffic, Jotunns heading one way or another. Most of the taller ones (of which a few made Tony recall suddenly the cyclopean scale of the above-ground architecture of the ruins he had visited the last time he was on this planet) wore furs about their hips and leather trousers of knee-length, and thin-soled sandals with straps wrapping up their calves; those closer to Loki in height (though usually a head or two taller at the least) wore similar clothing.

Tony asked about it quietly.

“Those without a political or social rank tend to wear furs they have earned, by hunting for themselves. The more decorated they are aside from that, with jewelry or additional spun cloth, the higher tends to be their rank in their own clan,” Loki explained. “Given most of those awake are still
of an icy nature, they wear little more than that, out of habit, but with the weather as unpredictable and variable as it is all over, even those who still live in colder areas have taken to covering up further, now that rain, dust and mud are factors in this world once more, along with ice and snow. Footwear, too, is making a comeback, as it were.”

“You never wandered around here scantily clad, while you had the chance?” the inventor inquired.

“No, I did not,” the trickster sounded a bit annoyed by the question, but still amused enough that the annoyance faded fast. “Come along. We’ve spent enough time with politicians of earth. I suppose it time you met those here.” He approached and opened a small set of doors: seemingly a side-entrance, compared to the more vastly tall ones Loki bypassed, which had seemed to lead into the same chamber. He led his lover through.

The room, originally, had been a command center for the hangar and other subterranean areas, but was now a court and a war-room both, and full of Jotunns arguing passionately with one another in little groups throughout, though at the head of the room was obvious space set aside for the king.

The controls from one end of the room to the other increased in scale—from those easily reached by those of closer-to-human height, up to those four times taller than Loki on the opposite end—such that those in the very middle, where the king stood, were designed to be operated by someone twice Tarja’s height. She stood atop one of the terminals, the top of which met Býleistr’s hip, in order to be just below eye-to-eye with the king, discussing matters with him, but aiming her words at another Jotunn who stood before them, who was a few feet taller than the king himself.

All of the Jotunns in the room, Tony noticed, wore primarily cloth. Few wore anything that could be considered a shirt, but cloth wrapped around the waist, upper chest, or both, seemed not-uncommon, usually with some heavy embroidered cloth draped from one shoulder, across their chests almost bandolier-like, to tie at their opposite hip and the remainder wrapped about their hips. All wore knee-length leather leggings, male or female, some decorated or creatively laced down the sides, some not.

The king was no different. Bare underneath his embroidered wrap-cloth, save for leggings and sandals, the cloth he wore was allowed to drape down his back, hanging nearly to his knees, the front section crossing his body from shoulder-to-hip, but then wrapped about his waist twice before being tied at his lower back, so that the tail of the garment had two layers, arranged with surprising elegance. If his position at the head of the room beside Tarja hadn’t been enough, Tony still would’ve recognized Býleistr as kin to Loki just based on his cheekbones, and the amused quirk of his thin, highly expressive mouth.

Not a single Jotunn, to Tony’s surprise, was at all blue here. They were all relaxed and in less volatile colors, ranging from those paler and fairer than Loki and Býleistr, to darkest browns. Tony was reminded vaguely of numerous paintings he had seen on the walls of Pompeii, overall.

Once he sensed the inventor had a feel for the room, Loki took his hand and began to lead him into the crowd, but found them both tugged sharply aside by a familiar personage.

Tony’s first impression was one of mild confusion: the black-eyed Jotunn who had grabbed Loki’s shoulder so casually was a head taller than the trickster himself, thin and wiry of build with narrow shoulders, and with elegant features more handsomely aquiline than pretty in any feminine way; and yet this stranger’s full lips, the expressive quirk of hän mouth, and the shape of those dark eyes was fey and not un-effete. The stranger wore cloth embroidered and otherwise marked with sigils and other designs for protective magic, bound across upper chest, and a few necklaces of pearls, polished teeth from something carnivorous, and a few beads of precious gems with powerful runes carved into them.
“Hasten not, Loki,” Kaata said, casually drawing them both under a spell designed to deflect attention. “You see the man they argue with, in the silver cloth?”


“He is an informant to some of the rebels who demand you blood,” hän explained. “You and your guest may wish to wait for them to finish misinforming him, and sending him on his way before you make your appearance. So far as he knows, you are many days’ travel from here.”

“Ah, very good. Thank you.”

“And who might your guest be?” the Jotunn chief inquired slyly, shooting Tony a curious look.

“Rather more than a guest,” Loki corrected gently, tugging the inventor just slightly closer. “This is my lover and partner Anthony Stark. Tony, meet Kaata Eevulilapsi, Päällikkö of hänen clan.”

“I had wondered when we would meet his anchor,” the päällikkö greeted, bowing with the same respect hän had given Loki, when they were more newly acquainted.

Trying not to read too much into that, or the way Loki seemed to blush and look mildly chagrined, Tony mimicked the slightly new style of bow, pressing the closed fist of his left arm to his right shoulder before rising. “I’ve heard only good things about you.”

Kaata’s smile warmed a bit with surprise and interest. “Really?”

“You’ve been very kind to me, Kaata,” Loki said lightly.

“I’ve hardly done so selflessly,” hän countered.

“I trust no one so foolhardy as to be that selfless,” the trickster riposted.

Kaata nodded, understanding and amused, but also a bit touched. “You’re nothing if not surprising, Friggasson.”

Loki inclined his head slightly. “I do try.”

“You’ve both missed the raising of a few renewed forests,” hän added, though Kaata’s eyes darted back to the rebel informant still speaking with Tarja and the king.

Loki and Tony watched as well.

“Which ones?” asked the trickster. “Aside from the one creeping over the hills.”

“The whispering forest all around the great falls is the tallest so far, and they have begun renewing some of the old tropical rainforest regions far to the south, but the work there is slow, as temperatures are still unstable,” Kaata recounted. “What we could really use is one or two powerful weather-mages, but they are rarer in Alfheim and Nifelheim than they are even here, and while Lady Hlín has some knack for it, weather does not respond to her beckoning as strongly as other forces do.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “I will ask Tarja if she might wake any storm Jotunn. There must be some, asleep below.”

“Yes, but she is wary of them,” Kaata said. “I asked her of it already. Though she had little time to spare me, I insisted until she answered me. She told me that the storm mages of old never did rest easy, under all the ice, it seems, and she worries they may not be in their right minds, after all this time.”
“And what do you think?” Tony asked.

“I think they might be grateful to wake from long nightmares of weather gone so very mad. I have been learning to operate many of the older magics and interfaces from below the ice, with aid from Ravi Helkkisson. From what I have since discovered, with his aid, the storm-mages have been far less volatile, in their rest, since the thaw began, than at any other point in time since the ice closed over them,” the päällikkö explained.

“We should bring that to the attention of Advisor and King, then,” Loki said, resting a hand on hän shoulder, as they all three watched the silver-clad informant slip away through the crowd and out of the room altogether. “Your family has been nomadic for some time, have they not, Kaata?”

“We have. It has long our preference; although...” Hän sighed, a little wistfully. “I think now with the ability to carve homes into stone, and live richer lives than in our caravan, it may not long remain so. I may pass on my title to my sister, for she is the better at developing such deep connections to places and among larger communities over time, where I am better at dealing with strangers,” Kaata admitted. “I would not stop wandering, especially not now of all times, and mages are needed among so many communities that my skills would be better suited to more travel.”

The mad inventor and the trickster locked gazes for just a moment, and smiled at one another before reaffixing their attention on the päällikkö.

Hän noticed, and eyed them both warily. “You both have something on your minds, I suspect. I do not know if I should trust it.”

“You need do nothing that you do not wish to,” Loki reassured, and quite deliberately led the taller Jotunn forward with him through the crowd, grip gentle on hänen shoulder with one hand, his other hand tangled up with the mad inventor’s, as they dropped the attention-diverting spell and wove their way forward. Loki soon found himself standing before Býleistr and Tarja with a bright, mad grin, half-bowing while Kaata bowed more deeply and Tony settled for somewhere in between the carelessness of the trickster and the respect shown by the päällikkö.

“It is good to see you both well,” Loki greeted.

“Who is it you bring with you, Loki?” Býleistr inquired.

Releasing Kaata’s shoulder for a moment, the trickster gestured toward Tony. “Allow me to introduce my lover and partner, Anthony Stark of Midgard.” More than a few heads turned their way at that, from all around the room where people had been caught up in their own discussions, until that very second. Things went quieter, as they realized the Wanderer had returned, and was apparently inclined to put on something of a show. “And I believe you both already know Päällikkö Kaata Eevulilapsi.”

Býleistr knelt, then, to get a closer look at all three of them, one arm resting across his bent knee as he examined them. He nodded in particular to Tony with some considerable curiosity, then to Kaata, and then fixed his gaze once more on his half-brother. Tarja, by contrast, was glaring at Loki continuously like she was waiting for him to get to the point already.

“We’d like to talk to you about storm-mages,” Kaata cut in, calm and fearless, smiling a little at the mildly disbelieving look Tarja shot hänen way. “I’ve been looking into the matter extensively, and a number of the reforestation projects currently underway won’t be successful without a few artificially maintained climates in different regions to get plants to the proper strength that they can withstand seasonal changes once they properly begin again, after the next equinox. I have also worked with Ravi Helkkisson, and confirmed that with the thawing of all the ice, those with storms in their magic
and blood have rested far easier, suggesting that it was not the long slumber itself which caused them such disturbances in magic and mind, as the tormented weather patterns they could not fully escape awareness of.”

“And if they prove unstable or otherwise compromised?” Tarja inquired.

“I believe none better to organize the community in support of their health and recovery than Kaata,” Loki said.

The päällikkö shot him a stunned look, eyes wide. “Pardon?”

“If you might be willing to act as voice to those who cannot communicate their needs themselves,” Tony added lightly.

“Choose your words with care, Midgardian,” Tarja warned.

“Oh, but I do,” the inventor shot back. “I’m only a little behind. You got your title yet, Tarja dear?”

“She has,” Býleistr said, sounding thoughtful.

Kaata’s mouth was hanging slightly open where hän stared at Tony.

“I’ve given it thought,” Loki said to hänen, softly. Then, at a volume the others could hear a bit better, he continued, “You have been a better source of information for the attitudes, feelings, and needs of the people of this world than any other since my arrival here. Even other leaders far older than yourself heed your words and do not hinder actions of yours that might be considered reckless for another of your rank. You are generous, kind, and infinitely curious about the minds of others, and what their worries are, as well as their hopes. It is impressive for one as relatively young as you are, to have so many throughout Jotunnheim who know and respect you, not just as the talented mage that you are, but also for the wisdom and empathy of your judgements.”

“You do indeed have that reputation, Kaata,” Býleistr concurred. “I have long considered requesting that you join my advisors, but it did not seem that such a life among them would suit you.”

“Indeed it wouldn’t,” the päällikkö agreed, “but that is not being suggested now.”

“No,” Tarja said. “I do believe our Wanderer has recommended you become the Voice of Jottunheim.”

“I thought so, and I do wonder if he is insane,” hän mused, shooting Loki an odd look, questioning and shrewd.

The trickster only smiled with sincere appreciation in his expression. “I am. Does that sway you, either way?”

“No,” Kaata said. “I already know my answer, Wanderer. I will not thank you, but I will accept, if you all might have me.” Hän looked up at Tarja, an the king, with eyebrows raised in cautious inquiry.

The elder mage bowed in response, as though to an equal: acceptance, and approval, all in once. Loki followed suit, and Tony mimicked him.

Býleistr bowed too, from his kneeling position, a bit lower than did Tarja.

The rest of the room did too, leaving Kaata to stare around at them with a sense of awe, smiling a little, and also a little terrified, but also with eyes bright at the thrill of the challenges to come. Waving
hands to bid them all rise, hän turned to Loki and gripped his shoulder hard as he straightened.
“You’re a mad creature, Loki.”

“As are you, and like harkens to like,” the trickster replied.

“Then how mad you must be,” said Kaata to Tony, only a little teasing. “I almost dare not wonder.”

Laughter rang out through the court at that.

The inventor, for his part, only kept hold of Loki’s hand, and stayed close, a little more relieved than he would admit to have someone else in the spotlight, when that spotlight was on another planet and half the members of the audience were three times Loki’s height.

It became a blur of introductions to important people and a few strategy-related arguments to do with ecology, after that, as the crowd seemed to swarm about them and they found themselves slowly carried through it out of the court/war-room, and down another couple of corridors into what appeared to be a feasting hall.

Tarja caught up with them not long after they escaped the last cluster of people who reminded Tony deeply of senators from his own experience. The elder mage pulled them aside, glaring at any others who tried to insinuate themselves closer, with such a regally dignified air that even the former prince of Asgard was a little impressed.

“You’re both insane,” she said, “and yet, I cannot find it in me to criticize your recommendation. I am slightly chagrinned that I did not think of it myself.”

“Well, you’ve been busy, so I gather?” Loki guessed.

“Immensely,” she sighed. “The earth mages are incredibly needy.”

“Well, they are from Alfheim,” the trickster reminded.


“You’re welcome,” Tony responded.

“How much to you intend to invest of yourself into our politics, Stark?” Tarja asked, her tone cool and only a little accusatory. “You have your own planet to run, do you not, in your ways?”

“Well, given Loki spent the last week pacifying every world leader on earth worth mentioning to the point they’re all cowed and fairly easy to deal with of late, I think I have some time and energy to put forward into understanding and aiding this world to the same extent. It’s as much selfish interest in my lover’s safety as anything else, keep in mind,” Tony explained crisply.

“So we are the Three-or-so of Jotunnheim,” Tarja mused. “Myself the thawed Advisor from a time before the ice; the Voice and her family, from the most peaceful clan of our former conqueror’ people; and the half-brother of that conquering line’s king, raised and betrayed by an Aesir king, now responsible for the destruction of their icy legacy and trusted by the Three of Nifelheim, and his mad lover from Midgard, the self-made mage with fire in his veins and wit fit to match a god of lies.” She raised her goblet to meet the ones Tony and Loki had just been handed from a passing tray, and both trickster and inventor met her toast. “To glorious madness, as has always been the way of Jotunns.”

“To glorious madness,” they echoed, and drank deeply.
Whatever the drink was, it sent a chill down Tony’s spine in little tremors, then fast-heated so he was left with a taste on his tongue like he had licked a glacier after drinking a strong cup of chai with little or no milk. “Wow.”

Loki exhaled slowly, his breath rising visibly as steam. “A potent herbal brew. Wherever did you find it?”

“Earth mages do have such ways with speeding along natural processes like fermentation,” Tarja mused. “And some of them are terribly handsome. I may have persuaded them to help me in the distillation of an old recipe of my mother’s.”

“I like it,” Tony said, though he belatedly realized that things seemed a bit more crisply colorful than they had a moment before. “Is there a bit of Lysergic acid diethylamide in this, maybe?”

“I hardly know how to answer that,” the elder mage said, blinking.

“It has an affect on visual sensory input,” Loki translated.

“A little, yes. It’s harmless, nothing truly distorting,” Tarja assured. “There will doubtlessly be a feast to celebrate selection of Jotunnheim’s Voice. Are you both too wearied from your travels to partake?”

The trickster looked at Tony, and Tony looked back, and they both grinned like madmen. Party in Jotunnheim! the inventor’s mind shouted, with enthusiasm.

“I believe we’re up for it,” Tony assured.

“Absolutely,” Loki agreed.

Tony had been to feasts in Asgard, at least two or three times.

Jotunnheim was rather different in style.

For one, there were a lot more mages, far less restrained than most of the ones in Asgard. They were also especially enthusiastic when tipsy, and eager to show off for the elder mages like Tarja, Loki, and Kaata, possibly in the hopes of persuading them to show off and add to the show. Eventually the feast hall opened its large roof up to the evening sky, the gold light of near-sunset pouring in, as a large fire-pit opened in the middle of the floor. A bonfire was quickly arranged, and as the sun went down, there was only firelight and moonlight: more than enough to see by, but also sufficient to cast strange shadows and flatter the looks of any and all.

Kaata spent much of the evening in discussion with Býleistr, joined by hänen daughter and a constantly-changing number of hänen cousins. Tony asked, briefly, about the child’s father, and Loki responded that he had been cast away after he had become too insistent that Kaata remain in female form for his sake, and hän grew bored with his insistence on sexual relations in which hän had less interest than he; they had not been very serious, as lovers, and hän hadn’t considered him a partner. He had been taken in again by his own family thereafter, and now resided somewhere far to the south.
“So there’s a reason you specified that, introducing me? That I’m your partner?”

“Yes, of course,” the trickster said. “You are my lover, and you have equal share of importance in my life as my own self. That is what that means, here, for you to also be my partner.”

Tony smiled helplessly. “Cool. Yeah, I like it. Good.” He leaned in for a kiss, despite the god of mischief laughing at him a little all the while.

The music was loud and used instruments Tony didn’t recognize, but one sounded a bit like sitar, and another almost disconcertingly fell between the sound of a violin and a human female soprano’s voice. The drums were the primary source of familiarity, along with a harp not unlike ones used in Asgard too. The melodies began slow and pretty, but as the night went on they became playful and fiery. Tony could only vaguely compare them to a hybrid of gypsy and bluegrass with a dash of the court tunes played during the reign of England’s Henry VIII, which made no sense to anyone but himself, though Loki humored him enough to at least hear his attempts at explanation.

It was halfway through moonrise when the younger mages began to perform their own little spectacles in groups of between two and four, instead of individually: illusions of light like masterpieces, dancing around other youths, some mages and some not, who acted as players, actors, re-enacting a battle here, or falling in love with the impossible there. Dragons of gold-and-purple light, birds in impossibly iridescent silver, that left behind them trails of real feathers.

The inventor found himself leaning back against Loki’s chest, watching the shows unfolding in four erratically-spaced circles (spontaneously opened in the midst of sections of crowd, it seemed) with intent interest. They had settled in beside Kaata at some point, and both older mages were directing the Voice’s young daughter, Amal, to the strings of magic being manipulated to create the wonders she was so enraptured by. Lulled by the excellent drink and some fresh-caught roast game heavy in his stomach, and the rumble of Loki’s voice against his back and cool breath stirring the hairs at the nape of his neck, Tony could almost fall asleep, save that he was watching the strings of magic-weaving too, and listening to the same explanations Amal was, occasionally asking his questions, a bit more intermittently.

“You are new to mage-craft?” Kaata asked, after a while.

“Very,” the inventor admitted. “You could say I’m a late bloomer.”

Amal seemed stunned by this. “But how is your magic so calm?”

“Amal,” Kaata warned, in the universal tone that informed any wayward child that their inquiry was an impertinent one.

Tony chuckled. “I have a good teacher, and I spent a lot of time learning about magic before I even knew I could use it, courtesy of this guy.” He elbowed Loki jokingly, unaware of the warmth with which the trickster beamed down at him at first, until the look on Kaata’s face (one which indicated someone was being adorable) caused him to glance up. Tony’s breath caught a little.

“Tony is a very talented mage, unusual and unconventional in almost every possible way,” Loki said, his words aimed at Amal, though his gaze remained fixed on the inventor’s, as his arms about Tony’s waist squeezed just a little, pulling him in just slightly closer. The trickster rested his chin on his lover’s shoulder as he said to the inventor, “While most might be unstable, upon having their gift awakened so late, you took to it like a duck to water, my dear.”

“Oh,” Amal said. “Did it hurt?”
“At first? Yeah,” Tony said, opening his eyes again there they seemed to have momentarily fallen shut. “It hurt a lot, until I spent a while with Hlín, learning control. She helped me out, getting to the point I was stable, which took several days.”

“What can you do?” the child insisted.

“All sorts of things your mother may not want you attempting,” the inventor said, his voice light and playful.

“Amal, why don’t you show him something you can do?” Kaata said. “Keep it small, please.”

The little girl nodded, then vanished.

Tony blinked a bit, a little surprised when she reappeared on her mother’s opposite side.

“Can you do that?” she asked.

“Yes,” Tony said, with a nod.

“It took me a long time to do that,” Amal said, with a bit of a pout.

“Better than trying too early,” the inventor assured. “I did really, really badly the first time. Trust me, it wasn’t good.”

Amal kept questioning him into the night, until eventually he let the girl (with no little encouragement from Loki) cajole him into explaining repulsor technology slightly. Eventually he summoned a magic equivalent to the gauntlet, similar to the one he had used when caught by the Ten Rings, but much more stable.

“What exactly does that do?” Kaata asked, sounding a little amused.

Tony aimed it at the open skylight and fired a blast like the streak of a comet skyward, causing the crowd below to still and stare after it, impressed to various degrees. Kaata appeared surprised and interested, Amal was joyously agape, and suddenly they had an audience, the music paused and most of the room staring at him in surprise and interest.

“Sorry,” Tony said. “Did I interrupt something?”

“How did you do that?” asked one of the younger mages.

Loki chuckled behind him, close to his ear. “Tell them you’ll either show them again a few times, or explain once.”

Tony snorted. “That’ll work?”

“It should.”

The inventor repeated the offer, and was instantly greeted with demands that he do it again. He could feel Loki lean back, weight on his hands, giving him a bit of room to work. Raising his arm and aiming high, Tony fired off a barrage of shots, then one prolonged beam, manipulating the trajectory just slightly so that it spiraled up, tornado-like, before exiting the skylight.

Cheers went up and the music began again, more tricks from the younger mages, but they respectfully let the elders and the Midgardian to themselves again and picked up with their own shows again where they had left off, leaving Tony shaking his head a bit in wonder.
“I’m more used to being mobbed,” he commented.

“They respect what you are willing to show, and inclined to keep secret,” Kaata said. “It is a courtesy they are taught to show mages from a young age, lest the wrong mage be ill-provoked. You are not such a mage, but it is still considered good manners.”

“I like it,” Tony said. “Very relaxed.”

“Yes, I find it so, too,” Loki murmured, again settling his arms about the inventor’s waist loosely: comfortable and not restricting.

There was something like relief and awe in the god’s tone that caught his lover a little off-guard, because it sounded like fears being proved unfounded, and reassurance that there was value here, in this world, for the likes of them both. It made Tony lean against him a bit more bonelessly, in an attempt to communicate without words that he liked this place, and these people, and all they might mean now, and might come to mean, to Loki, and perhaps himself, too.

The way the trickster nuzzled at the back of one ear with a knowing hum made him feel like the message might have even been communicated successfully.

“Where do you plan to rest tonight, Wanderers?” Kaata inquired.

Loki gave a pleased laugh. “I have been told there are quarters open for me, in Býleistr’s house, but I have found a place of my own, and made some alterations to it.”

“No more camping amongst my kin?” hän teased.

“Another night, perhaps. Perhaps I might bring some small feast’s worth of offering in the morning, to break our fast with you all,” the trickster offered.

“We might take very kindly to that. You’ve brought more of your culinary discoveries from Midgard?”

“Wait, what?” Tony asked.

“Some, yes,” Loki assured, amused. “I’ll explain in the morning, Tony.”

“Is this where those hefty charges on my credit cards from farmer’s markets keep coming from?” the inventor asked shrewdly. “They caught Pepper’s attention.”

The god chuckled, and said, “Pardon me, Kaata. I believe I have some explaining to do,” he said, with content chagrin.

“Goodnight to you both, my friends,” said the Voice.

“Goodnight, congratulations, lovely to meet you,” Tony said, just before Loki vanished them from the fire-lit feast.

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Tony wasn’t entirely surprised to land somewhere in pitch black, nor was he entirely surprised when a few torches lit up only a second later, at all corners of the large room with its smooth stone walls
and high ceiling.

He also wasn’t at all surprised that they were in the same position as when they had left, except that it was a bed under them instead of a stone perch.

“You made a nest, then?” Tony inquired.

“I suppose that is one way to put it. I prefer to find my rest in places others cannot access, when there are assassins actively seeking me out,” Loki offered. “It is not the first time I’ve had to quite literally carve a safe place out of stone.”

“I’m sure. No windows, though?”

“Well...” Loki murmured a spell.

Tony’s eyes went wide as all the stone walls save the one behind the bed’s headboard, from the floor up, became suddenly transparent, showing nothing but night sky and a frankly stunning view of the surrounding mountain range, along with a distant, enormous waterfall visible in the bright full-moonlight. “Holy fuck, color me seduced.”

“I did get the idea from your penthouse.”

“Call that doubly seduced, then.”

Loki nipped at his neck. “Is that an invitation?”

Recalling briefly the last time Loki brought in a copy of himself, Tony shivered. “Maybe? Yeah, may... maybe.” He sighed at the feeling of lips and teeth trailing down his neck. “About the groceries, though...”

“Yes, I’ve been bringing food here as a means to win over various clans, as a sign of goodwill. Yes, I might have gotten carried away in doing so, as I’ve become moderately enamored with some aspects of Midgardian food culture. Problem?”

“Not really. Just let me know these things.”

“Fair enough,” said the trickster, and banished their clothing just before tugging Tony down onto the bed sharply, splaying him out across it.

Shivering a little at the feel of cool linen at his back, the inventor pulled Loki down until he could catch that devilish mouth with his own. The god hummed contently into it, hands roaming the mad engineer’s skin down along his chest and sides to grip his hips, tugging them up into his lap where he knelt between Tony’s legs.

Arching closer, Tony wrapped his legs high around the trickster’s waist, loosely enough that it was easy for Loki to pull them up further to hook over his shoulders before he leaned over the inventor enough to get leverage from the headboard with one hand, letting the other stroke Tony’s erection slowly and tight enough to make the engineer groan and buck into the contact as much as his position would allow. When that teasing hand left his cock and trailed out over his hip to grip his ass in a fond squeeze, Tony emitted a content sound like a growl that trailed off into a soft moan as the hand moved on still further, fingers slicked with a flicker of magic just before they pressed into him, slow and skillful, putting harsh pressure just where he needed it as they began to open him up.

Loki was slow and unhurried, languidly devouring every desperate sound the mad engineer made, ignoring the wordless pleas for more and faster and harder, in favor of taking his lover at his own
leisure, until Tony was shaking under him, whimpering and biting at his mouth, grinding his hips against the long-fingered hand still tormenting him.

The trickster broke the kiss and asked, in a low purr, “Tell me what you need, Tony. Tell me precisely.”

“N-need you to fuck me like you own me, and make me believe you don’t think I won’t last,” the inventor rasped.

Loki gave a high moan of his own at that, and withdrew his fingers, using them to slick his own cock quickly before he pressed it into the inventor’s ass, all in one thrust, to the hilt, making them both emit guttural little cries. “I want you to last.”

“I want you to believe I actually will,” Tony countered, the backs of his knees gripping the god’s shoulders a bit tighter. “I don’t want you afraid I’ll leave, not when I love you like I do.”

The trickster shuddered and began to move, thrusts slow and deep, his mouth hovering close over the inventor’s. “We’re both realists, Tony,” he panted.

“Fuck that, I’m a futurist and you’re a mad god rebuilding a whole damn planet, Loki,” the engineer muttered, only occasionally interrupted by the helplessly pleased noises escaping his own throat. “We see brilliant potential where everyone else sees complete madness and recklessness and bad ideas, and you want to tell me that’s not what we are?”

Loki laughed, soft and broken and breathless against the inventor’s throat. “Of course we are,” he responded, moving faster, biting hard at the side of Tony’s neck to make the inventor cry out. “And I love you for letting me be this mad.”

“S-same to you, Loki, fuck, you’re so good, you’re perfect—just fucking perfect for me—only f-for me, your mine,” the inventor rambled, words getting away from him as his muscles started to tense and spasm. He leaned up and bit at Loki’s shoulder as he ground his hips into the next thrusts, making the trickster give a shuddering cry that sounded suspiciously like Tony’s name, and he liked that, bit harder to see if he could get that sound again. Loki obliged.

“Tony, come for me, you’re so close.”

And Tony couldn’t help but oblige, flying apart with a shout that turned into a sultry moan as the trickster followed him over the edge soon after and shudderingly kept thrusting long enough for them both to ride out their pleasure until it was nearly pain.

Breathing each other in, they shakily came back down to earth.

“M serious,” Tony muttered hazily, after a few minutes.

Loki kissed his neck, where his face was still pressed close, tucked under the line of the mad engineer’s jaw. “I know. I trust you.”

The inventor shivered a little at that. “Good,” he murmured. “Very good.”
Tony wasn’t exactly surprised when the rebels found them despite the misinformation of one rebel leader. Neither he nor the trickster had exactly kept a low profile last night, and given that neither Tarja nor the king made much of it, he’d presumed that they expected the rebel informant to suffer his just desserts when his information proved counter to the intel provided by rumors spreading about the Wanderer and his Midgardian partner arriving in Býleistr’s court, and about the Voice of Jotunnheim being appointed very shortly thereafter, all before the night was over.

So, overall, the mad engineer wasn’t entirely surprised when an otherwise fairly peaceful day spent watching Loki argue with earth mages (while Tony himself was occupied with talking to one of the only familiar ones, the elf he remembered was called Lucas, about how earth magic even worked, and growing steadily more aware of why so many non-earth-mages found it a bit dull) was interrupted violently and a bit explosively.

Tony was somewhat surprised by just how ferocious the fight that broke out was, between the rebels and all present non-rebel Jotunns. Loki had made it sound as though he usually kept these scuffles personal, leading them away from populated areas as fast as possible, but this time, when he tried to do so, he was not left alone. If Tony hadn’t been fighting alongside him, while also stubbornly fending off even the most subtle attempts the trickster made to send him out of harm’s way with confident ease, he wouldn’t have had the chance to see the momentary shock on Loki’s face when that happened, this time around.

“I’ve been studying the structure of your transport spells for how long?” Tony growled. “Stop that, it’s distracting.” He glanced at the god and noticed him shooting looks around them both with some disbelief and confusion. “What is it?”

“They’ve never done this,” Loki muttered. “Never so many, and you aren’t the only one preventing my attempts to extricate myself and these enemies further from the forest.”

“Well, what changed?”

The trickster gave a half-hysterical laugh and shook his head. “You, I think. Keep alive, darling,” he growled, changing into his fully horse-sized wolf-shape and launching himself at the achilles tendons of a couple of giants four times his size, tearing them down and leaving Tony and the others to dodge the falling rebels—at least, so the inventor thought, at first, until he realized they weren’t sent crashing; fallen rebels were instead were caught and incapacitated, then rolled aside for the fighting to continue. Tony threw up shields when a couple of mages targeted him, only to hear a rumbling sound not quite like Loki’s voice, too unearthly and animal in ferocity, but the speech-like syllables it uttered clearly came from the wolf, and sent the mages reeling as the earth under them rebelled violently and then tried to swallow them up to the knees. Loki then appeared amongst them, rending with tooth and claw until one of them shifted into a still larger beast, something scaly and almost feline with tusks.

Loki responded by taking dragon-shape and scorching it and any of the remaining other mages and rebel nearby. He lasted long enough to take down the other shifter before his resistance to the others’ spell-work gave out all at once and he gave a high screeching roar as spikes of ice and steel pierced his stomach. His wings spread wide, but using them to get free still pushed him further down the spikes before drawing him up and off of them.

Tony swore and concealed himself in his best spells for it, falling back behind one of the larger Jotunn mages currently acting as Loki’s ally, and took careful aim, but he was still too low to the ground. After scanning possible alternatives briefly, he teleported onto the shoulder of a far taller ally. “Mind if I stick around here for a bit?”

The Jotunn laughed raucously. “If you believe you can keep your footing.”
A spell to anchor his feet in place and another to further stabilize his balance helped, even as the massive Jotunn continued hurling and deflecting violent-looking icy projectiles the size of Volkswagens. “Yeah, I think I can.” He took aim at the mages currently attacking Loki from three sides, tapping into the arc-reactor concealed in one of his person pocket-dimensions with a bit of effort, and launched a blast at the head of the most skilled one with all the force he would usually reserve for a full uni-beam, were he in the suit.

The elder rebel-mage hit the ground hard, knocked out cold.

“Impressive, for a human,” said the Jotunn whose shoulder he occupied.

“Admit it, Andre, I’m impressive by any standard you know,” the inventor shot back. “What’s your name, anyhow?”

“Tapikka Gerritsson.”

“I’m Tony Stark, nice to meet you.” The inventor aimed again, and fired, this time in a sustained blast that knocked out three mages by virtue of making a couple of other very tall Jotunns fall on top of them rather abruptly.

Tony had to crouch to remain in place as Tapikka was hit with a spell that caused him a great deal of pain, causing him to charge. “Easy, bug guy, easy!” Reaching out with his own power, the inventor threw off the distracting spell and the other giant recovered in time to bowl over three opponents who had expected a more senseless creature aimed at them. Most of them were knocked out, and Tony shot a repulsor-blast at the one that tried to get up, after which he stayed down, limp and unstirred as other Jotunns bound their wrists and elbows while they were knocked out.

“My thanks to you,” Tapikka grunted.

“No problem,” the inventor panted, tapping into his stored reactor again to keep from using up much more of his magic reserves.

Tony saw Loki circling in dragon-shape, still bleeding a bit by the looks of it, suddenly swoop down and engulf half of the remaining rebels in an impressive amount of fire, sending up vast clouds of steam and shrieking as the icy Jotunns tried and mostly failed to fight off the heat. Some ran screaming, others launched javelins at the beast, which Tony blasted out of the air with a few swift blasts.

“You protect your partner well,” said Tapikka.

“Thanks. It’s on the list of reasons we sort of work, I like to think.”

That made the massive Jotunn under his feet laugh loud and long again.

Seeing Loki dive-bomb the remaining rebels physically, and shift into his more natural form to grapple with the last few rebel mages, Tony patted the side of Tapikka’s head briefly. “Gotta fly. Nice working with you.” He then vanished, and reappeared right behind a mage aiming a spear under Loki’s guard.

Tony grabbed the spear with a yank at the last second, and applied an open-face slap with a bit bit of repulsor-blast when the much larger mage attempted to bear down on him. It wasn’t enough to knock them out, but it was enough for Loki to leap up and slice the rebel’s throat. Landing alongside the mad inventor, both of them shoulder to shoulder and partially back-to-back, Loki said coldly, “Leave, now, while you still have your lives.”
The last two mages looked at Tony, who grinned wide and manic, hands glowing with magic like fox-fire.

Apparently, seeing the rage in Loki’s expression and the cold amusement in the engineer’s, as well as the last of their fellows falling behind them, the two rebels thought better of continuing to attack.

“Have we no option to surrender?” one asked.

Loki tilted his head, considering. “You would come peacefully?”

The two mages exchanged looked and proffered their hands, wrists together, to be bound. The first said, “I swear no more harm to you and yours, Loki Laufeyson, until we are given back to our kin, as is the law.” And the second echoed, “You’ve my word, too, for the very same.”

Loki lowered his daggers slowly, and seemed almost startled when a pair of Jotunns from behind him stepped forward, and bound the mages’ wrists, guiding them over to the others among those captured. He stared after them for a long moment.

“You seem surprised, Loki,” Tarja said, emerging from another part of the improvised battle field. “Have you worked it out yet?”

“But in the least,” the trickster murmured. “How...”

“A Wanderer is meant to be a bit of a cypher, but not heartless and unanchored,” the elder mage said. She glanced at the inventor by Loki’s side pointedly. “They now see your anchor and can see his intentions as well as yours, and how deeply you must care for this world, whether you realize it in full or not, for him to want such a part in it too.” Tarja chuckled a little at the inventor’s slightly shocked look, as well as Loki’s dawning realization. “Word has spread quickly of you both. I believe it will continue to do so.” She looked toward the tree-line then, squinting slightly. “Kaata has spent the day primarily underground with Ravi. They have had considerable success. Would you care to meet a few storm mages from the old days before the ice, dear boys?”

Tony lit up a bit, and Loki was clearly interested, but still a little stunned. “Just a moment, maybe?” the inventor suggested.

“I’m not-” Loki turned to glare at him, but the inventor only grabbed the lapels of his armor and dragged him close. The trickster cleared his throat. “Yes?”

Despite himself, the mad engineer started to grin. “I’m trying so hard not to say I told you so, because I had no idea this would even-”

The god growled and kissed him fiercely just to shut him up, and managed to successfully leave Tony a bit dazed when he pulled back. He smiled mock-sweetly at his lover, one hand sliding from the inventor’s lower back to cup his ass with a bit of a squeeze as he met Tarja’s amused stare with a beatific expression. “I believe we’d love to meet a few legends, this morning, yes. Do lead on.”

The elder mage laughed at them both, and teleported them away.
A Tale of Three Vengeful and Megalomaniacal Sons of Bitches

Chapter Summary

Dr. Victor von Doom is a little shit.

Beyonders are involved.

Shit goes down.

Not long after delivering them into one of the corridors near the main control room, Tarja was called away by Ravi and left the pair to find their own way down into the larger chambers still further below.

By the time Loki and his human lover reached the main hall of the subterranean maze which contained so many ancient Jotunns long kept in stasis, Kaata was standing on a platform roughly sixty feet in height in order to stand on level with the neck of a storm-giant taller than any Jotunn Tony Stark had seen so far.

“Holy shit,” the inventor murmured. “How... just how?”

“Some Jotunns, particularly those gifted with deep-rooted elemental magics connected to earth or sky, rather than ice or fire, can tend to be... very different, as they age,” Loki said. “She must have been more than a few millennia old, when the ice struck. It is a marvel they persuaded her to rest, rather than fight the horror. At a guess, it was against her will, especially if we judge by her still-slightly-mutinous expression, and Kaata’s body language at present.”

“They grow taller over time. Like... nonstop?”

“Only some. It is a recessive trait, more prominent among families who are almost all mages,” the trickster admitted. “And even then the gene is only expressed when triggered by a certain... a decoherence of self and slight physical as well as metaphysical transformation into something other, which causes those genes to become actively engaged. It occurs when they lose their anchorage to community and family, most often slowly over time, until they live a sort of hermetic existence. Some cease to require food or drink, and become a part of the land, if the lose themselves too far. The loyalties of such Jotunns are always... tricky to discern. They do not need others, as most younger and less magic-devoted Jotunns do.”

The very tall storm-Jotunn wore a thick leather wrap, from the hyde of what must have been a respectable dragon once, wrapped around her chest, belted above her breasts and at her waist, and similar material formed leggings which only went halfway down her thighs. She was not thin, and did not bother with any drape of cloth from shoulder to hip as most of those around her wore, if they did not wear cloaks or other similar garments. She was broad-shouldered, broad-hipped, and her skin was of a hue somewhere between dark olive and ash, with markings not entirely unlike those which the queen of Helheim wore down one of her sides, save that this larger Jotunn’s marks were silver-white, and only up her back, over her shoulders, down her arms, and creeping down from her brow and temples.

Kaata’s speech, given how far away hän was from the ground, proved difficult to hear, but as they
strode closer, pressing through the small crowd standing a respectful distance from the elder storm-
mage’s massive feet, Loki and the mad inventor were able to hear the giantess’ name was Engelrâð
Olvaldisdottir, which seemed to awe the trickster a little.

“What is it?” Tony asked.

“Olvaldi’s kin are known for being very powerful,” Loki said softly, almost sounding nervous.

Kaata concluded hänen speech with, “Knowing all of this, now, Engelrâð Olvaldisdottir, will you
aid us toward healing this world?”

The giantess smiled a faint, slightly bitter and coldly amused sort of smile. “You speak fine words,
young Voice. I will not do what I plan to do for your sake, or those who might consider you their
Voice, but I will aid you. I am sick at heart with how ill this world feels, and I would restore balance,
for which my pupils old and new, and those of my surviving kin, will need also be awoken. You
were wise to wake me first, for they will hear my words, and I will borrow some of yours.”

Stepping forward himself, Loki called up, throwing his voice with only a bit of magic to assist it
reaching the vastly taller giant’s ears, “I will aid you as best I can, Olvaldisdottir, if you may let me.”

The giantess glanced down at him, then took a half-step back and knelt slowly, leaning far down
indeed to get a good look at him, from only about eight feet above his head. “Who are you, little
one? Your magic savors of something familiar.”

“I am Loki Friggasson, Jotunnheim’s Wanderer,” the trickster responded, not needing magic to
project his voice this time, his words loud and clear as those of an actor or orator.


“Yes.”

“You are no Aesir, though your armor might be of their sort, or you would not claim such a title
unchallenged, if what the new world’s Voice has said of our icy conquerors is true,” the storm-mage
challenged.

“I was raised by the queen of Asgard as though I were her son; although the same cannot be said of
Odin Borsson, and these days I claim no one as my father. I am half-brother of King Byleistr
Laufeyson of Jotunnheim, adopted brother of Prince Thor of Asgard, father of the Queen of
Helheim, and respected as kin to the first of the Three of Nifelheim; and my lover and partner in this
life is a mad human genius, no longer mortal, who might as well run all of Midgard if only he cared
to. I am a Jotunn, and I am Wanderer to this newly-thawed world. What might I be to you, then, and
you to me, Lady Engelrâð?”

“So small are Jotunnheim’s Three. Is our Advisor also so small?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Small places can be more vital than they may seem, and it is easier for us to fit
into large spaces, than for you to fit within many of the smaller rooms I wander through. That is why
Nifelheim’s Three, too, have never grown anywhere near to your height. We are not so free to lose
ourselves to the songs of storms within and without, above or below.”

“True enough. I have been lost a very long time, in dreams, listening to pain and death carried by
thin and icy winds that never belonged on this planet, not beyond the poles where their music is best
suited. Then I dreamt of fire, and flood, and one small creature being chased by fire, cajoling it
onward and thus creating storms out of fire and ice, proper storms, Jotunnheim storms, for the first
times in eons. The winds sing new and strange songs, they suffer, but they sing with relief and crow
of fresh heat and freedom and dance invisibly under more sunlight than they have had to bathe in for centuries,” Engelrāð said slowly. “Kaata told me of what you did, and I was surprised by none of it, having seen it in my dreams, but now seeing your face, seeing such youth and pride and spite within you, I know not if I am more surprised, or less.”

“You still have not answered my question,” the trickster pointed out.

“I know not what you will be to me. The winds worry for you.”

“Worry?” Loki’s brow furrowed.

“Someone is hunting you, and I see a noose about your throat that no one else seems to,” said the storm-Jotunn. “You will be unable to run.”

Murmurs welled up from the crowd behind him.

“From whom?” Loki asked.

“Whooooom,” Engelrāð mused, savoring the syllable like a cook testing a bit of soup, determining it to still be missing something. “You slipped out of All-speak, did you notice? Something is already tugging at you.”

“I... did I?” the trickster asked, suddenly alarmed, and a little dizzy.

“Loki?” Tony stepped forward, resting a hand on his lover’s shoulder.

The god of lies shook his head as though to clear it. “It’s nothing.”


“Close to what?” the inventor asked, his own voice sharp. His hand moved away from Loki’s shoulder only as he took a step closer to the giantess.

“The name on the wind,” said the storm Jotunn.

Loki met her gaze then, shrewd and keen. “You also have a bit of prophecy in your repertoire, I take it?”

“Just a whisper of the gift; enough that for me to see the noose around your neck indicates its first tug upon you should be very soon, or I would not be able to see it at all,” Engelrāð concurred. “You know the name on the winds?”

“What sort of noose do you see?” demanded the trickster.

“Blue,” she responded. “A very bright, cold blue.”

Loki swallowed thickly.

“Talk to me,” Tony demanded.

“I need to leave,” the trickster said, “and you need to be out of my reach.”

Stepping closer, the inventor was disturbed by Loki instantly back-stepping to keep his distance.

“Why?”

“You still have not answered my question,” Loki called up to Engelrāð.
“I will accept your aid and welcome you among mine once you get free of that noose, little Wanderer,” she responded. “If ever you can.”

It was then the trickster’s knees almost gave out, without warning, and he scarcely kept enough balance to remain on his feet, but there was a crackle in the air around him suddenly, from powers not his own.

“Loki!” Tony snapped.

The god winced, his eyes squeezing shut, stumbling a few steps further back as though something were dragging him by the throat. “Damn.” When his eyes snapped open, there was no green left: only shades of blue and black. “Doom has a cosmic cube,” he managed to rasp, and then collapsed to his knees. When Tony took a single step closer, Loki’s hand shot out, aiming a series of ice-javelins his way, which the inventor scarcely dodged being impaled by. The god stared in horror at his own hand for a moment, his eyes flickering between nebulous blue and clear white-and-green for a few moments before he wrapped his arms around himself with considerable effort. “No, no, no, never again,” he began to all but howl, curling in on himself before he vanished, with considerable effort—his eyes green in that last moment—in a whirlwind of blue-and-green smoke with a sound like a muffled scream.

The mad inventor passed through the remaining smoke half a second too late, unable to reach him in time. He swore at length, then glared up at the amused-looking storm Jotunn older than Odin.

“It was not my doing, and I could not have stopped it,” she assured.

“Yeah. I got that.” Tony turned his eyes up further still, and teleported himself to stand on the platform beside Kaata, who wasn’t at all startled by his sudden appearance, but hän looked very pale. “I’ll bring him back. You have a handle on the publicity side, right?”

“No one outside this facility will know he vanished against his own will,” Jotunnheim’s Voice assured. “I will see to that. Can you bring him back?”

“It won’t be easy. I dunno how Doom got that kind of refined control of something like a cosmic cube without destroying his own mind, unless I’m missing a factor, but either way, I need to start by getting off this planet and back to my own,” Tony muttered. “He’ll have Loki there somewhere, hidden away. I can’t promise I’ll succeed at bringing him back, but if you hear about my death, you can presume I probably failed.”

“You have means to leave this world so easily?” Engelráð asked, now standing fully upright again.

The inventor glanced at her, then moved his eyes slowly up until he held the giantess’ gaze again. “You think Loki’s the only one with connections?” He gave a mirthless laugh, vanished, and then reappeared on her shoulder with a brief grip-enhancing spell on his own boots, noticing her surprise when she turned her head suddenly his way. His sudden proximity to teeth bigger than his own head was a bit of an adrenaline rush, but not enough to put him off grinning wolfishly and coldly, in a way that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m Tony Stark of Midgard. Nice to meet you. What else aren’t you saying about the winds?”

Engelráð looked mildly surprised, her smirk returning. “Clever boy, for a human.”

He blinked a bit, eyes squinty. “Your breath smells like a dry graveyard.”

“Your boots had better be clean-soled,” she countered.

“Tell me,” he demanded.
“Why should I?”

Tony strode close to her ear, and she turned her head to face forward just enough to humor him in his obvious intentions. In a normal speaking tone that no one else was close enough to catch, the inventor said, “Because my heart just vanished and you know something about how, or why, or maybe even where to, that you’re holding back. I know where the Casket of Ancient Winters rests, I know Loki’s children could take me to it, and I know his daughter alone might do all sorts of things to those who refused to help me get him back before whatever Doom finishes up what he has in mind to do with him, which will probably involve Loki’s death or worse in the end. His son might do still worse, and me? I’ll help them. I’ll aim them at this world, and those two, along with me, are definitely more than capable of giving you worse nightmares than any you’ve had in the past couple millennia, Engelráð dear.” He vanished instantly when she swatted at him, and upon reappearing had to disappear quickly again, repeatedly, throughout the whole chamber, to dodge sudden lightning and barrages of razor-sharp ice-shards.

He reappeared again, in her ear this time, which was a bit uncomfortably cramped, but worth it for her snarl of rage.

“Talk to me, or else I start showing you just how important small little spaces like this can become to you with proper application of pressure,” Tony said, very loudly, making the giantess cringe. The inventor managed to stay where he was despite the violent jostling motions the giantess had begun to employ. “I’m not as powerful as you, but you’re not gonna reach into your own body with any too-volatile magics, because if I deflect even a little of them into your eardrum, you’re looking at some serious agony, here, and you can’t get a lock onto my exact location because all your senses are unreliable at this range, and your own skull is full of deflective and protective and conductive magics, to make this a safe place to be... during a storm.” He clung for dear life as the giantess tried to still more rapidly shake her head to send him flying out. “Ah ah ah!” His wrist-guard unfolded into the sort of concealed gauntlet he used to wear to parties, and he shot a fairly weak, but still significant, blast further into Engelráð’s ear.

A deafening roar followed, but then the shaking stopped, and Tony could hear heavy, angry breathing. He waited a few minutes.

“You are a formidable pest,” the giantess admitted. “Come out, and you have my word that I will not harm you, and will tell you what I have heard on the winds.”

Tony teleported out, again to stand right beside Kaata, who looked him up-and-down quickly with renewed shrewdness, and a bit of impressed approval. Hän nodded to him, lips quirking a bit thoughtfully. The inventor saw it out of the corner of his eye and grinned dangerously, his gaze still fixed on Engelráð. “I’m glad we understand one another,” he said simply.

The giantess shook her head at him. “Whoever has stolen your partner has stolen a weapon he once wielded, one which was tied to him. The noose around his neck was not new; it had been there for some time, dormant and almost dead. That weapon called to its master upon being re-awoken and re-empowered by a powerful force. It was the Wanderer’s own actions which led him to be ensnared, and made him a target to the one who stole his weapon. That much, I have gathered from the whispers I have heard, both in dreaming of recent, and in wakefulness since.”

“Nothing new now?”

“Only echoes of his being taken. The winds know nothing of where he now resides, Tony Stark,” said Engelráð.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Tony said, bowing to her graciously, but not very deeply
compared to respect he showed Kaata a moment later. “I’ll be back,” he assured them both, then vanished again.

He reappeared above-ground, shivering at the sudden increase of wind and cursing storm giants with bruised pride silently for a second before he shouted, “Heimdall! Beam me up, pronto!”

There was a long pause, almost long enough to make Tony feel really worried, before the bi-frost finally flashed across his vision and dragged him up and away from Jotunnheim altogether.

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The betting pool between Natasha, Clint, and Bruce put a maximum of four days, before something Loki-related would suddenly become Avengers business long before the trickster and their own Iron Man returned from the wilds of Jotunnheim. Natasha won as of day two.

They were all still at breakfast when Agent Coulson strode in, Cavalry in tow. Phil looked professional and slightly concerned, which by his standards indicated there was a major crisis in progress. Melinda May looked ambivalently unimpressed, but mildly annoyed, which by her standards indicated that she hadn’t gotten a chance to beat-into-submission any parties responsible for the major crisis in question.

“We have a situation. I need assurance that Loki hasn’t returned to this planet within the past twenty-four hours before I even proceed,” Phil greeted, rather brusquely.

“I have connection to his phone, as well as Mr. Stark’s, Agent Coulson. Even at this distance and between realms, I have maintained steady communication with both devices equally, all anomalies and disturbances well accounted for. He has been in Jotunnheim since early yesterday morning,” JARVIS chimed in.

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Coulson said, looking more disappointed than reassured. “That means, then, that we’re now officially dealing with a devil we DON’T know, this time.”

“What happened, Phil?” Natasha asked lightly, stabbing a bit of bacon with her fork.

“The scepter Loki used, when he invaded New York, has gone missing, along with other tesseract-based technologies, right out from under us,” Agent May cut in, her tone cold. “They were in one of our most secure locations, and we wouldn’t have even known it went missing if not for Dr. Erik Selvig suffering a severe psychotic break just a few hours ago...” She looked at Coulson then.

He nodded to her. “At that same time, I experienced some severe chest pains. Agent Barton, have you had any issues this morning?”

“Is this why I feel really hungover despite not even drinking last night?” the archer muttered, rubbing his eyes.

“Most other agents Loki put under the scepter’s control did report an assortment of hangover-like symptoms,” Coulson admitted. “We don’t know why that is, exactly. The tesseract isn’t on earth anymore and none of us are under its influence. Do any of you have any insights?”

Bruce made a distinctly uncomfortable noise.
Melinda met his gaze. “You look like you might have an idea or two.”

“Just the one,” the biochemist said, “and I really don’t like it.”

“We’re grasping at straws, Dr. Banner. Anything might help,” Coulson assured.

“Well...” Bruce grimaced. “The psychic field the scepter itself had, even at a great distance from the tesseract, was pretty strong. It probably had impressions left of those it came in close contact with. If that memory were agitated, or purged, by sudden exposure to a new power source, like another cosmic cube, that could temporarily cause strain as the new device tried to reach out to those old connections, as though they were new. Distance alone is probably our ally, if that’s the case—unless someone tries the use the cube and knows what they’re doing.”

“If that’s so,” Coulson said, “I wonder how much time Loki might be afforded by that distance.”

All of the Avengers simultaneously developed a deep sense of foreboding.

“Aw shit,” Clint groaned.

“What are the odds Loki is their target?” Natasha asked, aiming her inquiry at Bruce. “And how much more susceptible is he to possible influence from the scepter and a theoretical new cube, than anyone else with slightly less exposure to the tesseract going for them?”

“I’d keep a close eye on Selvig,” the biochemist said gravely. “And an even closer one on Loki.”

“That might prove difficult,” JARVIS interrupted, with a hint of unease, “given that Mr. Lie-smith just vanished violently from the surface of Jotunnheim.”

The room went deadly quiet for a few seconds.

“Shit,” Clint muttered. “Seriously, goddamn shit.”

“Sometimes I hate it when I’m right,” Natasha sighed.

“No, I mean-” the archer started, then cut off as he fell out of his chair and onto the floor in a heap.

“Phil?” Agent May’s voice was sharp, but not lacking concern.

Coulson looked very pale, and his jaw was tightly clenched. “I... believe I need to sit down, before I join Mr. Barton on the floor.”


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Odin wasn’t at all pleased to see him.

Tony had expected this, but he was all but breathing fire and would not be swayed from his course of action. The very air around him crackled with barely-contained rage, but his eyes were cold, calculating and sharp.
Even the king of Asgard was far from blind, and knew better than to underestimate what this particular human might be capable of, if lied to, misled, or dismissed carelessly, at just such a time as this.

“You have a cosmic cube in your basement lockdown,” Tony said.

“The tesseract, yes. What of it?”

“There’s a new one in town, on my planet. I need to find it. You got any trade secrets that might help me out?” His voice was warning, his dark eyes narrowing shrewdly. He looked like a wolf staring down a rabbit more than any mortal at the foot of a god-king’s throne ever should, but he had bested this gallows-god before, outwitted and undermined him. Concealing himself behind a mask of congeniality would do nothing but waste the mad inventor’s energy and suggest, to Odin, that Tony Stark might have something like an iota respect for him, willingly shown by means of proper decorum and such.

No, best to leave the sheep’s clothing out of it.

Best to stand before this king and remind him, with every passing second, that he all of his kingdom had only as much power over the likes of Tony Stark as the human was inclined to allow them to have.

Odin rose to his feet, leaving his spear behind him with his throne as he descended the steps, approaching Tony. “I had no means to find even the tesseract, despite being its creator, even when it was in the hands of more ignorant mortals, before Loki seized control of it and stole it from them.”

“Loki was able to reach out to it from the other side of the galaxy, and drag himself back into the branches of Yggdrasil with a little help from some crazies,” Tony said coldly. “You telling me he has a closer bond to it than you do, when you made it?”

“He had... more intently studied the people who taught me how to create it, and how they move through universes,” Odin said. “He used their means, not any he learned from me. I still know not how he achieved that feat; I swear to that.”

The inventor inhaled sharply, his anger spiking. “How do I contact them, then?”

“They are not so easy to find as they once were,” the king explained. “Too many have attempted to steal their knowledge, rather than seek them out civilly and offer to share their own experiences and knowledge in turn, in the thousand years since Loki was under the tutelage of their leaders. You do, however, know at least one person who captured one of their number, quite recently.”

“Her methods won’t be effective twice.”

“Then adapt them into a question, rather than a demand, and offer something of your own up to them,” Odin advised. “To that, in my personal experience, they will listen.”

“What did you give?”

“My eye, and all opportunity to heal from its loss and regain my sight in full.”

Tony swallowed tightly. “And what did Loki give?”

“Memories he no longer wished to carry.”

“Prices are pretty variable, then.”
“What would you give up, for the knowledge they might offer?” the king inquired, genuinely curious.

The human smiled at him unkindly, and didn’t answer.

After a few long seconds of silence, Odin nodded, accepting the absence of words as though it were indeed answer enough. “You have taken to magic very swiftly, for one so young, yet so new to it.”

“It likes me.”

The king looked faintly chagrined at that. “So it would seem.”

“How could a mortal mind, one like mine a bit in intellect and with a knack for magic, control the full potential of a cosmic cube?” Tony asked.

“There is no way I know of for that to be possible,” Odin mused. “Even Aesir cannot handle that much raw power, not to wield directly. It... destroys minds like ours: Aesir, Jotunn, and even mortal. That much power, channeled through us to alter the universe itself, brings too much of the universe into us, until the concept of ‘self’ begins to erode, along with memory.”

“You’ve seen it go too far?”

“Not with the tesseract, but with Laufey’s father.”

Tony raised a brow. “The one without a name, right?”

“He... lost so much of himself that his own history was wiped not only from his own mind, but those who had known him all of their lives, including his son. To Laufey, the man he knew to be his father was nothing but a whitened-out shadow, within what felt like the blink of an eye. He went to great lengths to try and restore his own memories, and convince himself, and others, of what sort of king his father had been... or should have been.”

“But he never remembered even his name.”

Odin nodded. “Not even in death, according to Hel.”

Tony nodded, too, looking more thoughtful, his mind occupied with a few possible solutions now. “Selvig stared a bit too long into the tesseract, and it hissed to him with Loki’s voice all the while, and neither of them came away from it undamaged. Loki was outright deranged, between the farce he was putting on for Thanos and the Other, and how cracked he was from holding his mind free of too much entanglement with the tesseract and his scepter. Once the scepter was pushed through the energy-field around the portal-generator, he snapped out of it, but his magic was totally drained. He was exhausted and could barely heal his own shattered spine enough to walk off the battle-field, when the time came. He’s the only one who was in such close contact with it, while on earth, that can still function enough to pass for sane in public; could he help a mortal madman harness all that ego-shattering power without searing the sanity and self-awareness right out of their brains?”

“Loki... did not try to wield the tesseract itself,” Odin said. “He wielded a weapon bound to distant watching masters, which bonded with the tesseract and siphoned off the merest little sips of the tesseract’s energy for destructive purposes, and spread tendrils of psychic control which linked his ‘soldiers’ back to the tesseract in the same way that the scepter itself was linked to it; that scepter was the only thing he channeled his will through, and the wills of Thanos and the Other. Maintaining shields about his own thoughts, while also keeping track of all his servants, would have been agonizing so long as the scepter was in his grasp, but less damaging to his mind and soul than using power taken more directly from the tesseract.”
Tony recalled how much calmer Loki had seemed in that glass cage, away from the scepter. “He was still linked to it. He used it to escalate arguments and mess with the emotions of people around it, making them less clear-headed.”

“You included?”

The inventor nodded. “From what news I’ve gathered via spell-casting and consulting Frigga, I’ve got milder symptoms than most people who came into contact with it, but the constant mild headache is getting on my nerves a little.”

Odin reached out to touch one of the human’s temples.

With a grimace, Tony allowed it. “What do your Aesir eyes see?”

“Nothing.”

“Weak threads,” said another voice: Frigga, now stepping around the throne and striding towards them.

Tony’s eyes lit up. “Hey, you see things! What exactly is the ‘prophecy’ gift anyhow? It’s not like mage-craft, I got that much, and seems to be tied into some of the weird anchor-points for all the strings-”

“The architecture of history itself,” the queen interrupted.

The inventor’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh... that. Astral plane pushing its own particular agenda where future-events are concerned, right?”

“In part. More often than not, nothing destined is truly definite. There are multiple futures to choose from, as soon as any time-travel takes place, but some will always be more difficult to make real than others,” Frigga explained. “My gift for prophecy is very strong, and so I keep it to myself, what futures I see. I would rob no one of their control over their own lives, as speaking of what I see would have powers to do.”

“Because you seeing it is one thing, but it becoming part of someone’s story is another,” Tony murmured. “I think I get that.”

“It also comes with sharper sight than even most other mages,” Odin said.

“Yeah... someone in Jotunnheim spotted a noose around Loki’s neck before he vanished,” the human said. “She had a bit of the gift, but it was weaker.”

“Who?” the king asked.

“Engelráð Olvaldissdottir,” Tony said, admiring how the two rulers’ eyes widened at the name, and grinning fiercely at them. “She was fresh-woken, the first of several to help out with a lot of the global weather-issues going on.” He gestured vaguely toward his own skull, knocking the king’s hand away from his head in the process. “So there’s a thing? A visible one?”

“Cords of connection, very faint, very faded,” Frigga confirmed. “They have little pull on you. In fact... they are dying, even now.”

“Everyone else on earth is seeing slowly-intensifying effects,” Tony murmured.

“Someone is trying to deliberately spare you, then,” Odin said.
The inventor felt as though his organs were in a washing-machine, just now hitting a particularly violent spin-cycle. “He’s bound to the tesseract again, then. How much time, do you think...”

“You suspect another wields the scepter?” Frigga asked.

“Yeah. Don’t you?”

She nodded. “It would be the only way. He will not be... shielded from it, as he was before. Not when he was caught so entirely off his guard, and when the will of whoever took him is most likely inclined to have as much control over his mind as possible, to collect his secrets and attempt to break his will.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “Not much time, then.”

She shook her head, eyes full of fear. “We will try to reach the Beyonders through our own means. You will hear from me, wherever you may go in your search, if I reach them before you.”

“He is bound to you, is he not?” Odin asked. “Can you not track him, instead of the cube itself?”

“I tried,” Tony said, his voice slightly hoarse suddenly. “I can pull on his magic, but I can’t trace it. Hlín can’t trace it, either.” He looked hard at Frigga.

She shook her head. “I see it trail away into impossible directions I cannot follow, even with my eyes focused as sharply as I can make them. Cosmic cubes, by their nature, have enough power to alter reality: past, present, and future all. Even my sight cannot trace it; it’s potential powers are too vague and far-ranging.”

The inventor nodded, and bowed to her, then to Odin, not quite as low. “I have more work to do, then. Thank you,” he said, and vanished.

~~

Loki had lost consciousness not long after his arrival.

He’d had enough time to look up into Doom’s masked face, lit up by the cerulean glow of the scepter’s heart, and feel rage to find himself on his knees, unable to rise. Then the scepter had lowered swiftly, tapping the sharp tip of its blade against the trickster’s chest before he could resist the pull of it enough to move away.

He rebelled. Of course he rebelled.

Loki was not even so bold as to believe he had full claim of the heart in his chest any longer, and how dare anyone but its proper owner seek to sink such claws into his mind and soul through it.

The marks on his hip had burned like a fresh brand and he had screamed, shortly before everything went black.

Now he awoke, seeing everything through a bluish haze, to the sounds of faint grinding machinery in the distance, from every direction, the hum of electricity, and the pain of too-tight manacles at his wrists where they were suspended overhead, and his ankles where they dangled a few inches above the floor. His armor was mostly gone, leaving him barefoot, and wearing only his trousers and a
green tunic. All of his weapons were out of reach, and the haze made even the pocket-dimensions always about his person unresponsive when he mentally reached for any of them.

Everything felt sluggish, in his mind, like his thoughts were attempting to swim through vast quantities of tree-sap.

“Have you realized the extent of your helplessness here, yet, little god?” asked Dr. Doom. The sudden burst of non-mechanical sound made the trickster flinch.

Loki was disturbed to realize that he couldn’t tell if the metal-masked man had been standing there since long before he had awoken, or if he had appeared sometime after. All awareness and memory seemed slippery, all his thoughts as impossible to carry as sand in a sieve. “I... have.” He frowned. That hadn’t been anything like what he had wanted to say.

What had he wanted to say, again?

“Good. You’re much more cooperative this time.”

This time. A flash of memory came then: struggling, fighting and snarling and screaming. Loki’s head lolled forward and a faint groan escaped his throat.

“Damning with faint praise, I do know.”

The god tried to recall what he had been so adamantly fighting for. Things seemed so calm, here. If he cooperated, perhaps he could stay like this.

I love your brand of chaos, said a voice, floating up from deep under the blue haze. Something was buried, there. Something—someone—important.

There was a name visible floating in the haze. It was... familiar.

It was a name. It was embedded deeply, not by his own hand.

Who would he have possibly allowed to...

Tony Stark. Because turnabout is fair play, even here in my own head. Only you. Only ever you...

Tony...

Tony

TONY!

Loki’s head snapped up and he met Doom’s gaze again, struggling to keep his eyes in focus. “Doom,” he growled, eyes flickering between blue-black and white-and-green. “Release me.”

The doctor tisked. “This defiance again. You should know far better by now.”

“What you want from me, I cannot give, nor would I, even if I could,” the trickster snarled. “You will destroy yourself.”

“No, you will. In return, I will not destroy what is yours.” He tapped the tip of the scepter right against one of the god’s hipbones: the marked one.

Loki felt the letters on his skin begin to burn at the touch, like the weapon meant to erase them, burn them out of his skin and his subdued magic alike. In response, he dropped the temperature so swiftly
that the metal touching him creaked in protest. “You underestimate my partner greatly, if you think it might be so easy as that.”

“Not if I start with those he is closest to, after you, and make certain you leave your blades in their hearts for him to find,” Doom promised, low and deadly.

“You can hardly hold me here, what makes you believe that you—” Loki cut off with a breathless choke as another wave of blue erupted through his brain. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing. He could taste blood, after a time, and hoped, rather desperately all of a sudden, that it was only his own.

When he next could see, he had blood all over his hands, and there were S.H.I.E.L.D. agents all around him, all eviscerated. Loki stumbled backwards, unable to breathe, and slipped on a pool of half-dried blood.

He recognized some of the faces around him, on the floor. They were friends of the Avengers, and had been in crowds wherever he had gone, during his press tour of the globe, and now their eyes were devoid of life.

*Cassandra Wittkowski.*

*Ian Morris.*

*Jose Carter.*

*Amber Harrison.*

*Michael Franklin.*

*Tasha Jackson.*

He knew every one of them. They had known him.

On the wall before him, written in smears of blood, in his own hand, read a single line: “*Next, it will be Rhodes.*”

Then the blue cube-haze tugged at his very skull so hard the trickster could have sworn his skin almost tore with it. Helplessly, he obeyed the compulsion to return, to divert, to hide and to return, return, return.

His armor left him as soon as he arrived, and he missed it profoundly.

He stood on a platform, then, with Dr. Doom staring at him.

Slowly, Loki raised his arms, despite attempting to prevent it. Manacles closed around his wrists again, and he almost choked as others snapped around his ankles and the platform was pulled out from under him, leaving him dangling as he had been before, save for the that *this time* he wore far too much blood.

Doom strode up to him, then, standing at the edge of the platform which supported Loki’s mechanical restraints.

The trickster glared at him, breathing ragged. He felt sick to his stomach.

“You used this scepter to guard your mind against the tesseract,” said Doom. “You let the mind of Dr. Erik Selvig rot, staring into it more directly, letting him act as an additional buffer.”
Loki winced. “I could not dissuade his fascination with—”

“I care not,” Doom interrupted. “I could do as you did to your subjects and rob you of enough of your mind to force you to serve my purposes, but I suspect that you would need most of your will, and all of your strength, to do what I require of you.”

“It will still destroy more than me,” the god warned, eyes narrowing. “There is no way to wield that sort of power and come away unscathed, you wretched fool.”

“We shall see.”

Loki hissed in pain as he struggled to resist the blue glow seeping in around all corners of his mind. He could outlast this mortal. He knew that he could, but Doom was tricky. Doom had made a few alterations to the scepter, protecting himself from it as Loki’s plans against Thanos had made it impossible for the trickster to do, when he himself had wielded the same weapon. Doom could use it for far longer than Loki had been able to, with far fewer side-effects; that much was all too clear.

And Doom had a real knack for it.

Loki’s mind cracked open under the assault and he was left with a blue-black glow coalescing across both eyes.

“The cube calls to you,” Doom promised sweetly.

“It hardly knows me,” Loki responded, his voice very small. Deep down, far under the blue haze, his true self burned with loathing at the indignity of it, but that was so distant: more like an echo of a future that never truly rose to reach his conscious train of thought. He had those all the time—never quite prophecy, never even very useful, save when he was terribly bored—and he found it easy to dismiss.

So very easy. Almost blissfully easy, like the forgetting and dismissal was being rewarded, somehow, with pleasure.

That should be alarming, Loki thought.

Why? something else asked. Someone else?

Either way, the god of lies couldn’t actually think of an answer anymore.

“Get to know it,” said Doom.

“It burns,” the trickster protested. “I don’t think she likes me.”

Doom made a sound of disapproval.

Loki winced, overwhelmed by a sensation of shame and pain, all in shades of searing blue. “Please, please stop, please stop!” Eventually, the agony waned, and he was left shaking and empty of will.

“Look into the cube, little god.”

Loki’s head snapped up. The room was suddenly all dark, except the glowing cube before him, and the glow of the scepter in Doom’s hand, nearer to the ground.

The trickster stared into the cube deeply, feeling its whispers creep in around the edges of his mind: soft and sweet and poisonous. It wanted his name.
Loki opened his mouth to speak it, then snapped his jaw shut.

No. No names.

“What is it?” Doom asked.

“It wants a name.”

“Name it.”

“You made it,” said the god, still unable to stare anywhere but into the cosmic cube, feeling suddenly light-headed. Something deep within his own mind was stirring fitfully, but he pushed it aside.

“Then it shall be named Victory.”

“Victory,” Loki repeated. “Victory, for Dr. Victor von Doom, of Latveria.”

The cube hummed to him, and had it been anything more like a true living thing, there might have been petulance to it. It had wanted Loki.

I am taken, he told the cube, from somewhere deep within himself that he could hardly understand through the still-thick blue haze. Not by him.

“It has begun to give off strange readings, trickster.”

“It likes you,” Loki responded. His eyes began to glow all the brighter, then, and he reared back with a howl. “No!”

“It seems also fond of you,” Doom chided. “Now, don’t be difficult.”

The manacles at the trickster’s wrists and ankles hummed for just an instant before suddenly lighting Loki up through his very bones, via application of electrical current strong enough to kill anyone more human. The trickster screamed with it.

When the current stopped, the cube was held a little further away from him.

Not far enough, Loki thought. The electricity, however agonizing, had cleared some of the haze from his brain. “You understand me not at all,” he rasped. “This would destroy me. How am I meant to enjoy those I have prevented you from harming, if in the end, I will be dead at best, or more likely in a state where death would be a mercy?”

Doom hummed at that, low and thoughtful. “Perhaps other minds may buffer yours enough to achieve our ends, and leave you somewhat intact?”

Loki knew better than to believe the offer wholly sincere. Doom wanted him humiliated to the dust at the least, and seeing the trickster killed by either his own hand or Doom’s gauntleted ones, was likely high on his list of priorities. “With what catch?”

“Your choice is between partial, or complete self-destruction, and you must name three minds you would sacrifice to save the relevant parts of your own. They must be from earth, and no political leaders.”

The trickster let his head hang loosely forward again. “I need to think.”

“Then do so.”
“It is made no easier by the presence of your accursed cube,” Loki snapped.

“That is simply too bad,” Doom responded. “You have one hour.”

Doom left the room, then, by the light of the scepter alone.

The trickster shot the cosmic cube a resentful glance, then let his head loll forward bonelessly again as he struggled to think.

~~

It took Tony mere minutes to persuade Fenrir into aiding him.

As such, it took mere minutes to reach Gamora, despite how very far she was from any worlds within Yggdrasil.

She shot at him as soon as they materialized on her ship.

Tony deflected it with a swipe of magic, the massive wolf on his left snarling at her in response.

Gamora blinked. “Sorry. Reflex.”

“I live with Natasha Romanov. I’m almost used to it,” Tony responded. “I need to reach some Beyonders to clean up the last remains of your mess on earth.”

“Excuse me?” she growled. “My mess?”

“Apparently, Doom never stopped hunting down all the bits and pieces from the Ten Rings’ little production project, and got enough information together to figure out how to make his own cosmic cube,” the inventor explained, in clipped tones. “The thing is, he can’t wield it directly himself without destroying his own brain, so he got the closest thing to a licensed cosmic-cube veteran: Loki.”

Gamora’s expression turned to shock, then a hint of fear, then a bit of flat anger. “That explains your visit, then.”

“You reached their home,” Fenrir growled. “How?”

“They won’t fall for it twice,” the assassin chided.

“That’s why we’re going to alter the plan a little,” Tony said. “It’ll be sending them a gift, to start off, and let them know we’re not about to take anyone or anything from them by force. Same as Loki and Odin did, ages and ages ago.”

Gamora looked uneasy. “I... didn’t know that was an option.”

The great wolf rolled his eyes at her. Tony only gave an amused snort.

She sighed. “Fine, fine, but I’ll need your lab for this. I don’t exactly have a place with all the relevant equipment just in case I have a sudden desperate need to remind the Beyonders that I exist and cause them to want to murder me.” She narrowed her eyes at them both pointedly. “That’s why I’m doing this... if you both swear your word that you won’t let them damage or kill me, and that
you’ll return me to this ship as soon as we’re finished.”

Tony and Fenrir exchanged glances.

“I swear it,” they both said, then looked at each other again, more disconcertedly, disturbed by their own eerie synchronization.

Gamora’s grin in response was wide and bright as sunlight reflected off a pile of broken glass and polished knives. “Then take me to your lab, and let’s get started knocking on other dimensions.”

~~

Loki was burning by the time the hour was up.

He had attempted to freeze his way free, but the metal about his wrists and ankles had become super-heated when he tried to lower their temperature to such an extent as to compromise their structural integrity.

Those burns had been severe, but they were as nothing compared to what felt like lesions on his very mind from the crackling power pressing in from all directions at once. Pale blue fire and agony scorched at his every thought.

The tesseract was a tame cosmic cube, created out of patience, curiosity, desire to master particular skills, and the understanding of certain abstract concepts to do with the workings of the universe on the very smallest of scales.

This cosmic cube of Doom's had not been made in peace, and all of its power was young and restless as the mortal creature that had created it. It burned to overflowing with an almost sentient sort of desire: ambition and eagerness and hunger. It longed to be unleashed by the right hands, its power sent out and used to twist up the very universe, alter reality itself in past and present and future alike.

It sang to Loki, and pushed aside any barriers that his mind tried to summon, as though they were nothing.

“Have you chosen your victims, little god?”

The trickster could scarcely hear Doom’s voice any longer. He didn’t respond.

“Answer me.”

Words fell from Loki’s lips, low and rasping.

The whole room trembled with them.

Doom, for the first time since kidnapping the god of chaos, appeared alarmed.

The trickster made a low, softly amused little sound. “You like the sound of words like that, of course,” he murmured to the cube. “You’re made of a few. It’s a wonder they escaped mortal lips, and I wonder how he ever found them, to bind you so. Clever thing, clever... clever...” His eyelids fell to half-mast. He began to sing back to the cube, low and resonant, syllables cutting through the air.
Something shook the whole of the lab.

“Stop that at once!” Doom demanded.

Loki continued, eyes still fixed on the cube, something fierce and manic in his expression: something really and truly ravenous. Syllables older than half the multiverse flowed from his lips and tongue, his voice hanging in the air like fog, seeming to layer upon itself, ever note lingering longer than should have been possible.

“Cease, you fool! What have you done?”

Even as the cube was pulled away from him, Loki kept up his song, feeling something like worry and fear from both Doom and the cube, which viewed the mortal as its master. The last note was harsh as a raven’s cry of warning, and the whole lab trembled harshly around them all.

The very stone of the earth around the subterranean space groaned like a thing dying. Dust and gravel tumbled down the walls, and from great cracks that spider-webbed across half the ceiling, and the lab’s east wall.

Loki raised his head, eyes glowing green, blazing with it as he met Doom’s stare.

Then the shaking stopped and the trickster fell limp as a thing dead.

The last grinding, rasping growls of the earth on all sides faded more slowly into silence, during which Dr. Victor von Doom stood very still, holding his breath, and for the first time in many years, he felt something akin to genuine doubt, and more than a little mortal fear. Only as the silence lingered for over a minute, and beyond, and all of his systems assured him that his lab was stable and secure once more, did he manage to dismiss it, even by the light of the cube.

It would not be enough to destroy the place; the nearest fault-line had not been near enough, by far, but it would send a message.

Loki had to hope that someone was listening.

~~

Tony knew better than to assume Doom might be so foolhardy as to keep Loki hidden away in Latveria. Given the recent diplomatic tour the trickster had gone on, word that he had been kidnapped by one of the sole nations on earth not sworn against being his enemy would cause Doom far more problems than even his usual world-domination schemes ever had.

Doom was shrewd enough that the general public had no idea why he was on the shit-list of so very, very many superheroes around the world. He covered his tracks, kept his little country a safe place for his bases, which none of his enemies could legally touch, and Tony saw no reason for that to change.

So he wasn’t looking to Latveria.

He was looking at some places around it, though, and some even on other continents entirely, where Doom had conducted some of his puppet-master gigs in the past. Places Doom outsourced to. Places the mad villain had many contacts.
One of them had just lit up red.

“Sir, there’s been a massive geological disturbance in western Columbia, with far-reaching effects much further south and west than usual. None of the usual warning systems were tripped, which should have led to greater casualties, but it seems few were even injured, and most infrastructure in the region is also unharmed. It’s being hailed as somewhat miraculous.”

Thor had mentioned once that Loki’s words were more dangerous than they seemed, when he used particularly powerful ones. Something about Loki having the capability to shake the very roots of whole mountain ranges.

“Map it, try to trace the origins of the disturbance, and start scanning for all Doom’s usual signatures,” Tony said immediately.

“Ready for attempt number nine?” Gamora asked lightly, standing beside a hastily-constructed machine that she knew far more about the workings of than the inventor had honestly expected from someone whose skill set was generally more about weapons and killing people. She had been understandably offended when he admitted to as much, and informed him that anyone who was raised primarily on space-faring vessels had to learn about the complex workings of their drives and engines, just in case a few too many of the ship’s engineering and mechanical teams got all sort of killed or compromised.

It was, Tony admitted, a sensible cultural policy.

“Yeah, fire her up, and let’s see if we can get a stable delivery platform.”

“You still haven’t told me what exactly you plan to send,” she sighed. “Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

“How...”

“Clint introduced me to ‘twenty questions’ during my initial stay here in your tower, and explained what a breadbox is. I then taught the game to my crew... a few of them actually then made breadboxes. They were a bit weird, actually, those two.”

Tony shook his head. “Honestly, I’m still making up my mind.”

A portal ripped open in the middle of his lab, and this time stabilized without any implosion or sudden inexplicable changes in shape and size within seconds of appearing, as Fenrir squinted at it and made a couple of minor adjustments of his own, with a bit of a spell. Slowly, it opened a bit wider, ceasing to flicker at the edges altogether, until it looked very much like a doorway.

“Well, Stark, I think you should make that choice soon, then becau-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” she shouted suddenly, as the inventor leapt out from behind the barriers they’d put up around the test-space, and headed for the portal itself.

“Not leaving a chance of getting misrepresented without being able to argue,” he shot back, saluting both of them before he deliberately fell backwards through the portal. “Leave it open!”

Fenrir swore at length, struggling to keep the portal mostly-open in the wake of one heavy traveler. “Damn that man!”

Gamora was still gaping openly. “What... how did that even seem like a little bit of a good idea? What is wrong with his brain?”

“People have been asking that for years,” JARVIS commented.
Fenrir took his more humanoid form, save for sharp claws lingering at the ends of his fingers, and began scratching a few complex seals into the floor around the portal, his eyes never leaving the center of the now-shuddering doorway.

“Can you keep it up?” the assassin asked, a bit nervously.

“I think... probably.”

There was a knock on the lab door.

“They don’t know I’m here, do they, JARVIS?” Gamora inquired dully.

“They do not; however, this visitor is Miss Romanov. As such, I saw no reason to deter her,” the AI explained.

With a relieved sigh, the assassin said, “Let her in.”

Natasha stepped into the room, took one long look around and sighed. “Tony did something stupid and reckless, I’m guessing?”

“Yes,” the other two concurred, in unison.

“I’ll tell the others,” the spy mused, turning on her heel and heading back out the door. “Please don’t blow anything up.”

“Working on it,” Fenrir assured.

Tony was surrounded by the color white, and nothing more, in all directions.

It was really disturbing, the more he thought about it: no reflective surfaces, no differences in tone, lighting or shadow even as he took a few steps forward. It was deadly quiet, his feet not even making much sound on the also-impossibly-white floor underfoot. He couldn’t see the floor, in truth; he could only feel it with each step. Tony had a feeling that even that was just a courtesy-illusion.

“Why have you come here?” a voice asked, from all directions.

“I need some help from the people who taught the likes of Odin how to make cosmic cubes,” Tony said carefully. “I’m here as a show of trust. I know the last time my world made contact with you, it was violent, and one of you suffered unduly for it. I have no desire to steal anything not freely given, and the person I’m trying to help, who was taken from me, is the one who returned your kin to you.”

There was a creepy sensation from the air behind him, like his magic almost detected something, but either didn’t like it, or couldn’t make sense of it. Turning around, Tony was met with the sight of a tall, ordinary-looking man dressed all in white, with a mop of curly brown hair and tesseract-blue eyes.

“I was the one taken,” he said. “You may call me Frank, for now.”

Tony swallowed thickly. “I’m so sorry.”
The Beyonder stepped closer to him, examining his face. “You’re quite sincere. You also know what it is like to be taken, and maintained only for one’s usefulness.”

“I do,” the inventor admitted. “So did Loki.”

The Beyonder nodded, a wan half-smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. “Ah, you know my rescuer, and all he suffered.”

Tony nodded. “I love him.”

That seemed to surprise the strange being. “I see.”

“Why ‘Frank’ exactly?” the inventor asked, “Of all names?”

The Beyonder shrugged. “I need a reason?”

“Not really. You just don’t look like a ‘Frank’ to me.”

“I care little.” He folded his arms across his chest. “You implied that you seek to aid my rescuer. How? And why?”

“The ‘why’ is because I’m in love with him, and he was taken by a mutual nemesis of ours, against his will, and that nemesis is probably even now trying to force him to channel the powers of a fresh-baked cosmic cube, also against his will,” Tony explained curtly. “The ‘how’ is what I need help with. I can’t find him, and even when I do, I’m not sure how much control he’ll have of his own mind, and how much power from that cube might wind up aimed my way while he’s under Doom’s sway.”

“Doom,” the Beyonder mused. “I recall the name. He was trying to steal the secrets already stolen from me.”

“He succeeded.”

“Apparently.” Frank rubbed his chin, thoughtful, and with eyes narrowed. “The cubes are dangerous enough to make, let alone for such primitive creatures as humans, or even Aesir, to wield with any intent to embrace their full potential.”

“What is that potential, exactly?”

“Oh, you know: just the knack for reshaping reality itself in ways not even magic can do, twisting the architecture of history in which all magic and the astral plane is anchored in and rewriting it to suit a whole new shape for the universe.”

Tony grimaced. “Yeah, I was afraid of that.”

“It can also have a whole range of other side-effects on people using it, or trying to create one, of course.

“Of course,” the inventor murmured.

“I owe your beloved a debt,” said the Beyonder. “He served his own ends, in freeing me as he did, but it remains a life debt. I was beginning to die, slowly, just from being kept captive for so long, with my powers so limited.”

“I warn you... I’m planning to seek great and terrible vengeance,” Tony said coolly. “It won’t be pretty.”
“Does your enemy deserve your worst?” inquired the Beyonder.

“You had your freedom and your powers taken. Loki has that too, and furthermore is having his mind invaded and bent to someone else’s will.”

The being with god-like powers, ageless and possibly nameless, nodded in a concessionary manner, at that. “You need to find him, then. You did mention you were willing, possibly, to offer my people something in return as well?”

“Want a cosmic cube?”

The Beyonder smiled. “It’s more customary, as it were, to offer up-front.”

“You owe a debt. My up-front offer was trust, in coming here the way I did. You want more than that? Help me, and we’ll see,” Tony challenged.

Frank’s smile widened. “Then we should make our way to your world.”

~~

When next Loki regained consciousness, he was wearing a muzzle not unlike the one he’d had placed on him by Thor after the invasion of New York City.

He was also sticky with a great deal more blood and began to panic until he realized that it was from his own wrists. He had thrashed in his sleep until the manacles cut deep into his skin.

Breathing heavily, he tried not to look at the cube, now placed very close to him again, and he failed.

This time was worse. He couldn’t keep his thoughts even remotely coherent. Perhaps it was the blood loss. Perhaps Doom had dosed him with something.

Perhaps... perhaps it was simply time to give in.

Loki tried to shake free of the thought, his chest aching and his skull throbbing in an agonizing manner at the sharp movements.


Loki shook his head again, more slowly.

The light of the cube brightened, until it burned him, even through closed eyelids.

Images sunk into his mind of reality twisting to his whim, and he laughed bitterly at the poor attempts at manipulation, until it began to show familiar faces to him. All of them were happy. They were, in fact, happier than he had ever seen them.

Without him anywhere to be seen.

He could free them, from himself.

The thought made him choke back centuries of self-loathing.
It should not have been so shamefully tempting, and yet nothing else could have so made him hesitate. He had harbored suspicions far too often that many of those precious to him might have had better lives without himself involved, as much as possible. And yet...

Fenrir alone would kill me. Hel would bring me back just to kill me herself, as well. And Tony would win a boon off of her for the right to do the same. She would probably let him, but never admit to it aloud.

He snapped out of it with a faint groan.

The cube seemed to seethe with disapproval and the light grew only brighter.

Unwillingly then. State your name.

Loki grit his teeth and bared them in an ugly, bloodied smile, even though it wasn’t visible at all behind his muzzle. *I hardly know you, and you must hardly know me, if you would continue to ask me to give over this power to you, and expect it to work.* He then all but screamed as he felt something like a knife through his brain, or a spear-blade, made of horrible blue light.

This cube had reactivated the spear already, to summon him and reclaim him by rebuilding his old bonds to it; now it reached out along that bond and reforged still more: reforged, rebuilt and sunk claws in deeper.

The spear was still so full of impressions of minds and emotional turbulence and greed, all refreshed and revitalized and strengthened anew.

Loki could see it suddenly, through the pain. And it could see him. It *recognized* him and he felt drowned in the glaring blue light as though it were an endless sea.

*You are LOKI. You will bear this burden of glorious purpose.*

The trickster couldn’t scream.

That didn’t stop his lungs making the effort regardless, as he suffered and struggled in vain, bleeding anew where he injured himself, his body thrashing involuntarily against the onslaught and the pain.

It would have been a mercy, to have been abandoned to the dark, instead of this terrible light.

~~

Tony had been hoping to get straight to the rescuing, but Natasha stopped him, as soon as he came back.

“Before you go, you need to see this,” she said, and handed him a tablet.

He watched the footage.

A few seconds into it, he backed up until his back hit the nearest wall, his expression a mask that didn’t conceal much of his shock and horror. He had known it was possible, but to see it...
After ten minutes of the Beyonder, Gamora, Fenrir and Natasha watching him, he asked in a voice not quite like his own, “What did he write on the wall?” Clearing his throat, he continued, “It’s clear, when he was given a bit of self-awareness back, that whatever it was horrified him.”

“The message read, ‘Next, it will be Rhodes’,,” Natasha said quietly.

Tony’s throat worked convulsively, and he felt sickened.

Doom wanted to make Loki do the unforgivable. Even knowing the trickster wasn’t himself... to know Rhodey’s blood might be on his hands—and for Rhodey to be lost to him for good...

“We need to go. Now,” Tony rasped.

“He won’t be himself,” the spy insisted. “You aren’t prepared for that.”

“I’m as prepared as I’m going to get, and the sooner we get there, the more there will be left to save, dammit,” the inventor snapped.

Slowly, Natasha nodded. She turned her gaze, then, to the Beyonder. “Who are you, then?”

“Frank,” he said. “I’m not from around here, and I’ve already located the cube.”

Fenrir was looking at the Beyonder with a very strange expression, like he wasn’t sure whether to growl or hide behind Gamora. It was an uncomfortable sensation for him. “That’s a dull name,” he said.

“I’m considered dull, for a Beyonder,” Frank said flatly. “Most are convinced I should have stayed a cube, you see. It’s a very long story.”

Understanding dawned on Natasha then. “I see.”

“I am going to put on my armor,” Tony growled. “And we are going.”

“Shall I send the call to the rest of the Avengers to Assemble?” JARVIS prompted lightly. “It would be best, after all, to have backup.”

After taking a deep breath, and letting it out slowly, the inventor conceded. “Right. You’re right. Send out the call, open the comms, and Nat, you can fly them there. Frank, darling?” He snapped his fingers twice and armor coalesced out of one of the nearby display cases to engulf him within less than ten seconds. “Time to go.”

The Beyonder bowed at the waist, and vanished himself and the madman in the metal suit both. Fenrir growled and followed after them.

“Would you care to join us, Gamora?” Natasha asked, as alarms went up all throughout the tower.

“And miss the show?” She chuckled. “Not a chance. Bring it on.”

~~

“Are you now willing to serve your purpose?” Doom demanded.
Loki raised his head slowly and met the man’s gaze with eyes glowing uniformly blue from lid to lid. His expression was utterly calm, almost serene. He did not answer.

“You may speak.”

Still the god said nothing.

“Will you obey orders you are given?”

“I will,” Loki said, barely a whisper.

“Have you any will left of your own?”

“I know not.”

Doom stepped closer, resting the bladed tip of the scepter against Loki’s sternum. “Who are you?”

“I am Loki, and I am burdened with glorious purpose,” he recited.

The mortal sorcerer hesitated. “What purpose is that?”

“To burn.”

“For me?”

Loki blinked and squinted. “I’m not sure I understand the question.”

Doom looked from the trickster, to the bright-glowing cube. “How will you burn?”

“I am burning already, obviously,” the god said, his voice sluggish. “It wants my life... your life... it wants and wants, do you not see?”

“I do not burn,” Doom insisted.

Loki smiled slow and disjointed and dead, just then. “Oh, I can fix that.”

The mortal emitted a startled noise as the spear jerked in his hand. He couldn’t release it, even as the blade touched the cosmic cube.

*Victory you call me. I will be victorious*, hissed and whispered through both the god’s mind, and Dr. Doom’s.

Doom began to scream.

Loki went limp as a dead thing again, though he chuckled brokenly, full of pain, as the focus shifted off of him enough for the glow in his eyes to fade, just slightly.

It was his will that was hurt by it. His memories, so far, remained as intact as he could manage, and he buried them deep as he could, until he almost couldn’t find them again. They had to be safe, be kept intact; they were his self and if his self could endure, he could rebuild his will, so furtively he buried all, while the light’s too-near-sentient attention was primarily aimed in another direction.

He buried it all very fast, before the mortal villain was fully possessed and infested with the same purpose as the cube had burdened Loki with.

Again the light struck him, and so did Doom, with the butt-end of the spear.
Eyes again aglow, now matched in inner light by Dr. Doom’s, Loki stared down at his would-be destroyer, sincerely curious. “Yes?”

The spear glowed brighter for a few moments.

Loki’s manacles released him, and he fell to the floor in a bloodied heap.

“He is coming,” Doom rumbled. “He would take away our victory.”

The trickster’s expression became a mask of irrational hatred. “Who? Who would so dare attempt such a thing?”

“An Avenger, a wolf, and the Beyonder.”

Loki’s face twisted with a violent, grinning rictus that made mockery of the very concept of innocent mirth. “Then swiftly shall they die.” He summoned his armor, and pushed himself slowly to his feet. He reached up, primarily with magic, and plucked the cosmic cube from its resting place, seeming to savor its glow while letting it hover over one of his palms. Then he turned to Doom, and extended his free hand.

Doom handed over the scepter.

Loki handed him the cube, smiling winningly: bright and bold. “When you are ready for victory, do bring it,” said the trickster. Then he vanished to begin guarding the roof while the cube burnt up a bit more of the metal-encased doctor, who was already cradling it in gauntleted hands like it was his firstborn child.

“Victory...” Doom whispered.
The Price of Freedom and the Love of Monsters

Chapter Summary

Shit goes down with Doom. Loki does great and terrible things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I will try to hold the attention of the cube,” the Beyonder said, his voice cool and calm, in the minds of Fenrir and Tony, who both tried not to grimace at the casual invasion, however harmless and well-intended.

“What if Loki’s wielding it?” Tony asked coolly, into the mental connection as they approached the compound, getting a better idea of the layout of the battlefield before making the final leap there. It was a good idea to keep quiet; Doom was well known for always overhearing what he shouldn’t be able to. His paranoia truly knew no bounds.

“He is not,” Frank assured. “I can sense that much. The cube is... flawed. It should be made up of pure potential energy, but its creator lacks an understanding of potential which is not also accompanied by ambition, and any understanding of power that does not extend control over weaker beings. This failure of understanding has twisted it, and in time it would destroy itself violently as it further destabilized, but we do not have the time, and your planet might not survive it. Anyone in a hundred-mile radius would be vaporized along with the landscape, at the very least.”

“You can sense the cube location. What else about it indicates that it isn’t in my father’s hands?” Fenrir asked sharply.

“The fact I can see him atop a central building in Doom’s complex, holding only a spear, and clearly awaiting our company,” the Beyonder assured.

“JARVIS didn’t detect that much,” Tony added, hesitant.

“He is cloaked. If you look with your magic, rather than satellites, I suspect you may have a better chance of spotting him, given your bond,” responded Frank.

“I can’t sense him at all,” Fenrir insisted, his voice sounding very small.

The mad inventor struggled to sharpen his own sight, and weave threads to allow him to see farther, latching onto a passing crow for an anchor-point, steering its flight-path as gently and unobtrusively as possible. It cooperated, curious and almost amused, as Hlín had assured him that crows usually were, when tapped by magic users. Cats too, though Tony had never had reason to try that out. They were creatures with something like symbolic resonance with enough connections to stories and dreams that they were commonly guided by threads of magic; although how aware they were of it seemed to vary.

The crow glanced down, and Tony applied a spell intended to see past glamours and cloaking spells. He saw a flickering blue glow, and a familiar dark figure, decked out in full armor, save for his missing helmet. Loki had knelt down on one knee, holding a too-familiar spear, head down at first
but beginning to raise as though sensing eyes upon him. The beginnings of an uneasy grimace, turning into an outright snarl, marred his previously calm expression. The spear flashed and visual cut out with a blinding flash of plasmic blue.

Tony cringed. “Damn. I was getting along with that bird.”

Fenrir shot him a worried look. “Father usually quite likes crows.”

“The cube does not like the dissonance you cause within him,” the Beyonder said to Tony. “I suspect, if you get much closer to him, Fenrir, you may cause him similar instability.”

“Harming you is on his list of unforgivable sins, yeah, short though that list is,” the inventor murmured. “I dunno if we want to find out the sort of failsafes and tiger-traps he’s left in his mind, for himself, to prevent that. It’s probably more severe than anything he’s laid out for me.”

The wolf swallowed tightly, with an audible click. “You’re all too right. Beyonder, if you are confronting Doom, it will not only be himself and the cube which will distract you. His systems have connections to rival Stark’s when he’s in full world-domination mode, and stops caring about getting caught hacking, which I’m certain is the case at present. Stark, if you have a portable means by which I might collaborate with JARVIS, I’m sure he and I can sabotage most, if not all, of those factors.”

“Leaving Loki to me,” Tony confirmed.

“He’s less likely to self-destruct for your sake, selfishly,” Fenrir assured. “How could he live to further enjoy you if he did?”

The inventor nodded. “Whereas for you...”

“Hel and I know all too well how highly he values us, and what he would sacrifice where he considers our lives and future happiness more important than his own,” the wolf murmured, sounding pained. “If his will is compromised, or not his own... given that this has happened to him before and more than once?” He shook his head. “You’re right. He will have laid traps for himself. And I would not be responsible for setting them off. I’m sorry, but I-”

“It’s okay,” Tony said, resting a hand at the base of the wolf’s neck, just above tense, narrow shoulder-blades. Gauntleted touch careful, he knew it was JARVIS as much as himself burying fingers into the thick fur, reassuring, and he let the suit take over, so that he wouldn’t fuck it up with human clumsiness. Three drones shimmered into view around them, where they seemed to have been orbiting silently.

Fenrir looked a bit disconcerted, having been unable to sense them. “You do good work,” he acknowledged, seeing only a little magic subtly woven into them, well-hidden: all the rest was pure machinery.

The Beyonder was less surprised, but nodded respectfully at the machines.

One of them hovered closer to Fenrir, curling over his head slightly.

The wolf tensed a little, uneasy.

“He can’t join a psychic link yet,” Tony assured. “You’ll need a comm device, but I don’t have any adapted for wolf-ears.”

“Right.” Fenrir shifted once the drone pulled back a little, and accepted the comm offered when a
compartmentalized section of it opened. He frowned at it a bit thoughtfully, then put it in his ear, and something in the air around them twisted as he altered something.

Tony blinked rapidly a few times, feeling a little dizzy with the wash of power leftover from whatever spell the wolf had just done.

“Oh, I see,” JARVIS said, also over the mental connection now. “What a bizarre frequency through which to communicate.”

Fenrir only grinned at Tony’s slightly stunned look, and returned his comm to the drone, no longer having any need of it.

“I think we’re ready to get started, then,” said Frank. “At least, as ready as we’ll ever be?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. and the rest of the Avengers are en route, and I have mapped for them the positions of all of Doom’s forces within the compound, as far as any scans above-ground can detect; however, there is clearly a good deal of subterranean infrastructure here,” JARVIS informed them. “I would go so far as to suggest the majority of the compound is underground. I will need to hack into more local systems before I can collect that sort of pertinent information in any further detail. Fenrir, if you would please take this drone along with you, on any magic-based transportations you undertake through the compound, we should indeed be able to manage that and more, I do believe.”

“Give ‘em Hell, JARVIS,” Tony said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice, over the mental link.

“It will be my pleasure,” the AI assured.

“Good. Then let’s roll,” the inventor barked crisply.

The Beyonder vanished first, followed by Fenrir and his assigned drone. Tony’s remaining two drones both re-cloaked themselves just before he, too, disappeared.

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The art of subtlety was one that the Beyonder known as Frank had been forced to learn during his incarceration at the hands of the Ten Rings. Keeping what little progress he made toward recovery, or regained capacity to resist, he had learned to keep to himself even under constant close-surveillance and ceaseless scrutiny from guards and scientists alike. He had learned to let them believe him too weak to do what they wanted, so long as they wished to keep him contained and under control.

Hiding himself and his powers from human senses, and keeping such things undetectable even to their sensitive instruments, had become his all-consuming obsession: the only actions available to him for self-preservation.

So he was more than able to sit back and watch now, close enough to see Doom and all of his castle, but just outside the range of the cube to react violently against his presence. He had no reason to believe himself to be expected.

Frank waited, and watched, as a wolf, seemingly alone (flexible drone, movements as smooth and graceful as those of a manta ray, hovered protectively over his back, unseen by all of the machines around them, and further kept out of the cube’s awareness by the same magics Fenrir used to cloak
himself) prowled through a vast chamber full of machines of death from Doom-bots as simple as decoys of Doom himself, to larger dreadnoughts intended to destroy tanks, or even whole buildings.

Fenrir crept past them on silent paws. Some of them lit up as he past, which the Beyonder almost worried about, but then worked out that it had been actions taken by the AI occupying the drone, rather than Doom, when none of the weapons so much as stirred otherwise.

“You got a lock yet, JARVIS?” Fenrir inquired quietly, over the mental link.

“In progress. Doom’s levels of encryption are always particularly challenging.”

Whole panels and displays flickered to life, images flashing across them too fast for a normal human eye to quite detect.

Frank sensed an odd hum over the link, and realized it was a level of communication, simplified, between the wolf and the AI: an artificial language of data and encryption, machine-language, which allowed them to communicate a lot of information very quickly to one another.

“What’s that hum?” Tony asked.

“Fenrir is aiding me in decryption.”

“I cannot see you, Tony,” the Beyonder warned.

“Good.”

“The same will not be true for your lover.”

“I know, but if you can’t see me, I’m guessing the cube will have trouble getting a lock on me, and Loki will be its only source of data on my position and actions.”

“Impressive work,” Fenrir mused.

“The scepter has been modified, but not drastically enough I couldn’t deconstruct and figure out the changes... and their weak points. Among other things. Going on radio silence for a while, boys. Looks like I’ve been spotted. Time to say hello to my welcoming committee.”

A massive explosion rocked the complex.

The Beyonder saw the explosion, and could even detect a trickster god had been at the heart of it, and now lay at the edge of a crater, still clinging to the glowing scepter, but his expression was one of pain and confusion, and it clearly took him a lot of effort to sit up thereafter. He still couldn’t get a lock on Tony Stark’s position, but as the inventor had suggested, perhaps that was for the best.

“Frank, I suspect that despite your current attempts at subtlety,” JARVIS cut in, “Doom is already more than aware of your presence.”

“Why do you say that?” the Beyonder asked.

“There are protocols engaging as we speak which seem to be about imprisonment, and using technologies similar to those Loki introduced me to, when I aided him in freeing you from the Ten Rings. I would recommend you proceed with haste to more direct confrontation. We are having trouble stalling or reversing the protocols, even now.”

Frank swore, and coalesced into a bipedal, human-like form in Doom’s lab, cringing at what he saw within the sickly white-blue light of the cube that the metal-masked madman held between gauntleted
hands. “Victor.”

“Victory,” Doom declared, voice booming, amplified by every device in the room, making the walls shake with it.

The cube reached out, aiming to twist reality itself, to flee the Beyonder.

Frank held firm against it, but it took more strength than it should have.

The problem with being omnipotent was how little effort most things really took to achieve. It was only through interaction with other beings similarly omnipotent that the concept of force of will, rather than force of whim, became apparent, and Frank, by Beyonder standards, was still young. It was still a shock, when true struggle was required and it ached.

The cube was stubborn as its creator, and fed off the mind that made it, but Doom had wanted it to be obedient, had wanted to have the upper hand with it, even as he made the mistake of creating something infinitely more powerful than himself, when Doom’s own sense of power, his own understanding of the whole concept, was based on the idea of domination.

A twisted wreck of thought and intention lay in the core of the cosmic cube, growing like a tumor, like a cancer, trying to rationalize itself, and already reality was growing thinner around it, and the longer Doom held it, the more threat there was that his logic, his reasoning, would begin to override parts of reality and reshape it.

“I hadn’t actually thought your convictions this strong,” Frank acknowledged, “but you are barely here, Doom. Whither wander you?”

“I am in many places,” the villain said, eyes glowing brighter.

Deep beneath their feet, a thousand things stirred to life so suddenly that the Beyonder could feel the faint tremor of it up through the floor. His breath caught.

“Doom is countering us in real-time,” Fenrir declared.

JARVIS further added, “He is in his own systems, all of them, like there’s more than a dozen of him.”

“Then tell him to get out!” Tony suddenly roared, and there was a sound like shredding metal and static and a roar of rage, but distant and inhuman, even over the mental link.

Doom took a single almost-hesitant step back from the Beyonder.

Frank took one step toward him, and a field instantly went up around him. He reached out to banish it and felt sudden agony that brought him to his knees.

“I have improved much on the Ten Rings’ designs,” Doom chided, but he sounded distant, and distracted.

“I’m not weak as I was. This will not hold me for long.”

“I need but little time.”

“Incorrect, Doom,” Frank assured, smiling though the lingering pain through his entire being. “You still can’t handle this all yourself. You might amplify yourself a bit, but even if you lean on that too far, you’ll start to feel the burn. You’re feeling it now, at the edges of your mind. Can you even
remember the faces of your enemies?"

Doom stepped closer to him.

The field lit up with a pulse of powerful disruptive energies.

Frank screamed, then laughed as soon as it halted: the sound cracked and hysterical. “I’ll take that as a no. You still need a buffer, and you let him persuade you to send him after us? You really think you have that trickster god on a tight leash? I see more than mortals or gods do; I see into their minds; I can’t entirely help it, and his? Let me tell you, Doom—Loki’s mind is a terrifying collection of constructs and traps the likes of which you can’t begin to defuse enough for him to be harmless to you.”

Another pulse. The Beyonder screamed again, and laughed harder as soon as it stopped.

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Loki recovered from the initial explosion pretty fast, as Tony had expected.

The drones managed to deflect most of the ice-based weaponry, but as soon as Loki realized the ice was ineffective, one of the drones was immediately taken down by a barrage of flaming daggers, and it went down with an ugly crash.

The remaining drone went into stealth mode and stayed there, working its way under Loki’s guard as the trickster focused his attention on Tony, and they darted around each other almost too fast for the human eye to see, slowed or stopping only when one or the other of them tripped up a few threads of spell-work enabling hasty teleportation or, in Tony’s case, speed-enhancement spells. Loki was naturally quicker than most Aesir, trained for centuries to take advantage of his mobility and reach where most of his opponents were focused on brute strength.

Tony had an upper hand, though, in tangling and tripping up many of Loki’s spells, because nothing was hidden from him, where it usually would be, against any other opponent Loki would face. The spell written into the god’s skin overrode even deeply-ingrained habitual concealment, before Tony’s eyes. He could even see the cloaking Loki wove, and each spell was a masterpiece—except that it didn’t serve its purpose, when used against Tony Stark, because of the gap left in place by the bond Loki had forged, when he had put the inventor’s name in blood and ink below the surface of his skin.

It was driving the trickster to greater lengths of confusion and anger.

“You still in there, Loki?” Tony called out, voice metallic where it was broadcast outside the Iron Man mask.

The trickster gave a wordless snarl and lashed out with a blast from the scepter.

Tony barely dodged it, and then careened himself forward through the air to hit Loki square in the chest hard enough to send him flying back a dozen feet into the nearest wall, denting it. “You never miss, usually.”

The god’s brow furrowed and he raised the scepter again, aiming it at Tony, but the mortal was there in an instant, hand wrapping around Loki’s on the scepter. A flood of input, magic and psychic both,
hit through the trickster’s bond to the weapon and he felt blinded for a moment by it, some of Tony’s surface thoughts brushing against his cube-muddled mind.

It was an effort for the mad inventor to keep himself mostly-unentangled, but he’d studied the scepter enough to dodge the worst snares. He could sense Doom, could sense Loki.

The whole building trembled under their feet, and suddenly Doom’s presence was a lot more widespread. Loki’s jaw clenched and blue-white glow in his eyes increased. He began pushing the inventor away, prying at the gauntleted fingers around his own as his lips curled in a snarl that looked like it might be holding back a scream.

The mental link Tony had to the others was very faint now. He barely heard it when Fenrir declared, with considerable alarm, “Doom is countering us in real-time!”

It was a little easier to hear when JARVIS further added, “He is in his own systems, all of them, like there’s more than a dozen of him.”

“Then tell him to get out!” Tony suddenly roared, and there was a sound like shredding metal and static and a roar of rage, but distant and inhuman as he reached out with the spell he’d been weaving ever since he’d stepped back through a certain doorway with a certain Beyonder.

He’d studied the scepter’s specs for a few hours after returning to earth, while Gamora had setup the more basic parts of the machinery they would need to make a call to near-omnipotent beings from another plane of existence. Doom’s modifications were impressive, but not enough to merit too many alterations to the spell Tony had constructed for it.

It sent a pulse through the scepter, through all the minds ensnared by the cube that powered it, through everything the cube touched. It sent a pulse through them of a sort that the Ten Rings had used at regular intervals to keep the Beyonder too weak to use his reality-warping powers in full, except much stronger.

There was a reaction like a crack from the core of the cosmic cube, audible only to those connected to it. Tony couldn’t quite hear it, but he saw it in how the glow almost-faded from Loki’s eyes, and the scepter, for just a second.

Then it returned in full, got blindingly bright, in fact.

Tony was sent crashing through the roof and down into one of Doom’s labs with enough force to set all of his suit’s sensors, and his own senses, through a disorienting, jarring distortion when he crashed, because the blow hadn’t been purely physical.

He tasted blood, and smelled desert and felt a flash of irrational panic and old agony: something worming its way into his memory before he could work up another disruptive pulse of magic, and shake off the last lingering tendrils the cube had barely managed to impress upon him through the scepter.

If it hadn’t gone through the scepter, he wouldn’t have been so lucky, but Loki was still the one holding the scepter, wielding and guiding its focus.

And Loki was currently screaming in gut-wrenching agony, and thus clearly not at 100% efficiency. Tony struggled free enough of the wreckage to teleport himself back onto the roof, fear overcoming the voice in the back of his head suggesting a frontal assault would give the trickster too much of an opening, if this was just a ruse.

He found the god crumpled in a heap, his skin a mottled grey as though he were suffering sudden
heavy-metal poisoning, and Loki’s screams only trailed off when he coughed up blood.

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Very deep below the surface, held there by his own self-engineered failsafes and shields, a trickster god was drowning.

That was the only word for it. Beyond himself, feeling his body propelled and constricted against his will, unable to see, all of his senses both too acutely visceral—panic, horror, rage, and pain, building and building like pressure that threatened the structural integrity of his own ribcage from within—and too distant—all sound was muffled, as though distorted by leagues of dark waters around him, he could not tell which way was up, could not orient his perception but kept trying to thrash, trying to tread water, trying to reach for control more desperately than he ever had for oxygen in the physical world... but there was nothing to grip.

He was too deep, and for a moment almost gave in to the urge to just... drift...

A scream threatened to penetrate his very skull, even muffled as it sounded.

The too-distant sensations of his physical body, and the sensory deprivation itself, twisted into something dream-like. Memories overwhelmed him, as energy was drained out of him, from deeper within himself than he usually dared—such a drain on his magic, such fear and urgency and... hesitation?

Loki tried to reach for the warm glow all of his energies seemed to be disappearing into, tried to reach out and touch, but something blinding and electric-blue exploded, crackling and agonizing, cutting between and forking in each direction like lightning, rolling through with a roar like standing beside Thor in the midst of a berserker rage the likes of which the thunder god hadn’t succumbed to in centuries.

The shockwave crashed through the trickster god’s consciousness, threatening to burn and shatter, but Loki fought, and it all twisted.

He could taste stagnant, sick-laced water, uncomfortably hot and stinging and he was being held down in it forcefully, straining to hold his breath for long minutes, his body being jostled and abused and shoved and shaken through the water, keeping him doubled-over so it soaked him up to the shoulder-blades. Coarse ropes and handcuffs cut harshly into his skin, which felt all too delicate and raw, nothing like it should have felt: not without magic making the mundane matter something stronger, but all of his struggles only made his lungs burn more from oxygen deprivation, and the bonds dig deeper into his skin, scraped by too-abrupt movements until he could feel his blood beginning to drip down both hands from his wrists. He needed air, but every attempt he made to escape, to catch the brutish, manhandling thugs off-guard enough he might suck in a breath, they only pushed him down harder, changed their grips on his arms and legs so his joints ground together and some of his bones seemed about to snap. One of them elbowed him hard in already-cracked ribs and Loki couldn’t help it, he tried, but he couldn’t stop.

On pure reflex, to make up for the precious air that burst out of him at the force of the blow, he gasped, and immediately began to choke.

The water wasn’t just water. He wasn’t the first prisoner to be treated to this, and it wasn’t only his
own flesh and blood and a little bile that burned through his nose and mouth even more humiliatingly than the painfully-hot water that sent his whole respiratory system into a fit before he could even begin to stop it. Gagging between coughs of air he couldn’t afford to lose, struggling to sit up and doing himself no more good than another cracked rib, Loki thrashed like a wild animal in a trap, until he was all but heaving water only to swallow more, only in a desperate attempt to keep some of it, even if only a little, from further flooding his lungs.

He was dragged up before his vision quite blacked out and coughed harshly, vomiting water down his own front between agonizingly wet gasps, before the next wracking bout of coughs overtook him.

Ringing in his ears, barely audible over the din of his own making as his system tried desperately to be rid of foul water from all the places it didn’t belong, Loki could hear voices shouting at each other. They were all distant, foreign and unrecognizable things, jumbles of syllables that meant nothing to him, until one sharper, more familiar voice cut through, high and harsh.

It was commanding. It was angry. It was-

Loki lost track because he’d finally gotten two lungs full of mostly air, and exhaled only a little of it before being unceremoniously pushed back into the water head-first.

It was worse, because his body was still shaking with involuntary tremors, his blood was chock full of adrenaline, and instinct won out far quicker. His next gasp caused a fit so violent he could taste his own blood strongly before they even pulled him out of the water. The thugs restraining him pressed in around him, laughing raucously at making him into their personal water-fountain of anguish for a few seconds before his legs gave out and he hung limp in their grasp, retching and shuddering and coughing until all he could taste was blood and bile, the only clean water about his person being the saline drops squeezed out from between his tightly-clenched eyelids.

The familiar voice was shouting louder now, angrier.

Perhaps... orchestrating this? The thought made Loki feel sicker still, more leaden, the last of the strength draining out of him even before they shoved him back in the water once more, because that was Tony’s voice.

Loki didn’t even bother fighting his instincts this time. He let them win, hoping even through the stabbing pangs and sick horror that if he didn’t struggle anymore, perhaps he might fall unconscious enough to escape thoughts still more painful than this. His heart burned, threatening to collapse in on itself because this—

This was Tony’s nightmare, he now knew.

So why was the inventor here? Why was Loki receiving this punishment? From Tony’s dreams? He could only imagine the worst, and wracked with sobbing gasps, he went limp and lifeless in the water even before he should have, wishing for the dark to take him and trying to give it every chance to do so quickly, but even the solace of unconsciousness was denied him.

The grip of his captors became fearful, suddenly: hasty and bumbling this time, like they were truly afraid. Was it all fun and games until someone killed a god before they could draw secrets from him? No, if they wanted his secrets, there were far better ways than this. Tony knew most of them. He would never use this, in their place. Too clumsy. Too...

The water leaving his ears as the thugs forced his ribcage to propel water up and out, Loki realized Tony Stark was screaming, not in anger, but in pain and horror. He gagged up most of the remaining
water from his lungs in three harsh coughs and his head snapped up in time to see the insignia of the Ten Rings on large men struggling tooth and nail to drag Tony out of the room. For just a moment, relief flooded him, followed swiftly by fear and rage.

Then he himself was dragged only a few feet to one side, to a different water-trough, and shoved into it.

It was nearly ice-cold and sent him plunging not into awareness as he screamed, but into silence, back under, back into sensory deprivation, and he fought all the harder, but there was nothing to fight against, here, but inky depths.

He couldn’t even feel his own body now. Again.

It was almost deathly silent, save faint sounds like crashing waves that could be from miles away, above him, or behind him.

He did not have the breath or lungs to scream here.

That didn’t stop him from trying.

Because he couldn’t even feel the anchor he’d had before, that had assured him he was held down in the dark by his own hands.

This was worse.

This was too, too close to true death.

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Tony watched helplessly for a few moments, until the trickster’s coughing stopped. He was a bit horrified.

“You never told me you did that,” he whispered. He could see the edges of the trap, now. Loki’s attack against him had set it off, somehow: set off a reaction in the trickster’s blood that incapacitated him with pain and weakened him physically, forcing him to burn off almost half his magic just to recuperate enough to keep breathing and get the malevolent spell out of his system.

It was genius.

It was horrible.

It’s consent-based, Tony realized. *It recognized that action, against me, not being one Loki wanted taken, and it incapacitated him for it.* “You’re so fucked up it’s amazing, do you know that?” he rasped, his voice shaking. “I’m not even sure I want to know what you’d have done if that’d been aimed at Fenrir or Hel. I never, ever want to see it happen, now.”

“Tired of humoring the monster yet?” Loki’s voice inquired, as the god lifted his head. Crackling blue energy raced over his skin from the scepter, healing him faster by supplementing his magic reserves, though the conversion of those energies clearly came at a cost.

Loki’s expression was entirely hollow, this time: dead and blank.
Tony swallowed thickly. “Don’t you give up on me now,” he whispered.

“You should give up on him, you know,” said the trickster’s voice, though the words were clearly Doom’s. “I can make him hate you.”

“Even if you did, you couldn’t make him kill me.”

“I could make him destroy himself in the effort.”

“You still need him,” the inventor chided.

“Do I?” Loki’s voice was flat, but there was a cold amusement just barely detectable through the overall deadness of tone, on that inquiry. “I think, if it comes down to that, you will be in no position to escape, and the loss would cripple you significantly, Anthony Stark.”

Tony’s throat worked around a dry swallow, but he said nothing.

Something like a miserably failed attempt at a smile tugged at Loki’s expression, like the leadenness of the trickster’s muscles in the absence of their more usual master made them a bit too lifeless for a proper mock-smile. “You would do well, as I say, to give up on him, but you will not, will you?”

“I won’t,” the inventor swore. “If you think you can get into his head, then you’re a fool, Doom. You can’t make him give in without making him useless to you. You’re right that his loss would—” He lost his words for a moment, feeling sick with fear over the thought. “You’re mistaken, if you think it’ll make me easier to utilize. I’m not as strong as him. I don’t have the knowledge you need either, and you know that. You’d die, if you tried to use me, or worse than die: all that you are, Victor, would be gone. Your name would wipe itself from history and memory. It’s happened to others, who thought they could control a weapon like the cube, and you’re not as powerful as they were.”

“How do you know of them, if their names did not survive?”

“Because they had offspring,” Tony snapped. “And one of them was my lover’s father, and I know everything I possibly can about Loki, and I still didn’t know he would do what he just did to stop himself destroying me.”

Loki made an exasperated sound. “You expect me to believe this?”

“I have no reason to lie, and you’re listening with the ears of a god of lies. How insincere do I really sound? Come on,” he challenged, leaning in close, despite the creeping sensation under his skin at being closer to Loki, while it was so clearly someone else under the trickster’s skin. “Really think about it.”

The god’s expression became less dead, more twisted with anger.

Tony smirked. “You losing your grip, there, Vicky?”

He really should’ve expected the scepter in the gut, in retrospect.

He gasped and tasted his own blood. Things went a bit fuzzy around the edges of his vision, but he focused hard on the weapon piercing him. The HUD showed him in detail where all the damages were, and with the helpful visual, he managed to start a few recuperative spells even as the blade was dragged slowly back out.

Tony fell to his knees, choking, the holes in his armor, big one in the front, smaller one in the back
where the tip had poked out between two ribs, sparking and smoking. He fixed up his organs and halted his blood-loss, but it drained most of his magic to manage, leaving his vision grey and his whole body too heavy. “No protocols for stabbing?” he rasped, tilting his head up slowly.

His expression fell.

Loki was burning. From the inside out. He was still on his feet, frozen in place, hunched over and silently screaming, like he dared not breathe in, lest more oxygen feed the flames that were making his skin steam and his veins glow like burning coals here and there.

Over the mental connection, Tony barely managed not to scream, “Frank, hurry the fuck up with incapacitating the cube!”

“I’m... a bit compromised, Tony.”

The inventor’s heart sank.

“He’s trapped under a force-field similar to the one the Ten Rings used to contain him, and he is being subjected to regular disruptive pulses of a strength which might cause him decoherence of self, soon, which might be potentially lethal,” JARVIS explained. “We have not yet been able to work out a way to stop this.”

“Fenrir... Fenrir, he’s burning himself somehow,” Tony choked.

A fearful swear escaped the wolf. “You can disrupt the spell, can’t you? You can disable his magic altogether, even.”

“His magic is all that’s keeping his mind from being wholly taken over by the cube and you know that,” Tony whispered.

Loki fell to his hands and knees, choking on smoke and bile.

“He can survive it, whatever it is, Tony,” Fenrir assured. “You have to trust him that much. It will stop. This is what he knows he can take, and still come back from it.”

“He almost gutted me, please tell me you’re sure,” the inventor pleaded.

“Trust him. Help him. Don’t touch him, let him do this. Whatever he’s doing, just... you know how tough he is, Tony. You know how much it takes to make him weak enough he can’t do harm.”

Tony steeled himself, but only barely, as Loki slowly further collapsed into a limp heap on the rooftop, weakly coughing up smoke and wet ash.

The scepter was still in his hand.

The inventor aimed a repulsor at it, and fired, sending it flying.

Loki jerked upright, eyes still blazing blue, the fire fast-extinguished as the blue crept down through the rest of him too, and he summoned the weapon back into his grasp with a snarl.

“Well, the cube still wants him intact enough that it heals the damages a bit too well,” the inventor announced, feeling chagrined for just a moment before another blast from the scepter hit him hard in the chest, knocking the breath out of him and vaporizing half the armor between his skin and the outside world, as well as sending him skidding back across the rooftop until he hit a wall where the roof gave way to another section of building. The blow also made his whole torso flare with agony
where muscle-tissue damage was still repairing, slower than the more vital tissues, because he didn’t have magic enough to support anything faster, now.

“Fuck!”

Loki staggered forward, jaw clenched against more pain, skin grey again, blood staining his teeth, but the scepter cleaned it up still faster this time: learning and adapting to counter-act the trickster’s self-sabotage.

“Shit, it’s learning his tricks,” Tony groaned.

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The death-like distance eased a little.

There was a single light, from overhead.

Something about that single light, the yellowish color of it, and the sudden sensation of a convenient floor beneath him, made particular sorts of suspicion kick up in Loki’s brain, but it was hard to make much of them. The sudden influx of sensory input alone was a bit overwhelming.

“I knew you were a bit craven, but not a coward,” accused a too-familiar voice.

*Tony’s voice.*

Loki tried to form words, but only managed a faint groan.

He felt too dry and light and lacking in strength or substance. He felt like kindling.

“How can I possibly trust you, after that?”

Slowly, the trickster raised his head, blinking against the warm yellow-orange light. It was not fire-light, too steady for that. It was like papers discolored by age, and like red-hot metal, dingy somehow, and oddly familiar, but still also very foreign.

“What have I done, exactly?” Loki managed to ask.

“You *gave up*.” He snapped his fingers. “You stopped even trying to live? And why? Why, Loki?”

“I didn’t stop trying to survive. I just chose a different tactic,” the god rasped.

“You were letting them drown you, because you thought I was making them do it. I could see it on your face when you looked at me. How could you even-”

“Stop,” Loki said flatly.

“Why?”

“You’re not him.”

The very accurate impression of Anthony Stark snorted. “Oh really?”

“You’re not.” Loki smiled almost lazily. “You don’t know him like I do.”

“Don’t I?” The light flickered.
The trickster laughed, dry and pained. “You don’t, and you never will. You have my attention, you even have me trapped in something like a dream, but do not imagine for a moment that you have more access than I am willing to allow you, and most of my memories of him, and all the nuances of his behavior and his tells, are not for you. You would have to destroy me to get to them.”

“You would put such a high price as that over such trifles?” the doppelgänger inquired, sounding unimpressed.

“I would, among many others.”

“Why?” Almost-sincere curiosity this time.

Loki chuckled, but sounded weary. “It is the nature of my love for him, and one more reason I know you are not Tony, here and now. He knows very well why I would surrender, to him, if somehow he was so very far gone as to inflict that particular torment against me, given how much I mean to him, and just what that torture did to him, and he knows precisely how it felt,” he explained quietly. “It was clear that I was to be kept alive, but made to suffer; if I give up trying to live, the torment is forced to halt. I surrendered because I knew it would break him, to see me give in to what he had resisted himself in Afghanistan, and to give up to it for him. With the torment stopped, he would be forced to see how much pain his betrayal caused me, how weak I was willing to be for him, and there is no way, save for loss of his own will and control of his body by another, that he could see that and not suffer himself. It is how we never want to resort to harming each other, but we each know ourselves more than capable of doing, if it somehow proved necessary, haunt us both though it would.”

“You are mad. Both of you.”

The trickster smiled mockingly. “You understand me not at all, Victor.”

“I do not understand cowardice.”

“Is it cowardice?” Loki challenged. “Is it weakness, to accept pain and suffering instead of flinch from it? It is braver to remain unbroken?” He scoffed, and offered one of his most disgusted sneers. “I think not. I think you are more coward than I, Victor, and it has corrupted your life and your cosmic cube alike.”

“You dare?” Victor growled, all resemblance to Tony Stark suddenly gone. This was Doom before he required a metal mask, before he had been twisted and damaged, blue eyes blazing and teeth bared.

“How could you possibly create a functional source of unlimited power, when you have such a fundamentally distorted understanding of what true power is?” Loki hissed, eyes narrowing. “You have gotten only what you deserve from what you’ve created and should let it burn you to nothing, as your own domination and control of the earth would burn away all that makes it worthwhile in its own right without need of your scars upon it, carving it into shapes which better please you.”

“Silence,” Doom rumbled, and moved to shatter the illusion around them and send Loki back down into the dark, but the trickster clung, strengthening it, smiling coldly as the cube supported him, because he whispered another of the old words to it, barely a whisper, and it wanted to hear more.

Even if it meant going against Doom’s will, and it showed in a brief flicker of horror across his face that he suddenly knew it.

“Oh course Doom does not deserve any equal, in judgement, and power, let alone control,” Loki
snarled, his voice bleak with the pain of holding this scene together. The light, he finally realized, was akin to that of an interrogation cell, from an era on earth he had glimpsed through some films he’d watched with Tony. He shook off the memory, pushing it back down into hiding, focusing on Dr. Victor von Doom. “No, you do not deserve that, for any equal to you, Doom, would be too much like you: disinclined to be satisfied with only a measly 50% control over the relationship.”

The trickster rose to his feet, stepping slowly forward despite the very air resisting him. Doom back-stepped only twice, but couldn’t leave the circle of light they occupied, as Loki continued to stalk toward him, hissing accusations: “You cannot fathom trusting anyone that far, without the scale tilted further in your favor, in no small part because you know what it is to consider someone an equal, and to be rejected by them, and how that so wounds you that even to this day you call the feeling ‘mere disappointment’ and tell yourself that Dr. Reed Richards did not meet your high expectations, when you know instead that you failed fundamentally to see what about your actions so disgusted him, so appalled him that he would betray you; and yet then dare try to save you repeatedly afterward, like he hopes you’ll one day be less a fool, less a tyrant, less unyielding like a scared child in the face of your own faults, which you cling to like they are precious, because better that than the pain of self-loathing.”

Close to Victor’s face by then, Loki summoned the metal mask that usually covered the tyrant’s face and chided him, “That is how weak you are, Doom. You are too weak to trust anyone to see you as anything but the monster you really are, save yourself, and you never even question why.” The mask seemed to glow red-hot, just before the god suddenly pressed it to Victor’s face, making the mortal scream and the dream between them shatter, but Loki fell triumphant through the dark even as the agony of his physical body suddenly flooded through his awareness.

He knew the pain he inflicted on Doom was still being felt.

That, for the moment, was enough.

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“Doom is compromised!” Fenrir crowed. “Something finally got him. Frank?”

“Not me, but please, make—make it st-stop.” There was a sudden gasp of relief from the Beyonder after that. “Much better.”

The whole compound began to shake.

“Tony? Status?” the wolf inquired.

Static for a moment.

“Tony?!” Fenrir barked.

“Busy!”

There were a series of impressive explosions after that, one of which brought down a chunk of ceiling over the chamber Fenrir and JARVIS were working in.

Tony was holding onto the scepter, where he had landed in a heap of debris that had once been a machine capable of eating tanks for breakfast. “I need a magic boost, before he gets back down here,
or tugs on this any harder.

Fenrir appeared instantly at his side and grabbed his shoulder.

Loki came careening down from above just in time for the scepter to shatter completely, and every single light in the whole complex, aside from the light given off by Tony’s suit, to go out.

There was a rush of sound, a series of metallic crashes as multiple dead-machines tumbled over each other in the dark, a final screech of one metal body being dragged sharply across the floor, and then a fleshier thump.

The two surviving Iron Drones then lit up the scene.

Tony sat up, and took in the sight of Fenrir standing over his father, mouth bloody and horror in his expression, but it was clear he hadn’t drawn the blood. Loki was just covered in a lot of blood and he’d caught the trickster in his jaws, incapacitated him in a brief struggle, and dropped him.

“He’s unconscious, deeply,” the wolf assessed. “The cube burned through his shields unimpeded, once the scepter broke apart. It wasn’t for long... but I don’t know how much might have...” He snapped his jaw shut with a whine.

Tony teleported himself down. “Cube down?”

“It is, sir,” JARVIS said quietly. “Frank is awaiting us, outside the compound, away from any others. S.H.E.I.L.D. and the Avengers were not long in conflict with Doom’s forces before they all suddenly lost power. They have begun cleanup.”

The inventor banished his heavily-damaged armor into a pocket-dimension, watching Fenrir take his more human-like shape in order to carefully pick Loki up. He didn’t growl when Tony stepped closer and rested a hand on his arm, which was more trust than either of them had quite expected, though neither could manage to look at each other and acknowledge it.

Instead, Fenrir vanished them, and the drones, out of the dungeon.

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Frank looked tired, when he met them, but otherwise unscathed.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him slowly.

“It was... more effort than I had initially expected, to fully incapacitate the cube without any lasting and problematic effects to your world... or any of you. I’m sorry,” the Beyonder said. “May I... see him?” He nodded to Loki.

“Can you help?” Fenrir growled, wary.

“I might be able to. At the least, I can tell you what to expect, if the cube injured him severely. You will need to know,” Frank said softly.

Tony nodded to him, though the wolf-in-human-shape merely kept glaring at him, even as the Beyonder stepped closer and rested his fingertips against one of Loki’s temples.
Closing his eyes to better focus, Frank hummed, cool and thoughtful. “He is a remarkably resilient creature, is Loki, and very lucky. He sacrificed only what he could safely spare. He will need time, but... he will recove; though he will not be awake for most of it. He is very deep within his own mind, and coaxing him out before he completes repair to his own will, and unburies more of himself, would do more harm than good.”

Tony exhaled a shaky breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding.

“Thank you,” Fenrir gritted out.

“I must return to my home,” Frank said. “I... need to recover, and finish repairing or deactivating the cube, with the aid of some of our elders, based on their judgement of how irreparable its flaws may be.”

“What about Doom?” the inventor inquired.

“He...” The Beyonder hesitated, his expression a study in unease and mild horror. “The flaws of his reasoning which caused the cube to be so strong, and so doomed to be short-lived, were realized, and the cube attempted to purge them. In the process, it vaporized the late Dr. Victor von Doom. There is nothing left of him, now.”

Tony nodded. “Good.”

Frank winced. “Not at all.”

“Perhaps, but we are not inclined to find it to be a bad thing, all things considered,” Fenrir added dully.

“I cannot entirely fault you for that,” the Beyonder admitted. “I thank you, for this chance to repay my debt. I wish you all well.” He bowed, and then vanished.

Fenrir and Tony looked at Loki, still unconscious, and then at each other.

“Want to visit Helheim?” asked the wolf.

“Yeah. I’m not... fit company for most humans right now. JARVIS? Let Pepper know I’m going to be off the map for a few days, and that Loki’s in some kind of recuperative coma. Got that?”

“Yes, Tony. Do try to remain within my reach, as much as possible. It... will put many minds at ease,” JARVIS suggested.

“I’ll make sure his phone gets perfect reception,” Fenrir assured.

“Thank you,” the AI said, with sincerity, before they vanished.

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“You’re an idiot,” Hel said.

Loki groaned. Even in unconsciousness, he could not escape the chiding of his children. “I’m horrified to realize just how much I deserve you, at times, beloved daughter mine. Must you speak quite so loudly? I’m still very much in the early stages of recovery. You’re lucky I can support a
dream at all.”

“No, you’re lucky I have no qualms about asking Hretha for aid in hastening your recovery.” She snorted. “Perhaps I should’ve let you suffer, I know, you’d deserve it, for being such an idiot, but I would much rather throttle you in person without leaving any permanent damages because you’re an idiot, but you’re our idiot and we love you, even when you make us so angry we almost want to kill you.”

Eyes open, Loki found himself in a room lit by only one candle. He lay on a narrow bed, Hel seated beside him, glaring down at him with eyes a little blood-shot. She looked pained, and worried, and incandescently angry.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You could have been lost, father!”

“Which time?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You know which times, if you even dare try to deny it, I will tell Anthony Stark exactly how close you came to obliterating yourself.”

“You haven’t already told him?” Loki inquired, sincerely surprised.

“I told him what you did. I did not impress upon him just how slim was the chance you took, shielding his mind all that time, but especially toward the end, to keep him as far from the cube’s awareness as possible,” she scathed.

“When the scepter shattered, yes,” the trickster groaned. “I... did not have time to think. You must know that I did not. I could only-”

“I know,” she snapped tightly. “I know.” She wiped at her eyes stubbornly. “That doesn’t mean I didn’t see the echoes of what might have been, every night since. You came so close to shattering so much—so much that depends on you, and I, and all of us. Even Tony, much to my surprise; leave it to you to find someone even my gift for prophecy couldn’t see the destiny of coming until he was already vital to you. I just keep seeing all of the alternatives you so nearly missed and—” She sucked in a breath, and let him tug at her wrists, pulling her down until she leaned over the bed, her forehead resting on his chest. She shuddered. “That’s why I called Hretha. I want this behind us. I want you whole again, so I can stop seeing that. I never want to see any of that again. Do you know what happened, when we came after you, in those echoes? How could you do that to us? How could you make us see that? Watch you do that to yourself f-for us or not?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“I would rather you live,” he said softly. “You know that. No matter the cost, I would pay it. Even if some of that cost carried to you, that I would pay, for you to live.”

“You’re terrible and I love you, but please don’t ever make me see that again, even if it’s just echoes of unfulfilled prophecy, father. No more cosmic cubes, and if you so much as touch the Casket of Ancient Winters, even, I will flay you alive and put you back together just to flay you again, and keep you conscious the whole time,” she snarled, but the threat was empty, full of anger tempered by too much love and pain.

“I would let you.”

“Don’t,” she snapped.

“I will not change that.”
“I know. We all do.” She sniffed. “But there is a vast difference between knowing it, and seeing it, and it hurt me, father.”

Loki felt gutted. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

She sat up and held his face in both hands, eyes narrowed as she glared at him, shamelessly twisting the knife to enforce her point, just as he had taught her to do. “And that is why you need to avoid this. Never again, father.”

“I swear to you that I will put forth every effort I can both think of, and muster, to prevent you having to see that, but I will not promise not to do it, should the situation ever arise that I am without my own will, and your life, or your brother’s, is at direct risk of being ended by my hands.”

Hel made him watch her tears fall, not letting him shut his eyes or look away. “You hurt me,” she repeated. “Remember that.”

He winced sharply, but let her hold him in place, rather than try to pull away. “How can I soothe it?”

“Heal,” she said firmly. “Let me help you heal. Let Hretha help you.”

He could feel them, suddenly, at the edges of his mind. He hadn’t expected to regain that degree of awareness for another day, possibly two; although it occurred to him that his perception of time’s passage was most likely skewed, here. “How long have I been like this?”

His daughter’s lips thinned. “Three days.”

“Tony?”

“Also angry at you.”

Loki nodded. “But otherwise well?”

“You hurt him, too, father. When the scepter shattered, he saw everything it inflicted upon you, with and without Doom’s aid, in the whiplash of the connection it tried to forge with him, while in his grasp.”

The trickster looked suddenly stricken. “Oh.”

“Yes, he mentioned a couple of things.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Though it wasn’t easy to get him to talk about them. Your heart chose wisely, choosing him.”

Loki’s eyes widened a little. “Oh no. You’ve formed an alliance.”

Hel nodded.

A sputtering sound escaped Loki’s throat. “I’m doomed.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” his daughter assured, leaning forward again to kiss his brow. “He’s very angry with you, as I am. He wants to hurt you, as I do, because you deserve it for your foolishness, but more than that he wants to see you well, and whole, and love you well. I cannot help but be fond of such a man, who is capable of that, with all of his heart.”

The trickster smiled faintly, brokenly. “Only you, daughter mine, could deliver that message in such a way as to make me feel worse about my own actions, while also loving you all the more.”

“Oh, I’m sure Tony Stark could deliver similarly. That’s another reason I approve of him, you see.”
He groaned. “Of course it is.”

“You love it about him too.”

“I do,” he admitted reluctantly.

Hel smirked at him a little more fondly, and let her fingers trail down either side of his face. “Rest, then. We will strengthen you as you do, now you have let us in.”

“Thank you,” Loki murmured, and drifted back into the less-lonely dark.

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Tony Stark had never really had pets. Not mammals, in any case.

He was thus still a bit unsure how to feel about the current Fenrir situation, where he found himself on the floor leaning back against one enormous furry shoulder while the rest of the wolf was all sort of curled up around him. It was at once deeply comforting and a bit embarrassing, and had started the first night after they had brought Loki to Helheim and Tony hadn’t been able to sit still, let alone attempt sleep, until nearly dawn, while Hel and Hretha brewed a moderately inexplicable potion in a sacred cauldron downstairs. The wolf had gotten sick of his pacing, dragged him to the ground and pinioned Tony between his furry forelimbs until the mad inventor finally gave up feebly struggling, and swearing, and eventually lay still.

“What are you even doing?” the inventor had huffed, then.

“Making you be still. I’m going to keep you here until you get some sleep, in fact.”

“You’re kidding me.”

The wolf had grinned evilly at him.

Tony wasn’t sure what was worse: the fact he’d actually found the toothy and stubborn grin comforting (because it stupidly reminded him of that damned self-destructive idiot Loki, who had better recover soon, dammit), that he hadn’t struggled harder or even bothered using magic to get out of the stubborn grip, or that he’d actually fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep for several hours, after only about half an hour of the wolf keeping him pinned down. He woke up with Fenrir curled around him, rather than aggressively pinioning, and it had been... really sort of nice.

The second night, Tony had actually spent in a bed. The third, after Hel had managed to reach the trickster via dream-walking, and she and Hretha began intense healing spells, and painting on Loki’s skin with the potion they had brewed, Fenrir was the anxious and pacing one. It was a bit absurd, actually, for a canine the size of a horse to pace back and forth in front of a palatial hearth, whimpering occasionally.

So Tony had sat on the floor. “C’mere,” he said.

And almost instantly, Fenrir curled around him with a still-louder whine.

What the actual fuck is my life, the inventor mused, that this feels normal and natural and not even a little bit terrifying?
“What’s gotten into you?” he asked lightly, scratching roughly behind one of the wolf’s ears as two heavy forepaws tucked under his knees.

“Did Hel tell you what happened, when the cube burnt him? What she saw?” Fenrir asked in a quiet, slightly hesitant voice. He sounded younger than the inventor had ever really heard from him, and more anxious. Only Hel seemed capable of inspiring that feeling in her brother; he worried for her, and about her, and some of the only times the wolf had ever showed signs of feeling genuinely abashed had been when he was faced with the thought of her disapproval. (The other exception was when he had apologized to Dr. Young, but even that had been on a much smaller scale.) “She keeps seeing it, whenever she sleeps, or is otherwise open to visions.”

“She mentioned seeing a few other possible futures, or echoes of them,” Tony said. “What about it?”

“A few were echoes where he still succeeded in keeping the cube out of his head, but was more damaged for it. She saw the effects of that and how that might have changed our futures, but there were others, too. Others where he... failed.” He swallowed thickly. “She said we stopped him. She and I.”

Tony’s breath caught.

“She... is very angry with him.”

“I would be too,” the inventor admitted. “I assume, when you say that you two stopped him, you mean that you both went after him, and when he was aimed at one or both of you that he...”

“Self-destructed. Violently. Right in front of us.”

Tony shut his eyes and buried both hands in the wolf’s fur, at the base of his skull, scratching rhythmically to keep his hands busy as he tried not to remember the still-fresh additions to his own personal nightmare collection, of Loki burning up from the inside, or gone grey and bloody with poisonous curses. For him. “I know the feeling, a bit. Or close to it,” he said, his voice a bit rough.

Fenrir nuzzled at his stomach. “We know. Hel... saw what you saw. I heard your voice as you saw it and I know how much pain it caused you.”

Eyes squeezing a little tighter shut, the inventor nodded, swallowing tightly.

“You have to know that having caused you pain will wound him, too.”

“I know. He takes more damn pain than he should.”

“We try to tell him that he doesn’t need to, but I think he isn’t certain he believes that he deserves us, unless he is willing to go to such lengths. He’s wrong, but we’ve never been able to persuade him of that,” the wolf murmured.

Tony exhaled, low and shaking. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

“You are the same with yours, are you not?” Fenrir asked.

“I know. I suddenly get why Pepper left. She’s not... she doesn’t understand that about me. Not in a way she considers it forgivable, exactly, that I can’t be ashamed of it, nor do I want to even try to be,” the inventor admitted, very quietly, each syllable slow and uncomfortable.

“Nor can he. Neither of you would ever make martyrs of yourselves for abstract causes like the idyll of justice alone, but when you two do love, you love like monsters, and fight for your loved ones in
ways no more honorable people could. I would do the same for my sister, though she would fight as hard as my father with everything she had not to let me do so to any extent that might cause her to lose me,” the wolf assured. “When we hurt those we love, those are the only times we have it within us to be even remotely capable of feeling ashamed of our more monstrous traits.”

Tony smiled a bit ruefully at how almost painfully accurate that whole assessment was. “Is this you deciding you like me?”

The wolf huffed. “I decided I liked you long before that. This is me admitting you’re family and I’m fine with it. Oh, and Hel is too.”

The inventor’s eyes snapped open very wide then, staring.

Fenrir stared back, unimpressed. “Deal with it.”

“I’m not sure how to do that. My emotions are doing some uncomfortable warm and fuzzy things that I’m deeply disturbed by.”

Chuckling at him, the wolf nuzzled at his stomach again with one side of his muzzle. “Aww, you love us too?”

Tony made a choking sound.

“Yeah, you do.”

“How did this happen?”

“Well, I think it started with you falling prey to my father’s devilish sexual charms.”

“Please never say that again.”

Fenrir snorted. “Calm down, Stark. I’m not going to start calling you ‘dad’.”

Tony grimaced. “Oh thank physics. I dunno if I could physically handle that.”

“You’d make a better parent than you think.”

“What?!” the inventor squeaked.

“Right. Wow. Okay. Much less disturbing territory.”

“I promise you that I have no interest in discussing with you your future procreative plans, or lack thereof,” the wolf swore gravely. “I really don’t want to know, but assume that it’s ‘lack thereof’ and otherwise am determined not to further think about it, from this moment forward.”

“Thank you so, so much for that. I deeply appreciate it. Very much. I can hardly find the words to express the dull depth of my gratitude.”

“I just mean that you don’t have to be made at all anxious by the idea of Hel and I being your kin anymore than Loki might be by the idea of JARVIS being fond enough of him to prioritize him on par with yourself and Pepper Potts.”

“Point taken, I suppose,” Tony mused, sounding thoughtful.
“I think you’ll do right by us. You already clearly understand our rather bizarre family better than most people in Asgard who have known all of us for years, and it took you very little time to adjust,” Fenrir murmured. “And I like you. You do well by Loki: better than anyone he’s cared for in years aside from us.”

“Thank you,” the inventor said, sincerely moved, relaxing still a bit more bonelessly as the wolf’s breathing became slower and more even, lulling him to sleep not long after Fenrir finally caught a bit of it himself.

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Tony was not prepared for Hel in all of her glory, power still rolling off her in ethereal waves and making her even more intimidating and imposing, waking him up with a very sharp, “You asked about my father’s preferred seals and sigils, and alluded to possibly wearing one, at one point, Mr. Stark.”

Both the inventor and Fenrir startled awake, but the wolf was at least well-attuned enough to his sister’s presence to only tense, rather than flail or respond either defensively or offensively to the sudden awakening.

Tony flailed a bit, but once he locked eyes with the queen of Helheim, he went very still and suddenly serious, as her words finally sunk in. “Yeah. He uh, had some ideas, and I was open to all of them, to the point that yes, I do really want that.”

Hel nodded once, sharply, and pulled a sheet of paper from a previously-unseen pocket about her person, along with a round, flat piece of obsidian engraved with some excruciatingly complex sigils around the outer edge. She proffered both to him.

He took them slowly. “Is this...”

“I took the liberty of nicking it from his mind when the opportunity presented itself, and the way he had it tucked away suggests he still categorizes it as a vain hope he has trouble admitting how much he wants, whereas you’re clearly all for it and know what you’re getting into. The seal he had in mind, along with key sigils, is on that parchment. The necessary foundation spells he had considered, I’ve stored information for in the stone. I’m sure you can work out how to access it. Fenrir, no helping. It will cause father’s head to explode if Tony does this purely of his own volition and out of his own efforts, and furthermore his doing it in that fashion will strengthen the roots of the spell,” she explained, then turned on her heel and stalked back up the stairs, still by all appearances livid.

“She seriously looks like she’s willing to level whole worlds just to let off steam,” Tony said softly.

“She’s like that when she’s angry and scared. When she’s just angry, there’s a bit more delighted bloodlust to lighten things up a bit,” Fenrir mused. “What’s this seal-sigil-spell business?”

“I want a tattoo, you see.”

“... Pardon?”

“You’ll see. Let me up? I’ve got homework, apparently.”

The wolf huffed but uncurled enough to let the inventor get back on his feet.
It took Tony two full days to perfect the spell-work necessary. Only two more components were needed: Loki’s name in his own writing, and a few drops of the trickster’s blood. With that, the seal would be completed.

It all fit within a circle the exact diameter that his arc-reactor used to be, when he’d still worn it bolted into his chest. The main seal itself was mostly-triangular, with slightly-concave sides, each of which had another circle nestled against the middle of each side, fitted perfectly between the exterior of the main circle, and the triangular centerpiece. The triangle happening to be positioned similarly to the way the arc-reactor’s face had been, Tony suspected to be quite intentional. The triangle itself was made up of thick lines with very little space between them: interlocking sigils and shapes that Tony had come to understand every line of with care. The three circles each bore a different complex sigil of Loki’s own design, and they hummed strangely, waiting for Loki’s blood to stabilize them; they were wilder magic than most: little ways Loki had trapped a sound into a symbol, with those sounds being little pieces of the very oldest words he knew. The spaces in between the main shapes, and an outer ring about the whole design, bore symbols in different languages, each one older than Asgard, which wove spells of binding and trust.

It was designed to allow Tony access to Loki’s magic, and allow them both awareness of where the other was in spite of myriad forms of potential interference, as much as possible—a slightly stronger, modified version of some of the spell-work Loki had already places into the mark on his hip, but now allowing it to flow both-ways, unless will or consent were broken, in the ways Tony had learned from the information Hel provided, as well as seeing Loki’s self-defeating trap-spells triggered up-close. In that case, the one of them compromised and not-himself would be unable to affect the flow any longer, allowing the other to incapacitate them by means of draining their magic entirely, if it proved necessary—or only draining it as far as necessary to, perhaps, still allow Loki to maintain certain mental shields against an invading psychic force, as Tony had been unable to in the recent battle with Doom.

It would also affect both of them by silently communicating the impression of mutual ownership, to others. When eyes seeking an available potential lover looked their way, they would subconsciously register Tony Stark and Loki each as “taken” whether they were in one another’s company or not. The effect could be “muted” but not for very long, and only with conscious effort, should they require the ability to flirt for the sake of some ruse or another.

Tony liked the idea more than he cared to admit; being owned, and allowed to own. The idea of having fewer wannabe bed-mates flirting with him at events and parties would also be an incredible relief; it had only gotten more aggressive, anytime he went to such an event without Loki, in a way the former playboy found a little insulting, mostly because when he’d been with Pepper it hadn’t been nearly so bad, and so intensely certain of success.

So. Tony liked everything about the tattoo, except the initial searing pain involved in getting the ink in place, and to some extent the blood and sweat and acrid-burning herbs it had required (a gift from Hrethna, when he had trouble getting Extremis to stop dissolving the inks he used) to get the ink to stick around all sort of permanently.

His obsession with the project had also helped him get out of the nervous, restless and wrecked state he had been in and out of since getting Loki back, and having to wait and do nothing much to help things along while the trickster recuperated.
Now he was sitting beside Loki’s bed, watching him sleep.

Hel had been uncertain when he would fully wake, when Tony asked, but said it should be sometime today.

So he had resolved to wait, and listen to the god of lies’ steady, pain-free breathing for the first time in far too long, and try to adjust to the feeling of restless, incomplete magic embedded in his skin, under his shirt.

After a couple of hours, he broke the near-silence. “You drive me crazy, you know,” the inventor said quietly. “I don’t let anyone sacrifice themselves for me anymore. You know I don’t. I should be mad at you. I should be livid and want to knock some sense through your think skull, but more than that I’d really just like to hear your voice, right now.”

The trickster stirred a little, brow furrowing. “Hel said you were angry with me.”

Tony’s head snapped up and he stared as Loki’s eyelids lifted a bare fraction, showing a mere sliver of familiar green irises. “Oh, I am,” he assured in flat tones.

“I’m aware.”

“Are you?” Tony asked crisply.

“I’ve been trying to keep recent events out of your nightmares ever since I regained the capacity to dream-walk, after Hel’s initial stroll into my mind a few days ago, with fairly limited success, so yes I’m aware,” Loki said, softly apologetic in a way he could never properly sound when he was less sleep-fogged.

The inventor shifted his chair closer and rested folded arms on the edge of the bed. “You scared me. Badly.”

“I scared myself,” the trickster said.

Tony nodded. “I could tell. That was even worse, for me. ‘Scared’ isn’t my preferred look on you, ever.”

Loki smiled a bit faintly. “You smell like blood and Hretha’s herb gardens.”

“Yeah. You smell like you haven’t cleaned your teeth in almost a week.”

The trickster snorted. “You could fix that. You know my magic is still weak.”

A quick spell from Tony did indeed fix the case of the epic morning-breath.

“Thank you. That was rather awf-” He cut off when the inventor kissed him, soft and unhurried, but just a little urgent. One mutual, slow sweep of their tongues against one another before they slowly parted.

“You almost broke my heart,” Tony said, his voice a bit cracked. “You risked an awful lot, and you got out based on a lucky miss. If I’d set off the scepter just a few seconds earlier, then I could’ve lost you entirely, and I’d’ve known it was my fault.”

“It wouldn’t have been.”

“You did it for me, how is that not mine?” the inventor snapped.
Loki gripped the back of his neck tentatively. “It’s not your fault. It’s just yours. As I am. And my faults are my own, as my selfishness is my own, and I would accept from you anything, if I had to.”

“Don’t.” Tony’s eyes squeezed shut. “I saw that, too.”

“It wasn’t you-”

“You thought it was. I saw the cave. I saw you just-” He stopped, words failing.

“Tony...”

“I understood it, though. I did. You were so right, when you told Doom about it. That would kill me. Even if I was just trapped in my own head watching, that would hurt me more than anything, for you to do that, for you to give up like that, it would be the worst-” He cut off when Loki pulled him into an embrace abruptly, and buried his head in the god’s shoulder, letting himself be pulled up and made to sprawl over Loki on the bed. His hands clutched at the sheets hard enough his arms shook.

“I’m sorry you saw that. I would not have subjected you to it, for anything less than what I had thought was being done to me.”

“By me,” Tony said. “Why would you think that?”

“I was disoriented, coming out of sensory deprivation. Most of myself was kept... submerged under safer parts of my own mental architecture. Hidden away as safe as could be managed. I was dragged from feeling drowned in a lack of sensation, to the sensory overload of...”

“Being drowned.” It was just a whisper.

“Yes.” Loki swallowed tightly. “I heard your voice shouting commands. I couldn’t make out the words, but after hearing you, I was put back under the water. I couldn’t think clearly, or hear or see clearly. I could hear no one else giving commands and... I couldn’t take that. The thought of it alone broke me, and gave me the ability to stop fighting. My own nature would not have allowed me otherwise.”

“It didn’t occur to you that I was trying to make them stop?”

“It was clear enough to me that I was in a nightmare. I was incapable of such optimism. I am... used to assuming that the worst possibility is most likely the closest to reality. Such a philosophy has too often been the only thing that has saved my skin, on many and myriad occasions in my long life.”

“I’d like to change that with you and me, just with you and me,” Tony said. “You should expect me to do right by you. I want to. And I will, best I fucking can.”

Loki’s grip around his shoulders tightened. “Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry. I will try.”

The inventor raised his head to meet the trickster’s gaze, surprised. “That easy?”

“You are one of the best things to ever happen to me in my life. It would be unfair to hold you to the standards of the past, or anyone less extraordinary.”

“Silver-tongue.”

“A little,” the trickster conceded. “I will try. It may... take me some time to adjust.”

“We have time. As long as you keep away from objects of reality-warping degrees of power, from here on out.”
“I have no desire for a repeat of this experience, let me assure you,” Loki sighed.

Tony smirked a little. “Good.”

“Why is the skin on your chest humming like you have a new reactor?” the trickster asked abruptly, sounding somewhere between disbelieving and worried.

“It’s not a reactor.”

“What is it?”

“Well, you notice it’s right where the reactor used to be.”

Loki’s eyes widened still further. His lips parted slightly as his mouth fell slightly open and just stared up into his lover’s face. “Tony Stark...”

“That is, in fact, my name.”

“How did you-”

“Hel nicked your design while you were sleeping.”

“How did she even know to look for it?”

“Well, I mentioned it as something I was seriously interested in, when she asked a bit about the spells woven into the tattoo on your hip. She was, hm, initially concerned by perceived inequality of devotion and might’ve threatened to gut me.”

Loki continued staring.

“That wasn’t what actually persuaded me to actually do it; I wanted to anyway, and she could tell, which was probably the only thing that saved my skin. It still needs a couple of finishing touches from you, of course. I can lend you enough power for a little thing like that.” Tony’s smirk widened slowly as he watched the trickster’s throat working around a dry swallow. “Cat got your tongue?”

“No, it’s simply forming a plan of attack, of a nonverbal sort, which I may want to employ against your person very, very soon,” Loki countered, almost reflexively, then hesitated. “You’re certain that—you...” He paused, then trailed off when Tony sat up and impatiently ripped open the front of his button-down shirt.

“Look. I put every line there myself, and I know what every bit of it means, Loki. I’m many things, but ‘uncertain’ isn’t one of them right now, right here, and I would really like you to help me finish this,” he said, his voice low and steady, and he placed one of Loki’s hands over the buzzing, slightly overheated patch of skin, tattoo-marked, so the center of the design was right under the center of the god’s palm. “If you’re willing.”

“I do not know how I could possibly deserve you,” Loki breathed.

“That’s fine. I’ve got plenty of time to explain, and persuade you, and I’m really pretty stubborn,” Tony assured. “Please, Loki.”

Sucking in a breath, the trickster nodded. “You will need to cut my palm.”

Tony reached out with a sharp flicker of magic, making them both wince only a little, as it sliced open the god’s palm without either of them moving, though the both felt it like a fleeting whisper of pressure from the inventor’s skin to Loki’s, followed by a hum of offered power that the trickster
pulled a little from, just enough for the spell needed to put his name into the tattoo.

Leaning close until their lips brushed, Loki whispered a few soft words that made the air all around them quiver and whirl, just for a few seconds, as they both felt a brief searing burn between them: Tony’s flesh, Loki’s magic.

As it faded, they stared at each other.

“Mine,” Loki said.

“I’d fucking better be,” Tony responded, and kissed him hard, losing control of the desperation and fear and worry he’d been trying to contain for days and pressing close as he could get, hungry and indelicate and eager.

Which was about when Fenrir burst in.

The lovers were both so alarmed by the sudden entrance that their teeth clicked together uncomfortably shortly before they could pull apart, swearing.

“Look, I tried to give you both time to get emotional and everything, but pardon me for not prioritizing your ‘so-glad-we’re-alive-sex’ right now, when I was worried as fuck, father, dammit, I should maul you,” Fenrir growled, and aggressively shoved his head under Loki’s arm and ribcage, causing Tony to roll off to the side, closer to the wall, though it was a struggle to fit, in the narrow bed.

Loki allowed the aggressive affection from his son with a put-upon sigh, but embraced him shortly after, allowing for nuzzling and snuffling.

“That’s almost sickeningly adorable,” Tony commented.

“They generally are. Ridiculous creatures, both of you,” Hel said from the doorway. “I don’t blame him for interrupting, though. All things considered.”

Tony had just enough decency to look a bit sheepish. “Got carried away.”

She giggled at him wickedly, especially as the inventor tried to sink down out of view behind Loki, just to make her laugh a little harder.

The trickster shot her a look.

“We already had a few emotionally charged talks lately. I’m letting them have a few turns, given my unfair advantages,” Hel told him lightly, “but it is good to see you well, out of dreams.”

“I thank you, and will have to thank Hretha as well. I would never have recuperated so well, and so quickly, without you both,” Loki murmured.

“Instead of thanks, you can make sure I never have to do that again,” his daughter chided, smiling coolly. “That will do nicely.”

“I shall try my best,” Loki assured.

“You’d better,” Fenrir insisted loudly, only a bit muffled. “Otherwise I will work out a deal with JARVIS to make your sex life extremely awkward for a very long time.”

“Hey, don’t punish me too for this,” Tony growled.
“Should I not? Keep better track of your property, Stark,” Fenrir riposted.

Hel gave an amused, not-quite-ladylike snort at the shocked face the inventor made in response to that, his mouth hanging open.

“I suppose he might have a point,” Loki mused, eyes bright with mirth.

Tony tried not to blush in response to that. He really did. He failed a bit, making Loki smile wide and bright and lean back to kiss the side of his neck.

Fenrir jerked back with an offended snort, at what he detected in the air, at that. “I sense that my interruption has limited capabilities. Hel, I recommend a strategic retreat.”

“Do please,” Tony deadpanned. “I have some reclamation to do. Primarily with my tongue, but also with—”

“And I’m leaving!” the wolf declared, darting out of the room in a blur, followed out by Hel, who was still laughing at all of them.

Loki was shooting him an openly awed sort of look Tony had been utterly unprepared for. It was almost cracked open, and ridiculously happy and full of raw devotion, and the inventor sort of got lost staring back at him for several seconds. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

The trickster opened his mouth, then shut it again, clearing his throat. “It has... been a very long time since they accepted anyone else into our family, aside from Hretha, and I have never seen them...” He covered his mouth with one hand, clearly moved beyond the point of words to express. He was clearly a bit overwhelmed.

Tony leaned against his shoulder, smiling gently. “I love them too, I think. They love you so well, and they’re so much like you, but also completely not. They’re amazing, and they... understand us, and how we work. How we fit. And they made it kind of clear they like it. They want me to stick around, and I want to stick around, and we get on. You’re about to cry aren’t you?”

Eyes shining a bit wetly, Loki elbowed him. “You complete—”

“-perfectly insane wonderful lover you want to ravish at every opportunity?”

“Yes, but you’re also an ass.”

“We’re a matched set, then, in both cases.”

The trickster pushed him down flat on his back and straddled his hips, leaning down over him slowly, his forearms braced on either side of Tony’s head. “You are perfection to me, Tony Stark. You are maddening and crass and reckless and brilliant, and I love you with all that I am.”

The inventor gulped quietly. “Wow.”

Loki’s eyebrows slowly raised.

“We’re still totally a matched set. I love you. You’re terrible. I love you terribly and wonderfully and every other way I possibly can,” Tony hissed back, and pulled him down into a needy kiss, which the trickster melted into, pressing closer. His magic was still barely present, so he was relieved to have their clothes banished swiftly by Tony’s instead. Closeness, Loki needed. He needed it very much, needed to know all the injuries he’d inflicted against his lover were gone, that every inch of his skin was still there, still eager for his touch, that Tony was still unflinchingly open in his desire for
him, that they could not be ruined by outside forces, no matter how infinitely powerful.

It was a rush of heat and longing and reassurance, and yet unhurried as Tony’s hands also wandered him in turn, inspecting every joint and every line of muscle, every sensitive spot, and every old scar. It took them a long time, slowly kissing and taking in the feel of each other, every beloved inch.

Only then did they begin to rock together, hands wrapped around both of their cocks, stroking slick and hot as they developed a rhythm perfectly slow and hard, as they tightened their hold and both strained against each other, still so disinclined to rush, watching each other between long kisses, whenever they remembered the importance of breathing properly, only to forget again a few gasps later, when they crashed together again.

Tony fell over the edge first, but only barely, the increasingly disjointed rolls of his hips and the desperate way Loki’s name tore from him as he came inspiration enough to drag the trickster down with him, letting them ride it out together, as they breathed hard and shivered a little before the afterglow fully kicked in.

Loki trailed kisses down his lover’s throat and hid his face under the crook of Tony’s jaw as the inventor cleaned them up with a quick spell. He made a sound at the sudden sensation of slick fingers unexpectedly pushing into him, and arched back into the sensation instinctively, shuddering a little at the feel of it, still-sensitive as he was. “T-Tony,” he rasped, only a little brokenly.

“I need to drown in you, I need to feel you own me,” the inventor murmured.

A possessive shudder rolled down Loki’s spine and he emitted a sound of slightly pained pleasure as he felt himself growing hard again, and Tony’s fingers pressed in deeper, only two, and rubbed hard against his prostate, making him moan.

“Fuck, Loki, you’re so-” He hissed, feeling Loki’s hand wrap around his cock again, stroking him back to full hardness so fast it ached.

“You really do need this,” the trickster mused. He then reached back and pushed the inventor’s hand away.

“I can keep-”

“Shh, love, I need to feel it. I need to use you against myself, a little, let me savor it,” the god hissed in his ear, arching his hips up and guiding Tony’s cock into him, slow at first to press the head in, then sudden and hard and all at once for the rest, making them both cry out.

“F-fuck,” Tony choked out, not fully prepared for how much Loki’s words and actions both made his head spin and his blood boil. “You are the best, there is no way you could be more perfect, I’m convinced, oh fffuck!” he cried, as Loki began to ride him, hard and with his entire body in sinuous undulations that dragged up and down almost painfully slow, but with bruising force. The trickster didn’t restrain his lover at all, hissing in delight but never slowing his pace as the inventor’s hands ran over him, up into his hair, down to scratch across a nipple just sharp enough to make him almost scream on a particularly good down-stroke.

When Loki lowered his head and claimed Tony’s mouth, the inventor really did begin to feel gloriously drowned, with Loki braced over him, every inch of him given over to taking what he needed from his dear mad inventor, and arching into his touch, reveling in it, all while conquering his mouth and stealing his breath. Wrapping a hand around Loki’s cock, Tony discovered, caused the trickster to speed up his pace, and begin to make the most incredible sounds every time Tony met one of his down-strokes with a hard upward roll of his hips, especially as they built a rhythm that
achieved that winning angle and depth more and more, even as they became a little clumsier and much faster, more desperate for release.

“Tony,” Loki moaned. “Fuck me through it, please, please please-” He cut off with an inarticulate sound, spilling over the inventor’s hand and crying out when Tony then seized his hips and kept them moving at just the same pace.

“Keep up, Loki, come on,” he hissed, and the god tried, despite his limbs shaking and his whole body flush with overstimulation. He panted and rolled his hips down hard with little sounds of pain, even as his cock began leaking pre-come again, still hard.

The sight alone was too much, and Tony came so hard he saw stars, but Loki rode him mercilessly, not allowing him respite even when he tried to still the god’s hips, dragging him over pins and needles back to full arousal. “F-fuck, you’re incredible,” Tony rasped, clawing at the sheets as Loki regained his strength and went right back to riding him so hard the bed creaked ominously and Tony’s eyes rolled back in his head.

It took all of the inventor’s remaining concentration, of which there remained very little, to murmur a spell he’d made a point of memorizing the last time Loki had used it on him, as he stroked an unassuming patch of skin on one of Loki’s arms, just within reach of his mouth. Tony then began rocking his hips up harder into the trickster, matching his rhythm and making him struggle to maintain it, and only then did Tony turn his head and suck hard on that patch of skin.

Loki emitted a strangled scream, feeling that suction both on his arm, and right over the head of his cock, shocking his system utterly and causing him to come apart all at once, his entire body trembling and almost collapsing then and there. He was thus incredibly pliant when Tony rolled them over and pinned him to the bed, but he hissed in dismay at the feel of Tony’s mouth wrapping around his spent cock.

“St-st-stop, I can’t I can’t, hurts, Tony—Ahh!” His hips rocked up into the sudden heat increase (not-quite-painful) that had to be from a brief flare of Extremis, and almost sobbed at how abruptly, painfully hard it made him, pushing his recuperative powers to their limit. “T-tony, please, please.”

“My turn, if you don’t mind.”

Loki lifted his head to see Tony pulling four very-slick fingers out from behind himself, and felt a shudder run through him. “Y-yes,” he managed to pant, only to writhe at the overwhelming feel of Tony’s body sinking down over him, engulfing him, almost pulling another scream from him.

“You okay?” the inventor asked.

Nodding fervently, Loki seized his lover’s hips and rolled them down while rocking his own up, making them both very noisy in chorus. Tony rode him fast and desperate, crying out when the god forced him to slow slightly, allowing Loki in deeper, making them rougher for the struggle of it. Then Loki curled a hand around him, and Tony pushed him away. “N-no, just like this, just from this, you feel so—dammit, Loki, how do you feel so—just—” He ground down hard then, rolling his hips slow and taking the trickster deep as he could, gasping his name as he came untouched between them, and squeezing hard so the image and the tightness both made Loki come not long after, with a few more rough thrusts.

They fell into each other after that, hardly remembering to clean up and pull the sheet up over themselves before pressing close as sleep took them.
They spent most of the next day in Helheim. Loki had a very long talk with Hretha, and introduced her to Tony, whom she then promptly pulled aside for another talk. It seemed to be her specialty.

“You love my kinsman well,” she said, without preface.

He nodded. He knew he did.

“You are more vastly important than you yet know, and you will perpetually surprise people throughout the known universe, I suspect,” she mused. “I myself am shocked by all you have accomplished, and how much you have helped Loki heal multiple wounds in his heart and mind, many of which he was so used to the presence of that he forgot they were wounds at all.”

Tony swallowed tightly. “He’s changed me too.”

She nodded to him. “You are monsters and liars well suited to one another.”

The inventor smiled warmly at that. “Yeah. We are.”

“Heroes are ill-suited to leadership, in the long term,” she said, “but there are exceptions, and I believe you to be one of them. Should I have any advice to pass on, for the sake of Midgard, or should I be inclined to consult any powers residing there, I will expect to be able to bring my concerns first to you.”

Tony swallowed, his eyes widening a little. “Oh. Wow. You’re...”

The first of the Three nodded to him with a slightly mischievous smirk. It was all the more clear to him that she was definitely related to Loki, in that moment, than any previous point before then. “Do I need to pick a couple of seconds?”

“You have candidates in mind?”

The inventor considered. “Charles Xavier would be our Voice. We don’t have any single advisor, but... he’s the ideal Voice.”

Hretha nodded, considering. “I have observed him, of recent, paying more attention to Midgard as I have been inclined to do, knowing the place to now be capable of producing such mad creatures as your improbable self. He is a good choice, to act as foil to you, and balance any future discussions on dealings between the realms.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah... he’s the only psychic I’ve ever trusted even a little.”

She looked amused, at that. “I see. He must be quite pure of heart.”

“Disconcertingly so, but he’s ruthlessly practical, when he absolutely has to be.”

“Good.”

“Thank you,” Tony said suddenly.

“For?" she asked, already sure it wasn’t for the rank she had unexpectedly assured him he had, in the eyes of the rest of the realms.
“For, uhm…” He struggled for words. “It’s not just me that’s helped him. It’s you. Just, knowing you exist, and you’re his kin, and that his blood has better history than just Laufey and Laufey’s father, but that your world and your people, and you yourself, are honorable and wiser than Odin, in your ways, but peaceful and isolationist enough not to go advertising it like Asgard does... He was so much more comfortable in his own skin, after he learned that. Even before he and I were really on comfortable terms as allies, and still getting adjusted to each other. He was more grounded, not having only mysteries and a couple of really terrible failed kings to anchor his story, so far as where he really came from, and the history that goes with that.”

Hretha smiled a very soft, sincere smile. “I am glad to hear it. I had hoped…” She looked toward the other room, where Loki was audibly wrestling with his son while Hel mocked them from a safely-out-of-the-way perch. “I knew very little of him, before. Shamefully so. His actions have brought us back into a more active role, beyond our own realm, now that we are less stranded here, with the return of the Casket, and the thaw of Jotunnheim bringing so much lost under the ice back to life, and our kin there are once more willing to hear us, and welcome us.” She looked at Tony sharply then. “It was my hope to provide him a past he need not be ashamed of, but that did not ensure that his future would be much brighter. That, you have given him.” She squeezed his shoulder briefly. “You are welcome in the Nameless City, as much as any of my kin, Tony Stark. We owe you more than you may ever know.” She led him back out, then, and bid the others farewell too.

“What did she say?” Loki inquired.

“I... think she just told me that I’m the Wanderer of Midgard, so far as the rest of the realms see it, but don’t tell anyone back home or we’ll probably have a bloody revolution on our hands from all corners of the globe within a few hours,” Tony said. “So I’d stick to calling that mostly-unofficial.”

The trickster snorted, clearly amused. “You’re surprised?”

“A little, yes? I’m used to sort of surreptitiously claiming responsibilities to later base my authority on, not really... whatever this is?”

Loki settled an arm across his shoulders. “It’s basically what you’ve already been doing, between the Avengers, and dealing with international politics with myself, and being Iron Man, really.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s... painfully true, actually. I also volunteered Professor Xavier to be Voice.”

A low chuckle escaped the trickster, at that. “When do you plan to tell him?”

“At the last possible minute. He’s never surprised by me enough.”

Loki sniggered. “Too true. It’s commonly the case with psychics.”

“She also thanked me for making you less insufferable.”

“Lie.”

“Well, I may be paraphrasing heavily.”

“Tony...”

“Yeah?”

“I would like you to take me home with you,” he said, low and warm. After a long pause, he then added, “Except that Fenrir will be providing us transport, given that I am still in no state for it.”
Tony snorted. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I woefully disagree.”

“Lie.”

The trickster just grinned.

“Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s go home.”

“Yes. Let’s.”

~ ~

Fenrir delivered them back to Avengers tower, where they were immediately (and bodily) dragged into a debriefing by Director Fury, Agent Hill, Natasha, and Steve. They spent the next two hours explaining things that S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers had already gotten mostly worked out, but with some alarming still-unknown-quantities still causing them considerable headaches.

Once S.H.I.E.L.D. finished, but kept fishing for an extra fifteen minutes, Pepper Potts suddenly appeared and chased them out by sheer force of authoritative scolding and unflinching glares. She then hugged Tony very tightly, and Loki only a little less tightly, and stood to one side of them with a huff.

“God, you’re both insufferable and reckless and could’ve given me a heart attack, but I’m so glad you’re both okay and I don’t have to deal with either of you being insufferable with grief or pining, and Tony, Rhodey says he will punch you in the face if you vanish off-world again after shit that serious with no way for him to call you without earning him the absolute worst roaming charges we’ve both ever seen. I had to get him a corporate line, I’ll have you know.”

“He did tell me, at great length, and so did you,” Tony assured her calmly, trying to cool her down. “I am sorry about that.”

“I’m still a bit surprised that you just hugged me,” Loki said quietly.

Pepper spun on the trickster then. “Are you serious? After how much you’ve sort of matured him somehow? He actually attends serious meetings more, and pays better attention to international politics before blasting off into other countries chasing after Hydra or the Hand or whoever, and has lists of contacts to arrange legal facilitation of those sort of things now! He drinks less, when you’re around, and even I couldn’t get that to happen quite so consistently, and he’s happy! You make one of the most important people in my life more genuinely happy than I have ever seen him, and he’s healthy, and less likely to get killed most of the time thanks to you, Loki. Yes, for ever-loving fuck’s sake, I will hug you when you come back from recuperating after your latest near-death experience, because I really like you, and have accepted that you being a permanent fixture in Tony’s life, and by extension mine, is one of the best things to happen to our circle of friends in years!”

Loki’s mouth was hanging open through most of that speech. Tony looked a bit surprised, but was mostly busy grinning in a stupidly happy manner.
Then Pepper was standing in front of him, still panting and coming down from anger she hadn’t been able to let out for days, waiting for their return, and swallowed tightly. “I guess I’m saying we’re friends. I thought.”

The trickster stepped forward and hugged her tightly. “Thank you,” he said quietly, a bit muffled by the lightly-padded shoulder of her blazer.

“Don’t be stupid and almost die again. I don’t like it,” she responded.

Pulling away with a soft laugh, Loki nodded. “I will certainly try.”

“Try harder,” she insisted, but squeezed his shoulders affectionately before turning on her heel to face the rest of the Avengers, who were awkwardly staring, still uncertain how to react to the emotional scene before them as it had unfolded. “All of you, either get the hugs S.H.I.E.L.D. presence made it too awkward to get earlier, or fuck off. They’ve had a long week, our boys, and you all fuckin’ know it.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve and Bruce said in unison, reflexively.

Natasha appeared beside Loki before Thor could make it across the room, on eerily silent feet, while the rest of the Avengers made their way over to Tony or Pepper. “Hey,” she said, looking him over shrewdly.

“Hey yourself,” he returned.

She smirked at him. “Glad you made it back mostly intact.”

“Me too. Thank you.”

The assassin elbowed him lightly, and made her way over to Tony.

Loki was a bit surprised to find Clint standing on his other side as he turned to observe her passing. “Hello.”

The archer shot him an uneasy look. “I’m. Mostly glad you’re not dead.”

“Such progress,” the trickster mused airily.

“Shaddup. It’s not all for his sake, I mean.” He jerked his head in Tony’s direction. “You’re a decent ally, and I frankly envy your artistry as a prankster, you complete and utter asshole.”

Loki smiled a bit, and nodded to him at that. “Thank you, Clint.”

“You’re welcome.” He then grinned and very pointedly side-stepped out of range before Thor appeared and enveloped his brother in a suffocating embrace.

The trickster swore at length with what little breath remained in his lungs, before the larger blond god finally let up pressure enough for him to breathe. “My ribcage does not benefit from being forcefully compressed, you oaf,” he managed to rasp.

Thor let him go, then, and grabbed him by the front of the casual dress-shirt he wore. “You frightened us all half to death, Loki, once it was clear to Hlíн and myself what you had done, with Gamora’s aid in working that all out.”

Loki cringed. “Yes... well...”
“You are a reckless fool.”

“You only with those I love more than myself, and I recall you benefitting from it more than a dozen times in our youth,” the trickster shot back, a bit more bitterly than he had quite intended.

“And I was angry at you on each occasion, then, too, save those you hid from me and I was left to discover later, which made me doubly angry, but unable to say a word, for too much time had passed,” Thor growled.

Loki’s eyebrows raised. “Yes. Well.” He cleared his throat. “I never claimed to be without a few pet flaws of my own, but I cannot regret this one. Not given what I am willing to give, to preserve those I love.”

Thor exhaled a heavy, resigned breath. “I only wish you would value yourself a little more, brother.”

“Not over them,” the trickster said. “I cannot change that part of my nature. It is how I love.”

“And I’d do the same or worse in return, if I had to,” Tony added.

Both gods turned to stare at him for a moment: Thor with unease, Loki with something akin to disbelief and awe.

“Stark...” the thunderer said, seemingly unable to come up with the appropriate words for the conflict in his mind.

“You’re really certain of that,” the god of lies murmured, sounding faint.

“I am, yeah,” Tony said. “That was the other sort of terrifying and harrowing part of the whole experience, but I know now, that yeah, I would.”

“It goes without saying that you will never be allowed within a hundred yards of the tesseract ever again, on pain of Tony’s choosing,” Thor added flatly, desperate to alleviate the tension between them.

“I am more than willing to accept that,” his brother agreed.

“Noted. I won’t pick a fun one, sweetheart.”

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“Noted. I won’t pick a fun one, sweetheart.”

“I would hope not, for that particular trespass,” Loki shot back.

“I’m glad we have an understanding, then,” Thor said, a bit reluctantly amused as he released his brother and took a step back.

Bruce reached across him to punch Loki’s shoulder. “Glad you’re not dead. Keep doing that not-dead thing. Seriously.”

Loki snorted, but smirked at him fondly nonetheless.

“What he said,” Steve added.

“Someone order a ridiculous amount of Thai takeout. In fact, Bruce? You know the best places, you order it.” Pepper demanded. “Tony, make me a drink, and one for Loki; I request a Mexican martini we can share, with extra olive juice. Then make everyone else a drink. Everyone else, get into the living room, sprawl on the couches, and enjoy the fact we’re all not dead right now.” She proceeded to shoo them out to their respective places, and eventually sit near Loki on one of the couches, where she immediately began talking politics with him, updating him on anything and everything he’d
missed, and answering his various questions about it, the same as they had been doing most evenings throughout his press tour.

Natasha settled nearby, also interested in most of the news, and occasionally interjecting her own inquiries and suggestions, while Clint sat on the arm of her chair relaying a highly improbable story to Steve and Bruce, who occupied another couch opposite Loki’s.

Drinks were shared, and talk settled into a relative normalcy, by Avengers standards, as Tony settled in on Loki’s other side, while Loki and Pepper bickered back and forth over the situation in Ukraine, with Natasha cutting them both off with an unexpected and enthusiastic rant it was obvious she had been holding back for a long while, concerning Russian history and the whole situation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, in scathing and exasperated tones that kept her audience ensnared in rapt silence as she began to gesture expansively and swear like a sailor at intermittent points. Clint got up, poured her a double vodka, and returned, handing it to her along with the bottle. The rant lasted almost half an hour.

Later, Loki would admit it was actually very educational and informative.

Overall, it was still a fairly normal kick-off point for conversation by Avengers standards. Political talk somehow shifted to film critique, to combat strategies, to a few combat stories, by the time food arrived.

Tony caught an odd, slightly baffled look on his lover’s face, sometime in the middle of dinner, everyone still sprawled over the furniture with chopsticks and styrofoam containers of take-out. He elbowed Loki lightly. “What is it?”

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve felt at home, is all.”

The inventor’s eyebrows raised, and he leaned against Loki’s shoulder. “I’m glad you do. That should make it easier to keep you around.”

“You couldn’t be rid of me if you tried, Tony Stark,” Loki promised.

Tony grinned helplessly, at that. “All the better.”

The god’s face fell only for a moment. “I really would do still more terrible things to keep you. If I—” Another light application of elbow from Tony cut him off.

“Hey.” The inventor smiled, in equal parts steely and devoted. “I would too. I mean that. I don’t want to, not anymore than you do, but I will, when I need to.”

“Not ‘if’ but ‘when’, Tony?”

“Knowing us?”

“I suppose it’s only a matter of time...”

“Good to know you don’t scare off easy.”

“I could say the same to you.” The trickster looked genuinely concerned for a moment.

Tony grinned fiercely. “Not a chance.”

Loki kissed him, then, brief and harmless-looking to the others, but still letting the inventor feel his teeth. “Maybe I really do deserve you.”
“See? I knew you’d come around.”

“Get a room!” Clint called, from his perch beside Natasha.

“This is a room, and it’s my tower,” Tony shot back, catching Loki’s hand and lacing their fingers together absently.

The archer looked suddenly horrified. “Please, please not while I’m eating.”

The others laughed at his stricken tone, and Loki’s fingers squeezed lightly around the mad inventor’s: content to be keep this one, and to be caught and kept in turn, far from temporary, and far from sane though they both may be.

When the laughter died down, Tony stole another kiss, a bit less chaste than the previous one, and said to the trickster, “Welcome home.”

And Loki grinned. “It’s good to be back. I think I’ll stay awhile.”

The inventor beamed at him in return.

Chapter End Notes

There will be a short, separate coda/epilogue set in Jotunnheim. Because I love you all.

End Notes

The drink Tony makes is one I made up. I haven’t been able to afford Metaxa for a long while, though, so I haven’t tried it. That said... Hendrick’s gin. Just sayin’. If anyone tries it and tells me if it's any good, I'll write you a bit of short-fic based on a few one-word prompts.

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