Loki has always yearned for control; but he never did get to control anything.

Barton was made to be ruled; but he was never expected to realize it.

Power is the flame, and Loki Laufeyson is the moth; however, it turns out that even catching fire is not that easy. There are princes and monsters at war inside him – and Clint Barton got caught in the fight.
Or: can Loki trust himself not to be a monster, when all the prince wants is to take power?

Loki's POV of Strangers to Ourselves.

Notes

This is a sequel to the second chapter of Wrong End, where Clint and Loki are drugged and coerced into having sex, and both of them enjoy it more than they probably should.

This is a rewriting of Strangers to Ourselves told from Loki's POV. You don't have to read it but both works are complementary.

Loki does not have a healthy way of thinking, he does not play by the rules, and like Clint, he's an unreliable narrator. Warning for internalized kinkshaming and (arguably) dub-con.

That being said, enjoy and please, leave a comment. ^^
“Alright,” Loki said in a delighted, simmering voice.

*He gripped the hair of the tortured man and jerked his head back in a clanking of chains, drawing a moan out of him.*

“Let's start again. From the top.”

Like all stories, this one had several beginnings.

Perhaps it began with his oldest memory. He was just a little boy then. Father had been telling his beloved sons about the monsters growling in the dark; about blue skin and red eyes, and everlasting winter, spring thieves, death bringers. And Thor had yelled, “I'll slay them all!”

His child's voice had echoed in the immense room like an omen of the booming it would become. Loki had said nothing. He, the Silvertongue, the God of Lies, was nearly mute in his youth.

But his resolution had flamed inside him, coiled in his belly like lava.

*No, I will.*

With the unsinkable assurance of the young, he had had a vision of himself holding the Universe in his cupped hands. He felt his power-to-be vibrate in his veins. He had a destiny. He could feel it then. He would accomplish great things – make the ones he loved proud; and the ones the hated, envious.

Or perhaps it began with his first lover. He was just a young man then, and she was much older and much more experienced than him. He could see a repressed laugh in the corner of her mouth as he struggled against his own body; a few minutes of shameful caresses did nothing to improve the situation; in the end, as though she was tired of mocking him, she took him in her mouth and made him come. Loki hated every second of it. His pleasure had been but a fleeting sparkle; the loss of
control, though, was firmly embedded in his memory. It had been consensual, yet he felt violated.

For a very long time, he refused any form of intimacy, hating even the embraces of his mother, as though his body had been irreparably tainted with sex.

So perhaps it began with his second lover. By then, Loki had come to terms with the fact that he must fail in order to learn. He was very methodical – very cold – with the young stable boy who had found his way into the prince's bed; he didn't want to lose control again; and when he realized that his body was much more obedient, he was extremely pleased. He tried to make the boy lose control in turn, like a revenge against his previous lover; and when he actually succeeded, the thrill that flashed through him had nothing to do with an orgasm. Not a physical one, at least. The memory of his own shame, of his embarrassment, of his base pleasure – and the thought that he'd just inflicted this ordeal on someone else; that made him shudder in carnivorous bliss.

Then the adrenaline seeped away and he was suddenly ghastly frightened with himself. He stared at the stable boy panting on the bed; nothing on his face but a beatific smile. Yet Loki felt ashamed, almost terrified, as though he had committed some terrible crime.

It also began with his first war. Loki fought like his mother had taught him to fight. Thor despised magic and sneak attacks; he lived for head-front charges and thunder bolts. It was Loki who saved them both in the end, though, and the joy he felt was pure and unadulterated this time. There was no shame in a warrior's pride. The love he had felt for conquest and victory as a young boy flamed bright inside him again.

For the first time, he seriously thought of the throne.

It began with his third war and fifth lover and fourth war and eleventh lover.

It began with the realization that he couldn't help seeking reparation every time he thought himself scorned. He did not want the throne – not really. But somehow, everything Loki did was dismissed, or so he felt. His magic? Tricks. His fighting? Woman's moves. He took the other route like he always did. Since Thor's voice was booming and commanding, Loki's would be quiet and smooth. Coiling around other's minds until they did as they were told. He took great pleasure in his ability to deceive. In the end, it was the same as smashing people with a hammer; only more subtle, more elegant. But he only got called Liesmith for it.

Did they not all lie, though?

It was at this point that he began to build his house.

At first, it was only a cabin in the great fields, where he could hear the packs of bilgesnipes in the distance. He would teleport there every time he found himself in need of a bit of quietness. Then he added spells into the walls to shield them from Heimdall's gaze. He laced more magic inside the door so it would open only for him. He carved in transportation spells, so he wouldn't have to cast one every time he wanted to travel. He enlarged the room and made it into a library, which he would fill with everything he discovered as he roamed the Universe like the free, nearly omnipotent god he was. Before he knew it, the house was growing, and each room was another piece of the world he
It began the day he was so brutal with a maiden in bed that she burst into tears. Something flared bright and hot inside him at the sound of her wailing – and the very next second, it deflated into awful shame. As always, pleasure and horror were two sides of a same coin. Loki could never seem to enjoy himself without having to feel guilty for it. He comforted the girl and dried her tears; she was a silly, inexperienced little thing, and she got her spirits back up quickly enough.

He was left in a much darker mood. He could not deny to himself that the physical or mental suffering of others enticed him; that he loved to prank, and equally loved to hurt; and the thought disturbed him deeply.

It began with the much discussed death of a noblemen at the palace. Throat slit by his slave, who had been found sitting next to the blood-soaked bed, knife still in her hands, dried tears on her face. She had been executed the next day, but the evidence of tortures on her young body left no doubt as to the reasons of her crime.

That day, Loki went to the market, hidden in the shape of a servant. Slavery was not unusual in Asgard, but its rules were numerous and unbreakable. Slaves could only be former criminals or spoils of war – mere prisoners, actually; only that they were made to serve instead of uselessly rotting in the dungeons. They could also be volunteers who had chosen subservience over starvation; rarer, but not uncommon. Most of them were traded almost daily, but those meant to be kept by a single master for all their lives endured a very harsh training. Loki had always shielded his ears and eyes from this world – not because it repulsed him, but because it attracted him, and that horrified him more than anything. He foresaw a chasm there in which he would be only too delighted to fall; so he had been careful never to step close from its edge.

That day, he couldn't help himself, though. He saw the cages, and the chains attached to the necks of naked men and women. He saw them discussed and sold like animals. He saw them being branded and he heard their screams. He smelt their scorched flesh.

He lasted six minutes before transporting himself back to the palace and willing himself to forget everything he had just seen. His violent arousal frightened him so much that he took care of himself instead of calling a servant he could have seriously injured.

That day, he swore to himself that he would never, ever have a slave. The thought of owning someone was just too horrifying to him – because he knew that, if there were no consequences, nothing could keep him from giving in to his urge.

And that would make him a pervert. A criminal.

A monster.

It began with Thor.

It began with Thor's shadow.

It began with Thor's coronation.
It began with Thor's arrogance.

It began with Thor's banishment.

It began with blue skin creeping up his arms and despair sinking down his stomach.

It began with a need for revenge like never before. Making maidens cry and making a fool out of Thor worked well enough in day-to-day life. But how could he heal that gaping of a wound? How could he ever make up what he'd lost, when he'd lost everything?

It began when Odin fell down on the stairs, slowly, like a wilting tree, and Loki went mad.

He had lost everything, so he would regain it. His old fantasy came back to him. The Universe in his cupped hands. This was the moment he had been waiting for. He would erase up to the smallest traces of what he was. He would erase everything he had been, and build a king out of himself to replace it. He would own everything, control everything, because if he did, if he did, then maybe he could thwart the truth one more time, maybe he could lie one last time, and made everyone believe in his lie so he never had to lie anymore...

It began when he let go of Thor's hammer to fall in the abyss.

Because he could see the darkness inside him for what it was, now. He had tried to destroy Jotunheim. They deserved it. He had told Thor his father was dead. This oaf was better off as a mortal. He had failed in every way. They have failed in every way. He had disappointed his father. Odin was never his father. He had lost everything. He should have gained everything. He was nothing. He was superior to them all!

The voice that had awoken inside him – the one he'd desperately tried to stifle for so long – was now raging, you were meant to have the power, you were meant for the throne, let them suffer and beg and die, make them scream and writhe, make them tremble in fear, it will be so good, and you will be entitled to rejoice, you will have earned it, their pain will be your bliss!

The monster was awake and howling inside him, pushing at his mental walls, urging him to give in to the fierceness lurking inside him. So in his last flicker of innocence, Loki killed it – he opened his hand and let the monster fall in the darkness where it belonged.

It began with Thanos.

You deserve to rule them all.

And Loki snapped for good under the twin pressure of his inner monster and of the Titan's poisoned words. The most powerful being in the Universe was agreeing to the voice in the depths of his soul. So it must be the truth. It must be what was meant to be. He must stop fighting it. He was a monster.

He was a monster.
It began with his first slave.

He had promised never to give himself the opportunity to own someone entirely. But since he was a monster anyway, he could make people suffer – he could make them die if he deemed it fit, and shamelessly relish their pain. So he pierced the chest of a sturdy man, the only one who’d shown a bit of courage, and shivered with bliss when he heard him say, sir.

Mine.

For the first time, something he could call his. Something he had conquered. Agent Clint Barton. Just one man. But the Earth would follow, then Asgard, then the entire Universe – and maybe then, the monster would be appeased. Maybe then, his vengeance would be complete, the feeling of unfairness would quiet down, and his madness would end. Something deep inside him still wished for the return of the old golden days, but it was stifled now, like the monster had been for so long. It was its turn, now. The conqueror's. The king's.

It began when he lost everything yet again.

Bound and muzzled, he was brought back home like a stray dog, like a punished child, like an actual slave. Wrath burned inside him, and for two days he was completely lost in his own madness, his own helplessness only stinging even more his need for revenge and control and suffering. He would have killed the entire world if he had had the chance, and the peak of his arousal would have been reached in a bloodbath, orgasmic massacre as he devoured the Universe to finally make it his. The more they humiliated him, the more he felt his need for dominance grow savage and bloodthirsty; the more they tied him down, the more he struggled to break free, and he did not care for the consequences – as long as he could destroy them, ruin them, KILL THEM ALL!

For two burning days, he hated, hated, hated, and lived off his hate, in the delirium of his burst-out ego, and his mind went so white-hot with wrath it felt like his molten thoughts clogged in an amalgam of smoking steel, burning to ashes everything left inside his skull.

But then he made a mistake.

He calmed down.

He stopped and looked around him; he remembered the chain of events bringing here the person he had once been. Then the other side of the coin, the shame mirroring the pleasure, overwhelmed him for the first time since he’d fallen off the Bifrost.

It was agony.
He was literally crushed by a tidal wave of disgust at his own actions, so intense and shattering that he thought he would die. No one was ever meant to come back to his senses after such a fit of madness. He writhed with humiliation and self-hatred, the monster turning against itself, and he begged Odin to kill him, to put an end to it, but the All-Father did not listen and left him to the excruciating pain of remorse – not remorse for his attempt; but for its failure. He had tried, and he had failed, and now he felt, in every last inch of his soul, that he was worthless.

It began after a week of devouring shame.

By then, he had clawed his skin off – literally, leaving blood trails on the walls and floor – and ripped off tufts of his black hair. He had screamed, screamed, screamed to the point of awakening every echo in the Nine Realms, cursed in every language he knew, slammed his bloodied fists on the stone. His powers were bound, his house out of reach, and he had nothing left, nothing but the urge to own, the hunger, the starvation, and he had nothing to consume but himself, nobody to hurt but himself, so he tore his own body down and it still wasn't enough.

He needed only control, and control was exactly what he didn't have. It was the single worst experience of his life.

It did not kill him, though.

And he found some strength in that fact, when he'd thought there was nothing left for him in the world. After a week of inhuman pain washing through him and carrying away everything he was and had been, he had not died. If he could lose everything and still breathe, then he was stronger than he thought; then the hunger, the humiliation didn't have power over him – not like he'd thought. He could be deprived of his very essence, and still pretend to exist.

Nine days after he was thrown in jail like a slave, he asked that his wounds be tended to. He asked for a blade, then asked to be shaven clean when the use of a weapon was denied to him. He asked for an access to the baths, which was granted, and cleaned himself until he almost looked like nothing had ever happened.

His gaze had changed, though, and this was something no disguise could ever hide.

He was a monster and he was strong enough to accept it. He was mad and was conscious of it. He would never lose anything ever again. He would make it so even defeat was a victory to him. By refusing to let anything get to him, he was restarting his conquest, one step at the time. First of all, he had to control himself; then he could control everything else.

Even the thought of Thor stirred nothing but a vague contempt inside him now. He was cool and collected. Deadened. He was indifferent – the deep-rooted indifference of those who have been to hell and back; those who know that nothing matters. Oh, on the outside, he hadn't changed, but his very core had been transformed forever. Thor's friends put a blade under his throat, urged him to apologize, and he smiled – he beamed at them, and relished the disgust and fear and incomprehension and anger in their eyes. Everything was even easier now that he had stopped caring. The Universe in his cupped hands.

He was back; and this time he would win, if only because he had nothing left to lose.
It began when Odin told him that he was to be sent back to Earth. The second Loki crossed the Bifrost, he slipped away from Thor's hands and into his secret house. There, he could finally rest, in the coldness of a place that neither blamed nor praised him. He liked the indifference of stone, suiting the coldness of his own core.

After he had slept, he went back to Earth. Thor had not even noticed that his brother had not spent the night in SHIELD's base like he thought. They spoke of redemption and repayment of debt, and Loki accepted out of vague boredom. It mattered little to him that they thought him a prisoner; he knew the truth, and that was good enough. They had no power over his soul or his mind. He was so utterly free it was almost boring.

Then, insidiously, so insidiously he didn't notice before it was too late... things started to matter again.

* * *

It truly began with Clint Barton, of course.

But it began then for the second time; for the first true time; it began like a rebirth; and it ended everything too — although Loki could have never imagined it at the time. He was in no state to believe in anything then. He had lived through his own shattering, and he had built himself back. If anything, he was even more of a god. Even more of a monster.

So when it began, it was but a mere game.

* * *

“No,” Barton moaned in a panting, trembling voice. “Enough. Please.”

Loki's smirk widened; he licked the drop of sweat rolling down the archer's cheek.

“I said from the top,” he whispered against his skin.

The sob that came out of Barton's lips sent a lewd thrill up his spine.

“Please –” He was choking. Swallowing his own tears as he struggled to beg.

Wonderful.

“Please – no more!”

“Let's see,” Loki pretended to muse, pupils blown. “How did it begin?”

Barton's scream was horrible and deafening and broken with sobs and it lasted, lasted, lasted and oh, this was just the beginning.
Okay, guys. First of all: WHAT THE FUCK. Like, the comments and kudos and what? Not that I'm complaining but whoa. Anyway. Thanks.

Second of all: This is unbeta'ed, which means I'm trying to watch out for typos (sorry) but which also means I'm FREEEEE to post WHENEVER THE FUCK I WANT and it'll be every two days. :D

Third of all: From now on, all chapters titles are books/songs/movie titles. Find the author? Drop a comment. (No Google, cheaters!) Don't find the author? Drop a comment anyway. I don't think you realize how much I love comments. THANK YOU FOR COMMENTING.

Anyway. Second chapter!

“The main purpose of this meeting is to bring you help.”

Help.

Now that was just ludicrous.

If anything, Doom's serum had been a welcome distraction; and it had provided Loki with an excellent excuse never to try and help out the Avengers again. It was their fault he and Hawkeye had found themselves locked in a room too sturdy for even Loki to break the door. It was their fault they had to use the serum Victor von Doom had left for them – the infamous strength enhancer which also worked as a powerful sex pollen. It was their fault Barton was back in mandatory therapy for having bedded his worst nightmare.

Besides, thanks to that little incident, Loki had been granted access to Stark Tower now. It was so amusing to see them all pretend that he was a prisoner there. It was endlessly funny, too, to watch them try to help him, as though a brief, self-induced loss of control could have harmed him in any way. Unbelievable. He almost wished he could have let them know about the void under the Bifrost.
Nothing a few drops of sparkling drug could ever match.

“Hello, Mr. Laufeyson,” the man had said. “I am Dr. Thornton.”

“Dr. Thornton.”

Loki showed his teeth and pleasantly said, “Call me Laufeyson again and you will find yourself throwing up your own bowels.”

Thornton blinked. Once.

“Um,” he said. “Yes. Well. I am here to talk about your experience with Doom's serum.”

“Are you now.”

Thornton coughed. “Forced intimacy can be... harmful, to say the least. We simply want to make sure you are alright.”

Loki laced his long fingers.

“I was given the opportunity to rape my enemy with complete impunity; I did so with the blessing of his friends.”

Thornton froze. Loki slightly leaned forward and said, “Not to mention I was lucky to be injected with a serum which increased my pleasure thousandfold while I used him. Where I come from, this is a delicacy.”

He grinned. “You want to know if I am alright? I took Barton's body and mind to play, for the second time, I forced myself back into his head and you are offering me help?”

The insane grin which was stretching Loki's lips finally burst out in a peal of laughter. Thornton was red as a brick.

“Is there anything you wish to add?” he muttered in an heroic effort when the demi-god was done laughing.

“Yes,” Loki said nonchalantly. “I wish to add that Barton makes a better whore than an agent. You are truly missing out. Try him sometimes.”

Thornton briskly got up. “I think we are done.”

“Go and try him,” Loki insisted mockingly. “Although I believe he is currently staying with your colleague. Sitwell, was it? You'll have to wait your turn.”

The therapist made a brisk move and Loki got up so violently his chair fell down behind him. Everything went very still.

“Oh please do,” he breathed. “Attack me. I am restraining myself, doctor – otherwise you would have died the second you walked inside this room. But give me another chance to hurt one of you without consequences...”

He let his long fingers twist around nothing. Thornton scowled, but his fear was obvious. He promptly gathered his files and left without another word.

Loki ran his fingers through his black hair and sighed. This had been fun, but more than a little childish. Anyway, he had told Barton he would not reveal the details of their encounter, and he had
stayed true to his word.

Thornton had still managed to unsettle him; for all the wrong reasons, though. Such insignificant loss of control over his own body was not going to fluster Loki Laufeyson – he was no longer a virgin – but the memory of his pleasure was nagging at him. He had never been able to hurt a lover without feeling repulsive shame afterwards, but the use of the serum had relieved him of his guilt. How convenient for someone like him, to have all his actions excused. Truth be told, he had never thought a mortal would ever feature among his list of lovers, let alone score as the most satisfying of them.

He remembered Barton as they waited on the roof for ‘extraction’, as SHIELD put it. The effects of the serum were long gone; yet the archer had showed a weird concern for him. He was a lot less hurt than Loki had let Thornton think. Barton had the specific intelligence of highly pragmatic people; he had been as willing – and as unwilling – as Loki himself, and he was decided not to let it fluster him.

Loki still couldn’t understand their last kiss, though. It was not like him; and it was not like Barton either. Their bodies had acted on their own. The serum, still? It made no sense.

He shrugged again, then exited the room without further delay. Surely, a squad would be waiting outside to bring him back to Stark Tower; and he would comply nicely, despite whatever threats he might have uttered in Thornton’s face just now.

He had nothing better to do.

“Brother,” Thor greeted him. “How was it?”


Loki let his Midgardian suit shift into casual Asgardian clothes, then went to sit by the window and picked up the book he had left on the armrest. It was not so bad; he might add it to his collection, although truth be told, he had never read the same thing twice.

“I killed no one,” he said, plunged in his reading already – or rather, pretending to be. “Is it not an improvement?”

“They still resent you,” the thunderer guessed.

Loki slightly pursed his lips. “And you do not? You were there when I killed that precious agent. Just before I dropped the glass cage. Remember that?”

A deadly silence settled in the room. All the better for his concentration.

“I remember,” Thor said in a low voice.

Loki turned a page. “Admitting that you hate me would do us both some good.”

“I do not hate you, brother.”

“Brother,” Loki repeated.

This word used to infuriate him. But after he’d gone back to Asgard, after he’d undergone his own
death and resurrection for the second time – this time not in body, but in mind, in the dungeons; as he watched everything he believed in unravel, such details had become laughable. Let Thor think what he wanted. Loki would kill him one day.

Not that he particularly wanted to. There was nothing he wanted.

It was easier this way.

The truth was that he was not doing anything with his time at all. Infuriating SHIELD and Thor was merely a vague pastime. He just watched the city with mitigated interest, chin resting on the palm of his hand. He did not want to go out, did not want to set up a new trick, did not want to do anything, really. This was not like him – he was by definition always restless, always thinking five steps ahead the likes of Thor, always with an idea in mind. The only times he found himself in such glum moods were when he could not figure out exactly what he wanted. It had taken him a hundred years to admit that being in Thor's shadow had bent him out of shape, and the resulting disaster was something he did not like to recall.

He was lying to himself, he knew, by telling himself there were no desires left in him. But even though, he tried to keep it so. To want nothing was to lose nothing.

To win nothing either. And his restless nature would not permit it for very long. His craving for power – or if he must be more honest, his desperate quest for justice, for recognition, for praise – had been temporarily frozen, though. The shock he had encountered in the cells of Asgard had numbed him. But something had made him snap out of it and now he was thinking again. Feeling again.

Oh, he knew what it was.

Thank you.

Barton, panting in his lap, sullied with Loki's fluids, still trembling with the aftermath of his rough claiming. It had been his first time.

To think he had thanked him.

No lover had ever thanked Loki. Especially not the ones he'd hurt. And it awoke fantasies in him – not only of a sexual nature – fantasies he was trying to repress more than anything. In Stuttgart, when he had made that crowd kneel, the rush of bliss had been staggering. And he had been sincere in his will for a benevolent domination. He truly believed humans were made to bow. But they were too stupid to even envision the possibility; although they claimed their need for a good leader every other day of their lives. Hopeless.

In that split second with Barton, though, that golden second of drug-induced lust, Loki had been thanked for his violence. For what he truly was. And he could have taken Barton on the spot yet again just for it. He almost had, actually, but the drug had left the archer's system, and Loki had no interest whatsoever in rape. He was cruel, there was no doubts left about that particular point, but he craved control; and to desire a partner so much as to force him or her, that was the sign of a loss of control. It was a line not even the revelation of Loki's true nature had managed to blur. Asgard's ideas of honor – or if he must be honest once again, Frigga's ideas of honor – had molded him more strongly than any sadistic urge could.

He wanted to impose himself, and he wanted people to accept it; but he also couldn't deny that he enjoyed himself the most when they fought his dominance. How could he hope to ever achieve something in these conditions? He was a Jotun by blood and an Aesir by heart; he craved chaos and order all in once. Everything he built, he destroyed it. Everything he liked, he was ashamed of it.
He sighed. Doom's serum had allowed these sides to be one for a split second, but it was very likely that he would never get such a chance again. He had to deaden his hopes once more before he spread himself too thin. Keep it together and see where it would lead him – see if he could silence the monster within and go back to being Thor's brother, no matter how much he disliked the idea. He had to focus. Focus.

Focus...

On what?

His train of thought came to an abrupt end when Jarvis's smooth voice fell from the ceiling. “If you'll pardon me, sir, the agent Barton is requesting access.”

Loki cursed himself for his sudden and uncontrollable rush of hope. No, no, numb – he must stay numb, and he smoothed himself out like he would have ironed a piece of cloth, patiently unfolded every wrinkle sullying his mind, the marks of the monster and the marks of the prince, until there was only blankness left.

When Thor went to open the door, this unexpected visit was boring him already.
“What troubles you, my friend?” Thor asked from the doorstep.

Troubled, is he? Loki wondered.

He realized he was willing himself to keep staring out the window. If he had leaned only slightly forward, he would have caught sight of Barton's silhouette in the doorframe. But he wanted to listen without being seen.

Simple curiosity.

“Just wanted a few words with your brother,” the archer said.

Loki's fingers twitched on the armrests. Barton had come to see him? He sounded troubled indeed. There was a nervous, grating echo to his voice that Thor must have missed, but that Loki could hear as though he had spent his entire life studying Barton's breathing.

His focus frightened him and he took a deep breath, himself. He was familiar with the feeling – in battle or in bed, the world narrowed down to the body facing him, and Loki breathed his or her breath, saw through his or her eyes, felt his or her pain or pleasure. A way of control. After he had hurt the maiden that time, he had actually done the same thing to himself, to see how it felt.

The sharpness of the feeling had delighted him. It meant her scream had not been faked; pain was about the only thing Loki could actually trust. Some people held it in; some people were easier to read than others. With Barton, it had been easy – the power of the staff had made him transparent to Loki's eyes. The second time they had met, Doom's drug had similarly brought his defenses down.

This was, in a way, their first true meeting, and Loki was curious to see whether Barton would be as readable as he'd been before. He realized again that his attempts at numbness had completely failed, but this time, he didn't mind. There was no risk of spreading thin when he was so acutely focused on a single soul. He would be just fine.

“Did Loki misbehave?” Thor asked.

He was too easy to read – a thousand years together had stripped him of every secret. He was an open book, and maybe this was the reason Loki could not stand his presence even as he hesitantly tried to keep things civil again between them. Thor was just too blunt, too forward, too dull.
Barton, on the other hand...

“No, we're good,” the archer was saying casually. “I just want – I wanted to discuss some things with him in private.”

There! Loki thought with the delight of the cat jumping on a mouse. Oh, this slight hesitation, this hyphen in the middle of his words – a single crack in an otherwise perfect wall of blankness. Barton was a trained man, and he was good, but something bothered him so much it weakened his defenses. Loki could feel a raging turmoil beneath that calm surface, and he burned with the desire to skin him and find out what it was.

Curiosity, curiosity had always driven him forward, for better and for worse. He realized that in a matter of seconds, he had gained back everything he'd lost ever since Asgard's cells, ever since his defeat in Manhattan – and even further before, up to his fall from the bridge, and even before that split second in Jotunheim when his world had been turned upside down for the first time. Yes – he was burning again with mischief, with the desire to make the world his – in his cupped hands – except that the target of his craving was a single human soul.

That was a misguidance, of course; Barton did not make for a very interesting challenge. But he was the challenge which had just revived Loki's deadened soul.

Or maybe the demi-god was just delirious. After all, he had only heard two sentences from Barton just now. But delirium itself was something he had lost after his impressive fit in the Asgardian dungeons. Something had definitely changed, and this change had definitely been sudden, thorough, and caused by the mere presence of Clint Barton. Perhaps the memory of that distorted moment of golden, drugged freedom was to blame?

Whatever the reason, it only made him more enticing.

All these feelings washed through Loki in a matter of seconds; already, Thor was trying his best to ruin it all, the big oaf. “I am positive my brother means you no harm –” well, think again “– but still, would you consider –”

“Who is it?” Loki called out before Thor could cause irreparable damage.

He got up and walked to the door as though out of impatience. Thor looked embarrassed, but Loki wasn't seeing him – he was only seeing Barton.

And Barton him, as it seemed.

The carefully composed mask of the archer quivered terribly the second he lay eyes on Loki. The demi-god had to repress a smile of pure excitation – because for some unknown reason, his mere presence was the very thing which caused the shudder he’d heard beneath Barton's voice. How fascinating. Surely, this couldn't be about Manhattan; Barton had gotten over it. No, this was new; but still, this was entirely Loki's. And this ever-so-slight sliver of power made him crave more.

He could have sworn his own flustering had not gone unnoticed – yes, Barton had definitely seen something, and Loki caught himself. He hated being read about as much as he loved reading others.

“All right, Agent Barton,” he greeted him.

The mere sound of his voice provoked another of these nearly invisible ripples beneath Barton's skin. He struggled to look away and did his best to keep his voice flippant as he asked again to be let in. What did he want?
And then – Loki's trance abruptly broke down and he came back to his senses. He was instantly ashamed of his own ridiculous state. To get so excited over nothing! Barton must be here for a debrief of some sort; Loki was imagining things and indulging in his own fantasies, working himself up in a vicious circle, reading emotions he'd projected himself.

Yet the second he looked up at Barton, he felt the pressure built up again, and this couldn't possibly be only his own frustration and boredom at work here, could it?

“Very well,” Thor accepted, before going on in a lecturing tone, “Brother, do not forget that you are under the watch of two powerful guardians – ”

“Yes, yes, off you go,” Loki snapped.

He had had enough. Whether he was imagining things or not, it was time to find out. Eventually, blissfully, Thor left and Loki found himself alone with Barton.

Ah.

He waited for him to talk; after all, the archer had come to him, not the other way around. In the meantime, he took the opportunity to study him. Barton was fit and sturdy as always, but there were dark rings under his eyes and he was – yes, he was undeniably, albeit imperceptibly, shaking. Was he sick?

He wasn't saying anything and frankly, Loki's efforts to remain indifferent for so many months had used up every last drop of his patience.

“So,” he said.

Barton clenched his fists. Curious – now that Thor was gone, he was less cautious about himself. Why wouldn't he hide from Loki? It couldn't have anything to do with trust – and Loki's thrill at being the only one to witness Barton's turmoils was in the wrong. But why else would Barton lower his defenses?

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Loki attempted.

“Like you don't know,” the archer spat.

Oh.

Somehow, Barton thought Loki had already broken past his guard, and this was why he wasn't watching himself. Well – at this point, he wasn't entirely wrong; but the demi-god's insight had begun only after the archer had appeared on his doorstep. Something here wasn't right.

“As a matter of fact,” Loki said, studying his eyes, “I have no idea what you mean.”

The flicker he caught was pure rage. “No idea?”

Barton was now openly trembling and the wrath in his expression was undisguised. For a second, Loki even wondered if the archer was in his right mind – and the feeling grew when Barton growled, “Stop this – stop this right now!”

“Barton,” Loki said in confusion. “I am not doing anything – ”
Bur then what little control Barton still had over himself snapped – and he grabbed a chair to crash it across Loki's face.

The demi-god hadn't expected a physical attack, and although he was hardly hurt, the blow still shook him a bit and he took a step back. Barton pounced on him; he must have completely lost it to attack an Asgardian with his bare hands. Loki loved to drive people crazy, that was a given, but he was not responsible of Barton's state and the unjustified attack irritated him all the more. No matter what Heimdall might say, he still had a right to defend himself.

And since Barton wasn't in control anymore, Loki just had to take over. Whatever was happening here, be it a spell or a false accusation or a trick or maybe even another drug, it allowed him to fight back – and he did, breaking Barton's momentum and throwing him head over heels across the room; the archer crashed on the coffee table which shattered under the shock. He fell limp among the splinters.

Loki approached him with pursed lips. If this really was a spell, it must be a ploy against him – of course the Avengers would blame him for using force against one of them, especially Barton. But who had both the powers and the will to trap Loki in this way? No answers were coming to mind.

Except for Thanos, of course. But the Mad Titan wouldn't have gone through all this trouble. If really he had taken interest in Loki Laufeyson again, he would have simply come for him and sent everyone in his way to Hel.

Maybe not a spell then. But then, what?

Loki's smile came ghosting back over his lips. Well, he would just have to make Barton talk, wouldn't he? For both their sakes. Yes – no one could blame him for using violence now.

He tried to breathe a bit more slowly – his own excitation was becoming truly embarrassing. He should not have got so worked up over such insignificant events, but the prospect of imposing his will to a rebellious man was simply too alluring. He had been so bored these past months.

He leaned down and grabbed the front of the archer's tank top to bring him up. Barton's head hung limply, offering his throat to Loki's sight. He was out cold.

Perfect.

Loki dragged him across the room and sat him down on the most uncomfortable chair he could find – Thor shouldn't have let him design the furniture of their shared space; Loki had made sure there were only rigid benches and stiff chairs to sit on, except for the comfortable chair he'd made for himself.

The demi-god gripped Barton's right wrist and pinned it to the armrest, but then thought twice and walked around the chair to grab both the archer's arms and stretch them behind the wooden back. He crossed the wrists and invoked a rope to tie them together. When he was released, Barton's weight made him inch forward, and the ridges of the too large wooden back dug deeply into his upper arms.

Loki tapped his chin. Perhaps he could sharpen those ridges even more. There was an idea here – a torture chair, all stiff angles and subtle discomfort...

He shook himself up. He wasn't here to torture Barton, no matter how much he wanted to – and oh, the thought didn't even make him disgusted with himself, which meant he was too far gone already. He had to gather himself together. First of all, find the reasons for Barton's attack.

The demi-god had just finished tying the archer's ankles to the wooden legs when he felt him stir in
his bonds. He took a step back and sat down on his personal chair to admire his handiwork. Barton's slight struggles, his closed-eyed frowning, the gradual understanding of his position – and finally his eyes snapping open in complete horror, oh – that sent a thrill of delight up Loki's spine. He couldn't resist panic.

“Are you calming down?” he asked in a low voice, although the answer was evident.

Barton snapped at him – and Loki could see the muscles shift and tense under the skin. He grinned. “Obviously not.”

He got on his feet and walked to the archer, stopping just before the heavy chair. “Good thing I secured you. Struggle all you want; when you are exhausted, maybe we can finally talk this out.”

He was having way too much fun. The thought that he had caused this, that the fear and pain were his doing, was almost too perfect. What people regarded as negative feelings – suffering and terror, but also sadness, despair, and shame – had the advantage of claiming the entirety of one's attention. Loki was the only one in Barton's world right now, and he utterly loved it.

Once again, the force and suddenness of his own fascination should have surprised him, but consequences could wait. He hadn't felt so alive in months. For now, he wanted to watch the never-ending shifting of Barton's arms as he struggled to soothe a dull pain he probably wasn't even feeling consciously yet.

Oh, he was still trying to free himself and attack him! Right – what was that about? The gray eyes seemed clearer, though. Loki should ask him to explain himself now, before one of them lost it yet again.

“Barton,” he said. “I would really appreciate an explanation.”

The archer tugged at his bonds. “Stop pretending you don't know, you fucking –”

Loki slapped him without even realizing he had moved his arm.

At first, he was as shocked as Barton, but then a cold satisfaction flamed through him. This was once again justified; Barton had attacked him and now, insulted him; punishment was in order. The monster and the prince on a parallel yet again. Yes – he could let himself give in. He could hit him.

As long as he didn't injure him, he could do what he wanted.

He couldn't have stopped himself anyway – he was struggling not to actually lick his lips. He stepped closer, then gripped Barton's hair and jerked his head back. The archer let out a loud gasp – which wasn't exactly one of pain. And that was probably when Loki began to understand the true reason of his presence, but at this very moment, he could only feel his own exultation.

“Now,” he said with a fierce joy. “Are you going to behave?”

Barton's mouth was shaping soundless words as he tried to breathe through the stinging pain. “Please,” he uttered eventually.

Loki was so surprised he almost let him go.

Begging him? But – he hadn't done anything yet, not really. He knew Barton had endured a lot worse in his life than this bit of manhandling.

“Explain,” he ordered.
His curiosity was so strong it almost overpowered his will to hurt the archer. Barton licked his lips, but said nothing; Loki smirked and tugged at his hair as strongly as he dared – not too strongly, since Barton was desperately human, but still; it tore out a cry from the archer's lips and Loki shivered again in return. Screaming – he loved screaming above all. The most sincere sound anyone could make. A laugh could be faked, but a scream, a true cry of pain was something which came from the gut and not the brain.

“I said, explain,” he repeated.

He really wanted Barton to obey him, and he was disappointed when the archer started laughing instead – a trembling, joyless laugh. “You don't know? You really don't know. It wasn't you.” He took a deep breath. “But it has to be you,” he went on, like he was talking to himself. “It has to be. Doesn't make any sense otherwise.”

Loki frowned. Barton really wasn't himself. Maybe he had been drugged.

“What doesn't make any sense, Barton?” he asked, releasing him a little.

Barton held himself a bit less stiffly and started to shiver again as a result.

“For me to change,” he gasped. “To change like this. I never needed this before. It's like you turned me inside out all over again.”

This still didn't make much sense, but at least the archer was talking now. Loki decided to cut him some slack – he would have loved to further their little game, but he also had to find out exactly what was going on here. He finally let go of Barton's hair and walked around him to go sit down again; by the time he'd reached his seat, the feverish archer had already moved on to another thought.

“You haven't told anyone?”

“What are you talking about now?” Loki asked in irritation.

Barton gave him a look – apparently, being tied up and roughed up didn't overly disturb him after all. “You promised me something after that clusterfuck with Doom.” He shook his head. “I shouldn't be surprised that you don't remember – I don't know why I thought you would.”

Of course Loki did remember. He had promised not to tell anyone about the pleasure Barton had found, and about his willingness to be used, which couldn't be blamed entirely on the drug. And he had kept his word. But why was Barton bringing up the subject now?

“I do remember,” Loki said, and was going to add something when a sudden thought cut him off.

What had Barton said? I never needed this before.

And his feverish state had calmed down the more Loki hurt him.

His vulnerability had started right after the serum incident.

And during the incident, he'd been...

No, this couldn't be. This was just wishful thinking on Loki's part. Nobody would have consciously wished to be in Barton's position right now.
“Submission,” Loki murmured, just to see, to observe Barton's reaction. “That is what you need. What you never needed before.”

He expected Barton to sneer at him, like that old man in Stuttgart had sneered after being told to kneel. He expected Barton to react as violently as Thor did, when he had asked him whether Loki thought himself above humans.

But Barton didn't even blink; didn't even appear to envision the possibility that Loki might be taunting him. He simply lowered his eyes as though a shameful truth had been revealed.

Loki all but stopped breathing.

When Barton glanced up at him, he tried to maintain a mask of indifference but soon felt it would crack, and he just turned away, pretending to go get a glass of water. He filled it up with slightly trembling hands. He should have been ashamed at being so flustered but – but.

This was impossible. An Avenger – and not any Avenger; Clint Barton, his former brainwashed victim – couldn't possibly be willing to submit. And yet, everything indicated that during the Doom incident, Barton's longing for a rough claiming hadn't been an effect of the drug at all. Loki was almost frightened. Maybe it was just the prospect of good, fulfilling sex which flurried him so. Barton was one single, ordinary man, and he shouldn't have been of interest for a god.

But he wasn't ordinary at all – if really he was willing to bow, if really he had a need for subservience so intense it was driving him mad, then he was the first of his kind Loki had ever met.

Loki breathed out shakily, silently. He must calm down. First of all, there was no way Barton would ever submit to him, so there was no point in getting himself all worked up. Second of all, he couldn't keep him tied down here forever. He had to settle this matter before Thor came back.

But he didn't want to. The second Barton would walk out the door, he would have hopefully understood his own nature – and consequently decided to stay away from Loki Laufeyson until the end of his days.

If only there was a way to steer him in the right direction. To show him that what he needed, Loki was willing and able to give. But any attempt from the demi-god's part would be interpreted as – and constitute – rape. How could it be otherwise, considering their common past? Barton hated him, understandably enough.

Loki glanced down at the glass of water he was still holding. The corner of his lip curled up. He turned around to face again Barton, who was looking at him in guarded apprehension.

“So I see,” Loki said, marveling at how composed he managed to sound. “You crave subservience and it troubles you. And you are blaming... me – why, if I may ask?”

The archer raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been known for triggering interesting changes in people.”

Like he thought. Of course, Barton would connect this to Manhattan, when in truth that little mishap with Doom's serum was most likely to blame for the awakening of his tendencies.

“I have nothing to do with this particular one,” Loki murmured.
“Oh, come on. Like it would just happen. Thirty years of vanilla sex, and suddenly I'm a real-life submissive?”

At least fear and confusion weren't enough to strike him dumb. Good. Loki wasn't fond of silence anyway. And what Barton had just said was interesting for another reason.

“Sex and submission are indissociable to you? That is worth noticing.”

Barton was tugging at his bonds again. “Listen, you –”

“For Hel's sake, Barton,” Loki hissed. “I am trying to help you figure it out.”

No, they really couldn't get along. But of course Barton would consider him an enemy. He just wasn't thinking outside the box yet.

A live demonstration was in order.

Loki had noticed how often the archer licked his lips and how hoarse he sounded. He didn't realize he was thirsty, though; he wouldn't accept the water. That could count as a first lesson.

Without further preamble, Loki gripped the archer's hair again and pressed the edge of the glass against his lips. Barton yelped in surprise and tried to wriggle out. “What are you –”

“Drink,” Loki ordered.

This time, he would be obeyed, no matter what. The archer pressed his lips shut; Loki tugged violently at his hair until he couldn't move his head at all. Barton was breathing fast in his grip.

“Drink, Barton,” he growled. “Or I will let you choke on it, then try again.”

A shiver of delight shook him at the prospect. He thought the same shiver had ran through the archer. Surely, wishful thinking yet again – but then Barton opened his mouth and let his thirst be quenched. Another, more powerful thrill ran through Loki, who was very careful not to let a single drop spill. The way he was holding Barton, the archer had no control over the amount of water he could drink; in this split second, he let Loki take charge entirely, and this insignificant exchange of power was enough for the demi-god's cock to start straining against the fabric of his pants.

He released him instantly. If he didn't watch it, Barton would end up with a lot more than what he hadn't yet bargained for.

“What – what was that?” the archer panted, coughing a little.

His distress made Loki smile. “Only water. You thought I would poison you? Here and now?”

He walked back to the table – he could use a glass of water himself. “Manhattan is behind us,” he said.

Oh, how he wished it could be true. How he wished Barton was seeing it now. “I have no interest in tormenting you further.”

Well, not in the way Barton imagined anyway.

“You're still doing a pretty god job of it,” the archer said dryly.

“No,” Loki said calmly. You are the only one at work. You are so horrified with yourself that you would rather blame me, but the truth is that it is completely possible to become suddenly aware of a
deep-rooted inclination towards submission – or dominance.”

“Bullshit.”

Loki considered slapping him again, but his hands were full and Barton would see it coming this time. Not as much fun. Besides, he guessed he couldn't really blame him – the archer hadn't had a thousand years to accept his own twisted nature, like Loki had. Not that acceptance was a word he could sincerely use when it came to himself.

“You are not thinking clearly,” he pointed out. “Maybe I should tighten these ropes even more. It seemed like it did help you clearing your head.”

And wasn't that a spark of longing in the archer's eye?

“Do you seriously believe that my greatest dream was always to murder my own brother so I could have the throne?” Loki challenged him.

“Wouldn't surprise me.”

The demi-god hid his grin. Barton definitely didn't know when to shut up, and Loki rather liked it.

“It is a natural phenomenon, Barton. One day, you are gifted with a present you never knew you craved; and suddenly, you are the prey of a neverending hunger. The first taste is all it takes.”

He was talking about himself a bit too much here, but it didn't matter; Barton couldn't understand. He was too busy feeling sorry for himself anyway.

“So what do I do now?” he said in a dejected voice. “I join the nearest sex dungeon and let Mistress Sophie call me her bitch once a week?”

For some reason, the image brought a smile to Loki's lips. “I suppose that is one possibility. I am not familiar with Midgardian standards on the subject.”

Barton glared at him like he was trying to decide whether he was being mocked or not, but the next second, his shoulders slumped. Loki was familiar with the feeling – that dreadful feeling of discovering something repulsive in one's own nature.

And then, he waited. He waited for Barton to think and connect the dots, to realize that an obvious solution was standing just before him, to remember how he had felt when waking up tied down, or being forced to drink down the water. The demi-god just stood there, hoping – almost praying for the first time in his life – that his enemy would look up at him with something else than hatred in his eyes.

But of course, it wasn't going to happen. Idiot. Loki clenched his fists. Barton was still hunched in on himself, breathing shakily, swallowing at times as he tried to calm down. Frantically looking for a way out. But there was none, except the one Loki was about to show him. Oh, he was no fool; he knew there was no chance Barton would ever come to him, but he intended at least to force the archer to face his submissive nature. Loki could not fuck him and he could not decently torture him further, either – but he could still humiliate him, and made him realize that he was made to be ruled.

“There is another option,” he said.

Before Barton could even begin to wonder what he meant by that, Loki grabbed the back of his head and pressed his mouth on his.
He felt Barton tense like an uncoiling spring under him and struggle wildly to escape him, but the ropes were firm around his wrists and ankles. He was so weak anyway that Loki could barely feel his efforts. With his tongue, he forced the lips to part and took advantage of Barton's gasp to invade his mouth. He tilted his head and molded their mouths together, pressing at the back of the archer's neck to devour him better.

Barton stilled, panting, then let out a loud *moan* – so sudden that a burst of arousal made Loki push even further in his mouth, twisting their tongues together. It had been a long time since he had kissed someone so deeply and relentlessly, and although the kiss was meant to humiliate Barton, Loki was starting to get more than a little flustered himself. The archer moaned again, and Loki thought he was going crazy – he thought of gripping the archer's knees to part his thighs and cup the archer's crotch, knead and palm until his body responded, and Barton would probably *die* with shame, maybe he would beg, maybe he would struggle some more against his bonds, oh, it would be so *magnificent* –

Loki brutally let go and bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. The sharp pain helped him clear his mind of its haze of lust. It had been too long – or rather, not long enough; not long enough since Doom's serum had allowed him to rape Barton and still have him asking for more.

Everything was too mixed up in his head. The archer wasn't going to change his mind and Loki needed his own mind to go numb again if he wanted to avoid another disaster. He had already let himself go too far.

“Consider it,” he said, before spinning on his heels so his confusion couldn't show.

Sure enough, Barton spat, “In your dreams, you sick bastard.”

A second ago, Loki would have slapped him again for this, but now he was firmly decided not to indulge in his sick urges again. Barton wasn't his toy; or rather, he could never be more than just that. A toy. It was foolish to think he could fulfill Loki's thousand-year-old undisclosed desire.

He waved a hand to let the ropes holding Barton fall down. Thankfully, the archer left as soon as he found himself free.

Only after he was gone did Loki sit down, and exhale deeply, deeply, before rubbing his temples in slow circles, willing himself to calm down and just forget about it all and just – just, calm *down*.

---

Chapter End Notes

Ehehehe. It's *on*. 
Loki was in a fouler mood than ever during the following day. He doubted Barton – or anyone, for that matter – could have realized what bothered him, but *he* had been the witness of his own drifts and it sufficed to infuriate him. His carefully crafted numbness was gone; he was back again to his true self, his restless self, his bitter self, and unformulated plans were tangling in his head. His hunger to take control, to have power, had been revived with full force.

His fragile alliance with the Avengers was probably something he should preserve, but in the day after Barton left, his inner turmoil was so intense that he seriously considered killing one of them – just so he could regain a sense of control. He thought of Romanov, thought of slitting her throat and wait until she bled out; the despair of her friends, their unspeakable *pain*, all of this would be all *Loki's* – no matter what they did to him afterwards, they could never shake free of this dreadful influence. He would have won. Death possessed a final quality nothing else could ever quite match.

He tried to reason with himself, though. Killing one his hosts would be most unwise, and more than a little inelegant. But how else was he supposed to defeat that unbearable frustration? It was grating at his nerves, driving him mad, the monster inside him howling for blood. He was acutely aware of his own sadistic impulses, and this was maybe the most painful of it all.

“Brother?”

Loki snapped round at Thor. “I am *not* your brother!”

The thunderer blinked at him. It had been months since Loki had reacted in this way. The trickster stayed panting, then clenched his fists and turned away. “What do you want?” he spat.

“I – ” Thor hesitated. “Are you well?”

“I am *perfectly* fine,” Loki said, willing himself not to snap again. “*Speak. Up.*”

“Fury summons us on the Helicarrier.”

That was enough of a novelty for Loki to look at him again. “Us? What am I wanted for? Surely, not another therapy session.”

“Indeed, no,” Thor winced. “The director wants to discuss the help you might bring them.”

“Again? After what happened last time? Is the golden prince not enough for them?”

His once-brother, as always, missed the sarcasm and answered, “I am but a warrior; I can offer them
only limited help in comparison with your skills as a wizard and a strategist.”

Loki snorted. Oh, this was just too ironic. He had fought his entire life to leave Thor's shadow, and he had finally succeeded – he was a better tool than the prince of Asgard. How very fulfilling.

“Will you come?” Thor asked.

“No,” Loki said icily. “How dare they even ask.”

He turned away and plonked himself in his chair, all the while hating the way he must look like a sulking child.

Thor was not leaving, though.

“What now?” Loki said irritatedly.

“You have to be careful,” Thor said in a subdued voice.

The trickster frowned at him. What was this new idiocy?

“I cannot protect you from the Midgardian justice forever,” Thor said. “I will not force you, brother. But bear in mind that Fury is not the ruler of this world. Should you not prove yourself useful... others might retaliate. And my hands will be bound.”

Loki wanted to snap at him, but the genuine worry in Thor's voice deflated his anger, leaving only a vague weariness. He could not decently tell his not-brother that he couldn't have cared less about the Midgardian justice, and that he was only pretending to repent out of sheer boredom. He could have told him, actually – but for some obscure reason, he did not.

“Fine,” he said, waving a hand at him. “I heard you. Be gone now.”

“I shall come back in the morrow.”

“Fine,” Loki repeated.

Thor looked like he wanted to speak some more, but thought twice and eventually left. Loki rubbed his face with both hands. Thor's concern made him feel like a little boy – and few things are more dictatorial and uncompromising than little boys. The more puerile, the more inexorable. Loki took a deep breath, and thought of torturing Thor, of torturing Odin, of torturing Fury, of bringing them all down and have they begging in terrified sobs – and then, after they'd recognized his supremacy, after they'd lost all hope, after he could gain nothing more by killing them, he would kill them anyway, with all the inflexibility, the selfishness of cruel little kids...

His fingers suddenly clenched in his own hair and he briskly got up. He must not let such things invade his mind – it was himself he was torturing with these images. The more he wished for control, for glory, for supremacy, the more obvious it was that he was laughably helpless. He had once been the greatest threat upon this world; now they all ignored the little boy who could only stamp his feet with rage.

At the very second this thought crossed Loki's mind, someone knocked on the door.

He snapped round at it. Thor? – no. He would have just walked inside. An Avenger then.

Maybe –

No. No. No. Don't be such a fool. Loki gritted his teeth, then retreated in his bedroom; from there, he
ordered the door to open, and closed his eyes.

There was a shuffling of feet. He recognized the faint smell of bowstring wax underneath the scent of bathing soaps. Barton.

He breathed it in, nostrils fluttering and widening, as though he could have breathed Barton's very essence. Oh, that was an interesting idea – a disembodied victim, deprived even of flesh and caged in a bowl of glass, a pretty toy for Loki to own, a collectible waiting on a shelf for other souls to join it...

He snapped out of his daydreaming. It was amazing how Barton's closeness managed to trigger the most ludicrous fantasies in Loki's sick mind. Why was he back? It couldn't be for the reason Loki hoped for. No, he mustn't hope. He must never hope for anything again – it was safer this way.

“Agent Barton,” he said, coming out of his room.

The archer snapped round at him. He was standing very straight, the line of his shoulders very stiff, more nervous than a caged animal. Loki could see his every twitch; the way he gritted his teeth; the drop of water slowly rolling down his neck. He radiated coldness. He must have taken a cold shower – why?

Why, for the same reason Loki had nearly skinned himself in the cells of Asgard. Self-harm as a way of control. Except what had worked for Loki – what had numbed his soul and deadened his mind – had sharpened the edge Barton was on. To see him like this, nervous and jumpy, made Loki want to reach out and take him, force him to stay still, to calm down. The demi-god craved control, and oh, there was so much to control here.

Barton was not here for this, though. There was a vertiginous doubt in his eyes, a bottomless fear, and yet he was decided. He had come with a battle plan.

“Your mind seems clearer than last time,” Loki said. “A welcome improvement.”

Lies, lies, lies. He would have loved for Barton to attack him again, so he could teach him politeness in an even more thorough way.

As things were, he could still play with him, though.

“Have a seat,” he said, knowing fully well that Barton's restlessness would only worsen if he tried to sit still. Indeed, the archer appeared to grow even more edgy until he finally blurted, “I'd rather stand.”

“Very well,” Loki said.

He was disappointed – he shouldn't have. He knew Barton would not obey, but still... To have him standing there was just too tempting. The way he averted his eyes was delicious. As well as his controlled tremors. Loki wanted to grab his chin and make him look at him in the eyes; he wanted to hurt Barton until he couldn't control his shivers anymore. Everything he did, Loki wanted to force him to do the opposite, just because.

That was when Barton said, “Alright, you win.”

Loki blinked at him – for a second, he almost thought Barton had read his mind somehow. But no, the archer was referring to their earlier conversation.

Except it made even less sense. He meant... he must mean...
...he didn't mean...?

“I accept,” Barton confirmed, jaw clenched, firmly decided to carry this out.

His absurd courage touched Loki for a second; but incomprehension quickly overshadowed it as he tried to rein in his wildly aroused mind. No, no, no, he should not get excited – there must be a misunderstanding somewhere. Because Barton had just walked through the door to kneel before his greatest enemy, and in no way Loki's fantasies suddenly coming to life could make any sense. Was this an illusion?

“You are offering yourself to me,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

“I am offering myself to you,” Barton mumbled.

He didn't seem happy about it at all. He kept glancing away in the obvious demeanor of someone wanting to be elsewhere; he looked furious and, in a way, sulking, as though he had been coerced into coming here by some unspeakable higher force. Yet there he was.

Offering himself.

Loki tried to repress his excitation. No, this was just too perfect to be true. He could not allow himself to believe it. Not just now.

“Why?” he asked, hating how disheveled he must sound.

Barton didn't seem to notice it, though; he was in quite a state himself. “Because I need it,” he muttered. “Because you've already seen me at my basest anyway.”

It made... sense, Loki guessed. He knew Barton needed submission, and he guessed none of his friends would accept it so easily. But there was a line between drawing conclusions and actually acting on them. Surely, Loki was not Barton's first choice, not even his second or third – or hundredth. Anyone on this planet would have been less humiliating for Barton to pick.

So why was he here now? Surely, he hadn't actually changed his mind about Loki Laufeyson. Had he?

“But,” Loki frowned. “Do you trust me?”

“Hell no.”

Just what he thought. But then it didn't make sense at all – Barton was either stupid, or completely uninterested in his own existence.

“A death wish, then?”

“I don't think you would kill me,” Barton said.

He took a deep breath. “I don't think you would maim me. I'm not worth losing the trust of Thor and the others, no matter how much you'd enjoy it.”

Loki repressed a wide grin. He had forgotten he was pretending to submit to SHIELD's whims. In reality, he could have killed Barton, right here, right now, retreat in his house and never hear a word about it again. But what for, when life was treating him with such a delicious gift?

Like that, it could work. Barton's state was too humiliating for him to risk anyone else knowing; and he was convinced, the poor fool, that going to Loki Laufeyson was somehow safe, in the larger
meaning of the word. So there he was.

**Offering himself?**

Loki couldn't hold it in any longer – a wave of raw craving invaded every last corner of his soul and the monster roared with anticipated joy. Oh, the fun he would have. He would make that man his – he would make him his, so thoroughly, so merclessly, that he might even end up feeling sated for once in his long life.

“Stellar reasoning,” he breathed, stepping closer.

He didn't miss the way Barton stiffened, and he felt his own pupils blow to Hel. Oh, this was just too perfect. He had a willing victim, and yet this victim loathed and dreaded him. His screams, his fear – none of it would be faked.

“No killing, no maiming?” he breathed. “I suppose I could work with that.”

He stared at Barton, barely breathing. Everything he had always wanted, just waiting to be taken. It was too good to be true.

“But you would let me torture you,” he murmured. “You would let me get... creative.”

His hand raised up to brush Barton's chin, but the archer inched away and Loki's fingers closed like he'd been burned.

He went completely still. In this second, everything turned upside down and he was the one submitted to Barton's whims. If he said no – if he shook his head, Loki could not hurt him. Not in the way he wanted. Not with that perfect mix of well-considered consent and genuine repulsion he felt beneath the taut façade.

He waited for Barton's answer, and in the split second – in the eternity – it took, he lost hope already.

But then, Barton breathed, “Yeah. I would. As long as I can stay functional on the field.”

Loki stopped breathing and something inside him snapped and let free a tidal wave of – you will be functional. I will make you functional, I will make you anything I want you to be, and everything you are you will owe it to me and me alone, you will be my object, my creation, my property, you will grovel at my feet and it still won't be enough, I will be your master, your lord, your god –

“Very well,” he breathed.

He couldn't listen to the voice of reason any longer.

He held out his hand just to see if Barton would reach out, and the archer did. How adorable he actually thought this was a common deal.

Time for his first lesson.

Lightning quick, Loki backhanded him across the face – and almost came right now just from it. He was really too excited; he hadn't controlled his strength and sent Barton flying to the floor. For a second of terror – absolute terror, the valley to his peak of arousal – he thought this would be a deal-breaker; but when Barton straightened up, although there was fear and anger and fight in his eyes, there was also a hesitant longing.
“Oh,” Loki breathed out, an uncontrolled, erotic sound he should have been ashamed of. “There will be much to learn.”

He could barely hear himself think over the sound of his throbbing blood. His lips were dry; he licked them, but it didn't help – only made him more thirsty, if that was even possible. He couldn't wait any longer.

Nothing could save Barton now.

“Undress yourself,” Loki breathed.

He watched in utter delight as Barton actually obeyed him. The way he got up very slowly, the way his breath shook, the tautness of his muscles as he reluctantly peeled off his clothes, the way he kept staring at the floor – so, perfect. He was terrified. Loki felt a thrill of bliss running through his entire self, stung and excited by the rush of carnal pleasure, leaving him hungry for so much more.

Barton stopped at his undergarments.

“All of it,” Loki hissed.

Barton pushed it all down, then waited there, utterly humiliated and staring at the floor. His body wasn't unpleasant to watch, far from it; but the mere fact that Loki was now entitled to watch would have made it infinitely pleasurable, no matter how he looked. The demi-god thought of making him stand here naked all night; the thought was so delicious he almost carried it out, but there was so much else he wanted to do – and he wanted to do all at once, because a part of him still didn't quite believe this was truly happening, and an even bigger part was positive it would never happen again.

That was when Loki realized he was getting too worked up once more.

Barton was human; and he was, in mind if not in body, a virgin. If Loki took him now – if he unloaded a thousand years of frustrated power on a mere mortal – he was very likely not to even survive. Loki took a deep breath and berated himself. Patience. Not everything at once. Do not waste it. For Hel's sake, do not waste the only chance you ever had.

When he looked up, Barton hadn't moved, except for the fact that he was very clearly shaking. A pang of Loki's gentler side – the side which writhed in shame every time after he'd given in to his sick urges – manifested itself then; for a split second, he felt pity, protectiveness, and even fondness towards the terrified archer. Barton was so vulnerable right now. He could have been so easily broken.

To break him indeed would be all the more despicable. Too easy. Loki believed himself more subtle and elegant than a lust-driven brute. With a heroic effort, he pushed his urges down and, instead of hitting the mortal again, put a hand in the center of his chest.

He had wanted to feel his heart – to remind himself that this was a form of sentient, if inferior, life. But his usual vague contempt for humans was overshadowed yet again when he felt how fast Barton's heart was beating. He was no ordinary mortal; he was Loki's panicked pet. Or he could be.

If Loki did this right.

“Please,” Barton muttered.

The demi-god felt his own pulse pick up in speed. Oh, begging was really working for him – almost excruciatingly so. The fact that Barton had done it on his own volition didn't hurt either. In this moment, Loki would have granted him anything.
“Please what?” he breathed.

“Please,” Barton rapped out, face clenched in a scowl like he was in pain – “please let's get done with it.”

He expects to be raped, Loki suddenly realized. He expects me to rape him, and he still came to me.

How desperate could he be? In how much pain? How confused, how scared, how lost? A strange, twisted compassion rose again in Loki's chest. Barton was oblivious to it; he didn't know how lucky, how honored he should have felt.

Loki would just have to teach him.

But first, they must both calm down, or one of them might just die from a heart attack. Loki himself felt he needed to stand back for a little while. He dropped his hand and gestured towards his room. “Go. Kneel on the bed away from the door, and wait.”

Barton's features quivered. He didn't want to wait – *let's get done with it*, he'd said. But Loki would not allow this to be a quick, rushed fix. He would take his time, and Barton needed to learn patience anyway. Needed to learn so many things. He was like rough clay Loki could hardly wait to dirty his hands with. Eventually, the archer nodded and turned away; but Loki liked the sound of that shaky voice too much, and he heard Barton's silence as a wall. The archer could just shut up indeed, go into lockdown and pretend he was a log of wood it until it was done.

See if Loki allowed it.

“As long as your mouth is free, you will answer me verbally, Barton.”

He heard a dry breath; then, “Yes,” was the muttered reply.

To be obeyed sent small pangs of electricity up Loki's spine. He ordered, and Barton complied. Oh, it was a good thing he'd sent the archer away – he could have just snapped and ruined it all otherwise. He took a few deep breaths, and suddenly felt wobbly enough so he had to lean against the wall.

Oh, yes. Oh, Valhalla, yes. Hundreds and hundreds of years of repressed violence, of frustrated power, of craved control were pulsing in his veins. He could have it all. Of course, this was only one soul – only one fuck – but to possess a single person had an enchanting side to it. Ruling the world was great and glorious, but Loki could have never hoped to hold absolute control over a crowd. Over Barton, though? He could take his time and work him good and hard, decorticate him, skin him, break him. He could know him intimately, quarter him, expose him, own him entirely. A work of art.

But first, he had to calm down. Calm down.

*Calm.*

*Down.*

He stayed there almost five minutes, until he felt he could walk inside his own room without assaulting the man waiting there – not immediately at least.
Barton was beautiful.

There was no other word for it. He was kneeling like he'd been told, with his head bowed and his hands clasped in his back, in an instinctive position of utter submission. How he craved it, underneath those layers and layers of breathtaking terror. The curve of his spine as he bent his head, the expanse of his ribs as he breathed in, the twin globes of his ass resting on his heels; it was a real painting. Loki found himself breathless again, but in a more quiet, less aggressive way. This was the mortal's true first time; he would break down if handled wrong. But Loki had a thousand years of experience. He could show him the way; he could break past his walls of fear, and show him the way.

You were made to be ruled.

He sat next to him and put his hands on the tense shoulders, which tensed even more underneath his touch; but that was all. Barton stayed here, kneeling naked, without a word, willing — terrified beyond words and breath, but willing.

Loki swallowed thickly. His throat really shouldn't have been so dry. Barton did trust him somehow — if only not to kill him. Dominance didn't have to be about pain, though; the demi-god loved pain, of course, but Barton wasn't ready for it. He had agreed to be tortured, but if Loki hurt him now, the archer would shield himself from the pain. Block it out in a whole. The demi-god had to take control in a different manner; something that would not be true torture, but still qualify as an undeniable assertion of his power. As invasion.

He knew just the way.

Loki gripped the hard muscle between Barton's neck and shoulders, and squeezed, softly at once, then harder, until the archer let out a moan of pain. That was when he knew he had to stop — pity; he could barely feel the clenching of his own muscles. For all its weakness, Loki still realized that Barton's body was like layers and layers of boiled leather at the moment. He pushed again, rubbed the stiff trapezius with only a little more strength, and felt the leather give in under his fingers. Barton was breathless and licked his lips at regular intervals, but didn't make another sound. He was like a fascinated prey under the predator's claw, obsessed with Loki's touch.

Perfect. There is nothing else, but me, Barton. Me.

Loki pressed in the middle of his curved spine and forced him to straighten up; Barton's breathing picked up speed, but he still said nothing. The demi-god's plan was simple. Torture, he'd found very quickly, targets not the body, but the mind — the flesh becoming a mere vessel for the battle of wills between the torturer and the tortured. At the moment, though, Barton's mind was unreachable; torture would have just provoked a shutdown. So Loki would win him by taking over his body. If he forced it to relax, if he used it to show Baron how thoroughly owned he was, his mind would have no choice but to follow.

In theory.

“Lie down on your stomach,” he said. He needed better access.

Barton obeyed yet again, and Loki rubbed his shoulders as a reward. He opened Barton's legs — the archer stiffened, then relaxed ever so slightly when Loki did no move towards his groin. The demi-god grabbed his wrists to position his hands flat on each side of his head; then he got to work. He decided to play a little with Barton's pain threshold, see exactly how much strength he could handle
before the line between discomfort and agony was crossed. He pressed with the edges of his hands, with his knuckles, with his thumbs. The archer's reactions were delightful – Loki could have listened to his ragged breath and stifled moans for hours – but after a while, the demi-god wasn't even hearing them anymore, focused as he was on Barton's back. The damn muscles just would *not* relax.

He insisted, took his time, and eventually, the body gave in. Loki went up to Barton's head and turned on one side, then on the other. Barton stopped breathing at first, then resumed his panting breaths when he realized that he was in no immediate danger.

A threshold was definitely crossed then. Was it because Barton had feared death and been proved wrong? He started to relax in a more definite way, his muscles growing softer more easily under Loki's hands, and staying this way now. The archer's back wasn't like leather anymore, and his legs took only minutes to join the rest of the body in its slow surrender.

Loki's impatience was spiking up again. Playing with the body was nice, but he wanted to see Barton's eyes. He had allowed him to hide his face into his pillow for long enough. He turned him on his back and the archer let himself be manhandled, only sucking in a breath before relaxing again.

His hazy look surprised Loki as Barton's eyes trailed across his face without fear. The archer's anxiety was gone, along with his anger and rebellion. Only remained the *longing* the demi-god had seen after he had hit him.

He was suddenly devoured with the desire to touch *more*. After all, this body was *his*, and he needed to make Barton aware of it. He cupped the archer's cheek first; the gesture was intimate, almost fond, like a lover to his lover, and yet no disgust flared in Barton's eyes. Loki slid down his hand, touched his chest again; and this time, he felt the heart calm and steady under his fingers. He couldn't hold back a grin.

Oh, Barton was *done* for.

His hands roamed all over the archer's body; he suddenly pinched the erected nipples and grinned wider at the jerk he got in return. No pain did not mean no cruelty. Barton's mind was open enough, vulnerable enough for Loki to walk in and take what was his.

He forced the archer to kneel up, and without further ado, grabbed his ass and parted the cheeks. Barton gasped and clenched his jaw to shut himself up before he could protest.

*That's right, not a word. You are mine to play, bowman.*

The thought made Loki dizzy with lust. To think the Avengers had fought so hard to retrieve their friend; if they could have seen him now! The demi-god slid his fingers between the ass cheeks, and rubbed at Barton's rim, without breaching him – too obvious. He cupped his balls with his other hand and smiled when he felt them tighten in his grasp.

The urge to *squeeze*, to *crush*, to have Barton screaming and sobbing in agony overwhelmed him – he pushed it back. Now wasn't the time.

For now, he was all about a subtle, elegant claiming. Humiliation was a beautiful thing, too.

He noticed Barton was getting hard. *Excellent.* Loki hadn't been sure the archer would have an erection, but either he couldn't masturbate properly ever since the serum incident, or he *really* enjoyed his own humbling. Loki smirked at the blush creeping up Barton's chest, then gave his hard shaft the attention it requested. The second he squeezed it, the archer almost squeaked – and gripped Loki's shoulders.
This meant nothing. He needed leverage and the demi-god was the only thing he could hold onto. But still – he feared rape, and yet he went to Loki for protection. He was so confused. A wave of fondness seized the demi-god again. Oh, he would make this good for him. He could break him with pleasure as well.

He started jerking him off, and made it clear that Barton had to get on with the rhythm, and not the other way around. The archer looked very conflicted – fear was obviously still struggling to be heard at the back of his brain, but his body was just begging for its release, for him to let go. Barton's breath grew even more ragged, his panting uneven and almost desperate, almost panicked all over again; perhaps he was trying not to give in, or trying to decide whether he should give in, but after a second, he had to concede his defeat – and screwed his eyes shut as he pulsed inside Loki's hand.

He slumped against the demi-god, utterly ruined, so shocked with his own pleasure that he didn't even appear to notice Loki raising his hand to taste him on his pale fingers.

The demi-god was now trembling with arousal, and Barton's salty taste didn't help. Loki had always adored making his lovers come – force them into the terror of abandon, into the shame of animal pleasure; and the slow build of Barton's surrender had made him tremendously hard.

He had sworn to himself he wouldn't do anything more, but the temptation was just too great. After all, Barton had come expecting to be raped and tortured; so Loki could allow himself to use him. Not that he would have listened to the voice of reason anyway. Not anymore. He wanted to stuff his cock down Barton's mouth and make him gag on it.

Oh, yes – that was an excellent idea.

"On the floor," he breathed.

Barton looked drugged with endorphins. It was fascinating to watch him kneel without question, without the slightest hint of fear. Surely, Loki hadn't gained his trust so fast; but his ministrations had apparently shut down the reasoning part of Barton's brain. The archer looked incredibly serene and even hazily happy to be ordered around.

Is it not easier this way? Loki remembered asking the crowd in Stuttgart.

Barton certainly seemed to think it was. At the moment anyway.

Loki wanted to take him, and he felt he couldn't wait a second more. The implacable tantrum of a spoiled little boy. Now. Mine. He would force himself on Barton – and too bad for him if his bubble of quietness burst out at the worst moment.

He spread his legs, then wrapped a hand behind the archer's neck and brutally pressed his face against his crotch. Barton kept breathing evenly; he even parted his mouth a little, as though he meant to lick the leather covering Loki's erection.

Now he was just asking for it.

Without further ado, Loki wished his clothing away, took himself in hand and pressed the tip of his cock to Barton's lips. The archer's breath fluttered a little, but he still didn't even try to protest; he only opened his mouth and let out a small moan as the demi-god pushed inside, sliding down his tongue and into his throat. Barton had to hold his mouth wide open in his efforts not to bite – his jaw must ache – and he was trying to breathe through his nose, with little success.

It was perfect.
Loki grinned at the small signs of the archer's discomfort, then started thrusting, more slowly than if he had taken him from behind, but still relentlessly enough for tears to well up in the archer's eyes. Oh – he could cry. Excellent. Next time, Loki would have him sobbing. Next time, he would get to hear him scream.

*Take it*, he thought in sudden burst of sadism – he hated the thought of exposing his own urges and tried not to let them show, but he was burning beneath dispassionate features, as he *fucked* Barton's face, all thought of carefulness gone to Hel, *take it, you can beg and writhe but it won't change a thing.*

What he didn't say, he made it clear by going at it even rougher, until he felt Barton's throat constrict around him in his efforts to breathe. He pulled back a little in his great leniency; Barton coughed a little around his cock, and, well, that meant he had filled his lungs – Loki went at it again, and *watched* it, watched his cock disappear and reappear between the reddened, slick lips. And suddenly Barton *sucked* him – once – and that was it for him.

He pulsed down the archer's throat and a fit of devilish violence seized him again – he tightened his grip on the short hair and tugged forward, burying himself to the hilt, filling Barton's mouth and hitting the back of his throat as he pulsed and pulsed and *oh, you better swallow, bowman.*

The archer did, his brow furrowing a little but promptly smoothing again, like a calm lake briefly rippling under the wind. Loki marveled at it, at this magic which had made his awful crime acceptable.

**Crime.**

Crime, yes. Because now that he had physically come, the coin was flipped, and the sadistic part of himself was becoming a distant stranger. What had this stranger – this *monster* – done to a helpless victim?

But Barton wasn't hurt.

In fact, he looked as unhurt as humanly possible. His face reflected only a distant bliss, and he was simply waiting for what would come next, kneeling with his hands crossed in his back again, quietly catching his breath.

Loki could have cried with shame and relief. This was impossible, but yet the proof was there. Barton *really* wanted this. This meant that for the first time, Loki could be himself without restraint. He could let his urges take over, and not become a monster.

Well – not entirely.

He trailed a hand through Barton's short hair, without pulling this time. The archer seemed to enjoy the petting, closing his eyes under the touch. Loki was seized with the irrational need to break him again – but with gentleness this time.

Yes, he wanted to take Barton in every way he could be taken. Pain, pleasure, tenderness, who knew what else.

“That,” he murmured, “was the first lesson.”
The archer didn't realize these words were meant for the both of them, and only nodded. Loki wanted to hear him more than anything. “Out loud,” he ordered softly.

“Yes,” Barton croaked.

His throat was sore, of course, but the underlying tones in his voice talked only of quietness.

“You will remember it,” Loki said.

*Remember for the both of us. Remember I can be gentle even as a monster. Remember I will not always be. Remember to accept it. Remember to be mine.*

“Yes,” Barton whispered again.

He looked exhausted, now. Loki guessed he hadn't slept much lately. This wasn't good. He wanted the archer well-rested and healthy – so he could endure what Loki would give him.

His groin stirred again at the thought. He'd better get Barton away from him.

“Get up,” he murmured. “Dress yourself and get some rest.”

“Yes,” Barton breathed, for the third time.

Loki watched himself go with incredulity.

What had just happened? Had it all been real? He couldn't believe it. For a second, he wanted to call Barton back, chain him at the foot of the bed as proof; but by the time he formulated this ludicrous thought, the archer had vanished.

Loki stayed there in utter shock, staring at the closed door, unable to believe he had fulfilled his own desires for the first real time in his thousand years of existence – and that nobody would blame him for it.

Chapter End Notes

Whew.
Thoughts? :)
Loki spent the next day in a haze of nervousness. He let his mind wander so much that Thor called him out several times on it—he couldn't read a book, couldn't start a conversation, couldn't even stare outside the window without coming to a slow halt and staying spaced out for long minutes. Every time, his nerves started to tingle with the memory of Barton's submission, of the way he had accepted it, taken it—and at this point, Loki had no other choice but to retreat in the shower to relieve himself. He did not like it very much, but he hated to be on the edge near his not-brother.

He had to think. He had to think of what to do next. Thor wasn't going to spend all his nights on the Helicarrier, and there was no way Loki would risk taking Barton in his own chambers with that big oaf in the other room. If they were found, their little arrangement would come to an immediate end. One more reason to get along with the Thunderer and his pathetic friends.

A part of Loki still lamented over the pettiness of his current preoccupations. What had become of the world conqueror, of the Avengers' arch-enemy, of the God of Lies and Chaos? He was meant for glory—for greatness. He was meant for revenge.

But mostly, he was meant for control, and right now he craved to control Barton more than anything. Something that would both resist and not resist him; something he would have to strive for, something he would have to claim, every step forward a victory in itself.

In his idleness, he could think of nothing more important. Oh, what was he trying to prove, anyway? He could let himself be dormant for a while; it would always be time to resume his schemes. First, there was Barton, and the endless horizons his shameful cravings opened up.

What would they do next? Loki wanted to hear him scream, more than anything. There hadn't been enough pain involved last time. He had to be careful not to leave permanent marks, though. Except if they could be hidden. Barton's arms were bare most of the time, but it wasn't his arms Loki was after.

Although they were truly beautiful to behold, and would be even more once they bulged and fought against unforgiving ropes. Oh, yes, Loki would torture him, tie him down and made him beg and cry.

He just that to wait and it would all come to him.
Except that obviously, the archer had a different take on the situation.

Which wasn’t surprising—Loki had no idea how he had reacted to the memory of their night together, after snapping out of his blissful haze; but he could guess. The shame Barton must have felt. The demi-god was no stranger to it; it had devoured him after he had made the maiden cry, or the stable boy come. It had eaten him up every time he killed an enemy and felt a thrill of power in return. It had tormented him for long, long nights after his only visit to the slave market. He was a monster, but Barton was an animal, too, and Loki could give him what he wanted. What they both wanted.

So he simply waited for him to come back. By the end of the fifth day, he was growing dangerously fidgety, though.

“Brother,” Thor said.

Loki took a deep breath and forced his voice to be steady. “What?”

“You are... restless.”

“I am bored,” Loki spat. “How can you stand such a stiflingly dull life?”

“You mean calm,” Thor said. “There have been no attacks in two weeks; a welcome change.”

Loki scoffed.

“We could spar,” Thor offered hopefully. “Like we used to.”

He had tried to get his brother in Stark Tower's 'gym', as the mortals put it, from day one. Loki wasn't opposed to the idea of physical exertion; he was driving himself crazy at the moment. Perhaps he should have just escaped to his house, and from there, into the wilderness of a distant world, to battle savage beasts and exhaust his unresolved tension. But the disembodied voice they called Jarvis would have noticed it, putting Barton forever out of reach. He just had to be patient.

He would not spar with Thor, though. Too many memories, and not all of them good.

Someone knocked at the door and Loki all but startled to his feet.

“Barton, my friend. It is certainly a surprise to see you down here again.”

To you perhaps, you big, oblivious dolt.

“How can I be of assistance?”

By going for a stroll in Hel!

“I’m—” Barton's uneasy voice answered. “I'm—here to—”

To hear him so unprepared made Loki brutally sober up. It was his job to take things in hand—more than his job; his nature. Barton's arrival had cleared the confusion and put him in charge again, just like a magnet set in movement by the proximity of its opposite.
“Does it still concern Loki?”

*No, it concerns the color of the sofa, you blind idiot.*

“No—I mean, yes,” Barton was saying. “But it's no big deal—I just—”

“Let me guess,” Loki said out loud, coming closer. “This is about your quiver yet again.”

Lying.

He loved lying. The crafting part was the funniest. Planning ahead a machination on the long haul was always gratifying, but simple little lies, pure *mischief*, was something he had dearly missed. He had talked about Barton's quiver because it was a familiar thing—and a surprise two-man con required familiar elements for the con-men to rely on.

Barton's lost eyes sought his, and his need for guidance was so obvious Loki felt the same thrill he'd felt when the archer had leaned against him in his lust-induced confusion. If Barton didn't pick up on his lie, though, it would be embarrassing at best...

But then the archer's gaze cleared up.

“Yes,” he said, with still a hint of uncertainty in his eyes, but no doubts left in his voice. Putting on a *show*. “You've delayed it long enough, don't you think?”

*Good,* Loki thought, almost smiling. Barton was clever; Loki had known from their previous cooperation, but it was a delight to have it confirmed now that the archer was in his right mind. A dumb toy would have been worse than no toy at all.

“What *about* Barton's quiver?” Thor frowned.

Ah, the crucial part. A good lie, Loki had found, must be either ridiculously unrealistic, or pathetically trivial. Anything in-between would fail. As it was, he aimed for trivial—it was easy; he just had to combine the existing elements. Himself, Loki; Barton's quiver; and a favor long due. Add a false testimony to cement it all, and there you had it.

“Stark and I were discussing the possibility for me to enchant it, so it would never get empty.”

He caught Barton's blink and grinned.

“Oh,” Thor said. “That would be very... kind of you.”

Loki smirked and stared right into Barton's eyes. “I am all about *kindness,* lately.” He was delighted in the resulting shiver his innuendo stirred up the archer's back.

“But where *is* your quiver?” Thor frowned, turning to Barton.

*Your turn,* Loki thought, holding Barton's gaze. *It is easy. Just follow the logic. Something trivial. Something that will get Thor away from us—or ourselves away from Thor.* It also counted as a test, somehow—if Barton *did* want Loki to uphold his end of the deal, he would find a way to make it happen. He could have bailed out at this point.

“It's in my room,” Barton said, *something to get yourself away from Thor,* “It's recharging—*something trivial,*”—and I'm going to train in a few hours so I can't bring it here,” *follow the logic.* He raised an eyebrow at Loki. “Are you coming or what? I'm a busy man.”

*Something to get me away from Thor.* And that small bit of insolence at the end—a distraction from
the main event.

Flawless!

Loki was ecstatic. To lie to Thor, to force Barton to lie with him, to have a shared secret was all the more exciting since it must be triggering a certain amount of guilt for the torn archer. Their bond was unnatural in more ways than once, and all of them were wonderful to Loki's twisted taste.

Thor looked alarmed at Barton's snappish tone, but Loki didn't let him speak. “It is fine,” he assured Thor. “Remember—I am kind now.”

And Barton will bear the marks of my kindness for days.

Thor had no further reasons to stand between them—after all, he should be encouraging any form of cooperation between his lost brother and his teammates. “Don't be too long,” he called out as they walked away.

“Jeez” the archer said between his teeth once they were out from hearing range. “Is he always like that, or is today the Asgardian holiday for Over-Protectiveness?”

Loki repressed a chuckle—it was nice to know that he wasn't the only one to find Thor's mother hen demeanor infuriating at best and disturbing at worst. This time, it wasn't him his brother was protecting, though; he was worried about Barton—quite right, too. But when Loki pointed it out, Barton clenched his jaw and answered, “It's not protection I need from you.”

Only then did Loki notice how on edge he was. His own state had nothing on Barton's fidgety restlessness. He looked drawn, too, his skin pale and marred with dark rings under his eyes. His skin was glistening with a film of unhealthy sweat, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists in a nervous twitch.

Loki put a hand on his neck and Barton twitched.

“You are back on the edge,” the demi-god said as they stopped before the elevators.

“That's pretty much where I live.”

He shrugged his hand away; surprised, Loki let him, but a dark humor seized him the next second. No, Barton. You dragged this out. You didn't want to come back to me, so you restrained yourself until you lost it once again. The archer had no capacity for control; he needed it from an outside source. But he hated the only source he had at hand—which made it all the more fun.

“You still managed to react swiftly enough to the quiver lie,” Loki said.

“Was it just a lie ? I could really use something like that, you know.”

Trying to be flippant now? Had Barton no idea how transparent he was at the moment?

“You came to me again,” Loki whispered, almost tasting on his tongue Barton's shiver of denial. “You must be so desperate.”

Oh, he was, so much that he went perfectly still when Loki grabbed his neck, like a cub carried by a tigress; putting all his trust into the hand holding him, if for a brief moment.

“Oh, yes,” Loki hissed fiercely. “You crave it. It is written in every one of your nerves.”

He felt his own need growing inside him and setting his very blood to fire. It was mixed with a good
dose of anger, too. Barton had waited, stubbornly, instead of relieving both their suffering. Loki had told him to remember the end of their last session, remember that acceptance was the key and that he was meant to submit, to crawl like the animal he was. But he hadn't listened.

This called for a punishment. The doors of the elevators opened on Barton's room; he tried to escape Loki's grip again, but it was far too late for that.

“You forgot your lesson,” Loki hissed in his ear.

He threw him down on the floor and crushed his neck with his boot—not too hard, because those bones were so frail, so flaky—but hard enough to make him feel the weight of his master, to let himself know he was being trampled down like the worthless mortal he was. Oh, it felt good, better than Loki had ever felt, and a pang of electricity zapped up his spine, making him straighten up even more over the groveling body.

“You let yourself go until you got almost sick with need again,” he snarled. “And now you expect me to unknot you once more?”

How he would come to regret such presumption. Barton had to realize that the demi-god was not at his beck and call. _Loki_ made the rules.

“Am I your _whore_?” he asked with anger and lust. “Am I prisoner here only for your personal use?”

The archer twitched helplessly under his boot. “No,” he said hurriedly, almost choking on the words, “No, you're not.”

His voice was blank and breathless with terror. His cockiness, his attitude, his nerve—all gone. Loki felt a burning warmth pool in the pit of his stomach, and he removed his foot. Punishing Barton more in this way would be most unwise. He didn't want to cripple him.

Well. Not _overly_ so.

“I was too easy on you,” he said. “On your knees.”

He couldn't help grinning again when Barton complied. Oh, that was a beautiful sight. Kneeling at Loki's feet, where he belonged, him and all the likes of him. This was _right_—Loki's chanting blood could only mean this was deeply, perfectly _right_.

“Let's see,” he mumbled, excitation tinging his voice.

He walked around the archer, pondering. Hurt him, yes—but how? The choices were virtually endless. No one would hear him scream here, and—oh—there were even _exposed beams_. Now that was just too perfect. Yes—Loki could see it now, the muscled body stretched out and bracing itself for the lash.

Yes.

“Please,” Barton choked.

Loki's entire attention focused on him so suddenly that it was a wonder the archer didn't waver under the weight of it. “What?”

Barton's begging always took him by surprise. The archer was usually so proud. He would have taunted Loki with his dying breath, had they been on the battlefield. But here—here—he was trembling and submitted. Loki's _plaything_. 
“Please, I'm sorry. Next time, I won't... I won't wait for so long.” He licked his lips. “You're not here for my use. You're—you're doing this to help me. You're doing me a favor.”

Loki was so stunned even his arousal was short-circuited for a second. Barton's apologies were obviously as genuine as his whine of terror under Loki's boot had been. And spontaneous, too. How could it be?

He was willing. He was—eager. He wanted this, no matter how scared, how angry he might be. And Loki was seized by a powerful feeling which had little to do with sadistic bliss—it was a strange mix of pride and fondness. Gratitude, maybe.

Barton wanted to be good, and he wanted to be good for him. Again, the demi-god silently thanked the Norns. Never before had he witnessed such miracle. Oh, the man would get what he wanted. Not only for Loki's pleasure, but for his own completion. The demi-god's lewd excitation had vanished, letting a more composed feeling settle in. He would teach him. He would punish Barton, but the archer would know that his suffering had a purpose.

But first, Loki wanted more of these heartfelt apologies. This might be the single thing he had never heard in his life before.

“And?” he simply said.

Barton's throat worked silently, but he went on. “And I should be—I should be honored. I'm sorry. I was ungrateful and selfish.”

So desperate. This time, Loki didn't want to mock him for it, but to reassure him. You will get what you want. I am only too eager to give it anyway. But still, it was unbelievable that Clint Barton, the man Loki had so utterly humiliated and tormented during Manhattan, would bow in this way and beg his enemy.

“You are a mess,” the demi-god murmured.

“Yes,” Barton said in a small, humiliated voice.

Loki wouldn't let this stand. They both needed the sharpness of a pain exchange right now; something that would soothe Barton's torment and Loki's desire; something which would make the things of this world crystal clear, if only for a moment.

“Take off your shirt.”

Barton complied, and Loki sat on the bed before him. He saw a flicker of doubt in the archer's eyes—was he to give head once again?—but made sure to dissipate it at once by invoking a swaying leather whip he folded in his hands. Barton's eyes widened almost comically, and Loki could see his breath hitch—which made his own breath hitch in return. But the archer said nothing.

Loki could have beaten him now, but it would have been too sudden. He needed Barton to grasp the thought of his punishment; to see its logic, and embrace it. There was a ritualistic aspect to it, unlike in crass, utilitarian torture. Loki knew just how to underline it.

“Hands up,” he murmured.

His cock stirred up when Barton complied again. Loki could have had the bonds wrapping magically around his wrists, but he did a point in making the knots himself, relishing Barton's growing pallor as the current situation sank in. He was casting minute glances at the whip resting on Loki's knee, blanching a bit more each time. His breath was ragged with fear, but not only fear. In his own way,
he was excited.

They had waited long enough; Loki couldn't contain himself anymore. “Get up,” he ordered, licking his dry lips, “and face the wall.”

Barton obeyed yet again, nervously twisting his bound wrists. Such situations tended to knock him into a strange submissive shape. Loki remembered his hazy state, his fuzzy acceptance of even the most demeaning abuse by the end of their first session. This was where he wanted to bring the archer. Down, down at his feet, where each of them would find the completion he needed in the other.

He tied Barton's bound wrists to the exposed beams—and wasn't he grateful for this convenient architecture—and ran his hand over the naked back. He had explored Barton's entire body five nights ago, but the feeling of a living flesh under his hand was wonderful. Reminding him that this living, sentient creature was submitting to him, that this flesh would bleed to honor a god. He felt a pang of gratitude again. Barton had taken the first step, the one step Loki couldn't have forced out of him—an exchange not only of power, but of respect. He had used the word honor and he had bowed his head.

Loki still couldn't quite believe it.

“You were surprisingly eager to apologize” he murmured.

Barton shivered. Loki took in his half-naked, helpless body, and grinned. “I would _hate_ to disappoint.”

He took a step back, lifted the whip high up and made it sway in his hand before bringing it down. It cracked, then hissed through the air and _hit_ Barton's exposed back, making him startle violently in his restraints. He didn't make a sound, but after the initial clenching which made his muscles stand out like snakes under the skin, he let out a shaky breath and actually relaxed more than before the hit—it only lasted a second; he was tensing again the next, but Loki could tell he was, if nothing else, relieved it had started, and relieved he could see for himself exactly just how much it hurt.

Loki was torn between a rush of pure filthy sadistic _lust_, and the imperative need to do this right. The whip wasn't exactly his weapon of choice, but he had always favored it over a sword or a bow. He must be careful, though—he wanted it to sting, he wanted it to burn, but he didn't want to be the one who lost control. Whipping was a true art; that was the main reason he had kept practicing even after finding out he was much better with a spear.

He made the whip swirl in the air again, then hit Barton across his shoulders. The archer violently tugged at his bonds, but still made no sound except for a loud exhale of breath, trying to regulate his pain, to domesticate it. He was preparing himself for the long haul. Loki almost praised him for it, but let's face it—he wasn't feeling _that_ kind.

He hit Barton's lower back the third time; he was getting back his old reflexes fast, but he was distracted by his victim's uncontrollable moan and frantic tugging at the leather bonds. _Oh. Sensitive spot, is it._ He grinned again—and decided he had tested the waters long enough.

He started hitting with a more relentless rhythm, setting a pattern he kept breaking just to relish Barton's aggravated spasms. He loved the way the whip weighed and swirled in his hand, the handle slightly turning against his palm every time, the wave building up along the swaying length, hissing up and culminating in the harsh shock of the crack; and then immediately after, the blow coming down like the lash had turned into a solid shaft, the sharp sound of leather against flesh, and the cry of pain. He loved the way Barton tugged at his bonds and contracted his shoulders, before letting it
all snap in a sudden spasm each time the lash bit into his skin, then tensing again, building it up, waiting for the next blow. They had gotten into a regular rhythm fast, as though it was a slow dance at the pace of the whip swaying back and forth like a snake. Very soon, red marks started to flare against the archer tan skin, neat, thin lines across his back. Loki almost stopped because he wanted so badly to touch them, feel the evidence of the pain he was inflicting, the discordance in heat and the faint ripple of the abused muscle under his fingertips.

But he needed to go on, crucially so. Barton's groans of pain were starting to sound all the same; these weren't the beautiful, uncontrolled, garbled sounds the torture had pushed out of his unwilling mouth. He was getting used to it, getting into it, and Loki didn't want to let that happen just now.

Let's try a little more strength.

The whip reared up and brushed the ceiling; the demi-god brought it down twice as hard, and the resulting sharp, loud *slap* was music to his ears—not as much, though, as Barton's *scream*.

*Oh,* yes. Loki felt himself grow fully erect in his pants. This sound was the sound of complete abandon. He had total control over him. He could torture him all night long if such was his will.

And as a matter of fact, *such was his will.*

He made the whip crack and hit Barton again, with a sadistic, insane grin the archer couldn't see; but he jumped in his restraints all the same and screamed even louder. After a few more hits, the sounds he made started resembling desperate sobs; he had trouble holding his head upright between blows, and he didn't tense nearly as strongly as before. By then, his back was crisscrossed with red stripes, and it was the most wonderful, arousing, *perfect* sight Loki had ever beheld.

He hit again, and Barton's pain only came out as a frantic breath. He hit again, and the archer started whining with every breath out, shuddering violently, ready to break. Maybe it was time for mercy.

*No,* the monster said inside Loki. *More.*

He hit again.

*More.*

He hit *again* and Barton found the strength to scream one last time, arching back and struggling against his restraints.

*More!*

Loki hit, again, the *lower back,* and the archer's howl strangled in his throat, and he sagged in his bonds, choking on his frantic breath. He could take no more.

*More, more, MORE!*  

Loki let go of the whip like it was burning him and sent it flying on the other side of the bed.

It landed in coils and looked alive for a second, like a leather snake rearing up yet again to bite; but then it passed.

The demi-god was slightly trembling, but not as much as the tortured man struggling to stay on his feet on the other end of the room. Loki swallowed his shame back down. *I stopped. I stopped in time. He is alright.*
The sight of Barton's welts made his arousal flare up once more; the rush of blood, combined with the confusion of his feelings—excitement over shame—sent him swaying a little. He stepped closer and gave in to his urge, tracing the lash marks with trembling fingertips. The guilt vanished again as he felt the archer shuddering underneath his fingers.

Whipped into submission.

“That is a good look on you,” he whispered in Barton's ear.

He didn't expect him to understand just how sincere the comment was. The archer had nearly fainted anyway. It was about time to free him.

Loki untied the bonds holding him up with a wave of his hand; Barton collapsed and the demi-god caught him just in time. Another pang of guilt seized him—the archer was completely drained—but also a pang of strange pride: Barton hadn't complained once throughout the ordeal.

Loki helped him kneel down, then cupped his chin and made him look up. The grey eyes were hazy, almost unfocused. This wasn't just about the natural rush of endorphins. Being tortured did something for him, just as torturing him did something—and more—for Loki.

“So,” he murmured pensively, staring into these bottomless eyes. “You took it well enough.”

Barton seemed to go even more mellow at the praise. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

Loki stilled.

Oh, it was a fantasy of his—receiving thanks and praise for his skills in torture and domination—but a mere fantasy. He wouldn't have dreamed of ordering Barton to thank him; what would have been the point? Fake thanks were worthless.

But now Barton thanked him on his own volition, for the second time. Loki was almost scared for a second; and then, a rush of deep arousal, purple and red, overwhelmed him like never before—something soft and velvety but also fierce, and merciless. It left him dizzy with pure thick lust. With the need to crush and own—mostly own. Make this creature his until it forgot its own name.

“I would enjoy taking you now,” he breathed.


Only then did he realize he was phrasing half of his fantasy out loud. Staring at Barton, he realized it would have to stay just that, a fantasy. The archer couldn't go for another round. He was at his very limit already.

Curse this mortal body and curse this man's stubbornness.

“You are wrung out,” Loki said in displeasure.

But it was alright. He would take what he wanted next time. He would leave Barton ruined and sobbing with shame over his outraged body.

“I hope you will remember that lesson. You will return to my floor the day after tomorrow.”

“Thor will—”
Once again, Loki slapped him before realizing his hand had moved.

He thought Barton to be down in his haze of devotion, and now he was speaking of Thor? No—this Loki would teach him. There was nobody else but the master. He wouldn't let Barton think of these sessions as a game while they were happening. He wouldn't accept anything from him, but the most utter submission.

“Don't worry about Thor,” he said, coldly, calmly, like he didn't think he could sound—but the need to assert his dominance possessed him and made him into a creature of steel. He felt composed, calm, certain. He felt—in control.

“I don't want to hear you say anyone else's name while we are together. Understood?”

“Yes,” Barton panted.

Good. If he had just nodded, or worse, hadn't reacted, Loki was not sure what he would have done to him.

And the realization frightened him. He must get away—get away now, before the purple and black flow which had, somehow, replaced his blood, took over his mind and made him a pain-craving monster again.

“Two days,” he said, “I will be waiting,” and turned away, his heart hammering against his ribs.

* 

He took care of himself in the shower once more, then stayed there for a very long time, facing the wall and leaning against it, his face pressed against his forearm. The physical release only made him feel empty now.

The way Barton had twisted and writhed and struggled and screamed...

He closed his eyes as droplets of water ran down the locks of his black hair. On the red screen of his eyelids, he saw Barton's muscles cording beneath the skin, the tortured, outraged flesh. He remembered his strangled breath.

Loki unconsciously took himself in hand again and parted his lips to breathe through his mouth. Barton's sounds, this symphony of those swallowing, wet sounds immediately interrupted with gasps. Why didn't those have a proper name? The sharp sounds of the whip, and Barton's red stripes, quivering, those angry welts which must burn, burn so bad he would feel them for hours...

Loki felt himself twitch again and brutally straightened up. No. He should sleep now. Sleep, and forget everything, if only for a few hours.
Chapter End Notes

Whew, yet again.

Thank you for reading and commenting! :D
Loki woke up covered in sweat and struggling for breath.

Wincing, he untangled the soaked sheets from his naked body and stood up. He wanted to open a window, but there were no windows in his bedroom.

He gave a longing look at the door and staggered towards it, then realized he was about to leap in the coldness of his house of stone, and stopped himself. Taking a deep breath, he slicked back his hair with both hands. No—Stark's artificial intelligence would feel it. He had to calm down.

He felt like he had kept repeating himself these two words during the past week. How desperate was he, for Barton's deeds to affect him so? Was he really such a monster, for the need to own to burn him like this, to consume him like he had been held down and force-fed red embers?

Monster. He closed his eyes, then walked out of his room and into the dark chambers he shared with Thor. He felt like his entire body was on fire; he had hoped to find some coolness there, but the air was just as thick and smothering. So he took another deep breath, and let all the heat leave him in a deep sigh.

The carpet froze under his bare feet, laces of frost radiating from his heels and toes. For a second, coldness washed through him and cleared his mind in a moment so blissful it was almost worth it.

But then the hunger came back with full-force. He was the same, whether in blue or white skin.

“Brother?”

Loki didn't move, even though each one his muscles had hardened like true ice. It was dark, and his skin was melding in the shadows. Thor couldn't see him; not really. But had Loki turned to face him, his red eyes would have shown.

He was careful not to.

“Brother,” Thor repeated, in a low voice.

It sounded like he was making a point. And he was, in a sense. He would call Loki brother no matter what his senses told him.

Hopeless fool.
It was like slamming one's head against a wall. Thor didn't listen. Loki could play him and lie to him and mock him, but whenever he tried to speak the truth, Thor didn't listen. And Loki was rendered powerless.

*I am a monster,* he would have said. *I wish to crush Barton under my boot. To make him bleed and scream. I wish to own him, for all the things I couldn't own.*

He couldn't own him; he realized that, now that he wasn't half-crazy with lust. But he could make him suffer. He had the permission.

*I enjoy his pain and his fear. I enjoy his disgust and reluctance. I want to take him, to take him and hear him sob in shame for it.*

Had he said these awful, monstrous things, Thor wouldn't have listened. He would have dismissed them, like he always did, saying that Loki was mistaken, or trying to play him, or talking nonsense for the sake of it. But the truth couldn't vanish on a mere whim. Not even lies always could, so truth? Truth was a wall of steel between them.

So instead, Loki mumbled, “I was too hot.”

He heard Thor sigh behind him.

“I did not yet thank you for coming here,” the thunderer mumbled.

Loki almost looked over his shoulder, but then remembered his red eyes again, and closed them.

“I am here because Odin ordered it,” he said. It was a lie, so Thor listened. The truth would have been, *I am here because it matters not where I am.*

“Yes,” Thor said. “And I didn't thank you for complying. For sharing these rooms with me. Like when we were small children. Do you remember?”

*No,* was the truth. *All this happened to someone else. To a living lie shaped into the form of a child.*

“Of course,” Loki lied. “It was unpleasant back then already.”

He let his white skin come back to him and almost felt himself begin to glow faintly in the dark. He invoked a robe of black silk and wrapped it around his pale shoulders.

He wanted Barton. He wanted something he could overpower, something he could vent his frustration on. He wanted someone who actually craved a monster.

Barton hated him, too. But Barton needed him. He had said so himself. And no one had ever, ever needed Loki before—not to mention needed him for what he truly was. For his madness. For his sadistic urges. For his hunger for power. Barton made him exist, more than anything else Loki had ever done or felt or lived through.

“Thor,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Go back to Fury tomorrow night. Tell him—” he took a deep breath. “Tell him I am ready to... *consider* a meeting.”

The warmth in Thor's voice was unbearable. “Of course, brother.”
Fool. It was a high price to pay for a night of quietness with Barton. But Loki couldn't care. His blood was simmering quietly in his veins.

“Good night, then,” he said.

He turned and padded softly to his room, staring straight ahead not to cross Thor's gaze, his not-brother a blurry shape on his left. The shape made a move towards him—like it wanted to hug him or put a hand on his shoulder.

Loki closed the door behind him and let the robe fall down, then buried himself under the covers. He was too cold now.

* *

“Perhaps you should come with me,” Thor said anxiously the next night.

Loki rolled his eyes. “We have talked about this already—it would be reckless for me to arrive unannounced on the Helicarrier.”

“But Fury already expressed his wish for you to aid him.”

“And I refused. It is only polite to show some humility. Go and ask him on my behalf.”

Thor sighed, and Loki flipped a page of his book. “I am only trying to redeem myself,” he said. “Can we not do this my way?”

“Yes,” his not-brother said. “Of course. I apologize.”

_I am going to torture your teammate until he forgets his own name._

Loki allowed a small smile to creep up his lips. “There is no need to apologize.” _Not to me, anyway._ He looked up and added, “Now—be on your way.”

“Very well,” Thor nodded. He hesitated for a second, then said, “I will be back.”

He often said that, as though one day he might not come back at all. Loki knew why—of course he knew. He had fell off the Bifrost, and Thor had yelled with pain and anger, had reached out for him as far as he could.

But he had not come after him.

“Go,” Loki repeated serenely.

Thor left. Loki closed his eyes and begin to count the silent seconds. One. Two...

It was getting dark outside when someone knocked at the door and Loki reopened his eyes. He hadn't stopped counting; the exercise had evened him out. His mind was calm and neat like he wanted it to be. And it had only been two days—Barton would still be his. He would come in humility and ready to bow.
Loki got up gracefully and opened the door. “Agent Barton,” he murmured.

He was glad to see him. He could admit it to himself—there was no *shame* to it. Who wouldn't be glad to be served?

The grey eyes of the archer plunged in his own, then instantly averted themselves. He walked inside with a stiff gait and stayed there, with his back too straight.

Loki slightly frowned. This was strange. Yes, he had tortured Barton last time but—the whipping had not *traumatized* him, Loki was certain of it. Why would the archer be so nervous now? Did he truly not remember the well-being which came from his bowing? Did he not recall how fit he was for submission—how Loki had proved it to him *twice* already?

The demi-god got closer from the man waiting there, and set a hand on his shoulder. He had expected to find the muscles stiffer than they should be; he had not expected Barton to violently *cringe* under his touch. Almost as though he expected, again, to be raped. Had he understood nothing? Had their connection been merely a fantasy of Loki's—another to add to his long, shameful list of poisonous dreams?

He slid a hand under the archer's shirt and brushed up the bare back, experimentally. Barton did not flinch again, not even when Loki felt a throbbing lash under his fingertips and cruelly scratched it.

“Does it hurt?” he breathed.

“Yes,” Barton mumbled.

He talked. He talked, and he was telling the truth. Yet his mindset wasn't right. Intellectually, he wanted to be here, but his body, his subconscious, the animal part of him were wary again. Untamed again. Loki would have to start from scratch.

A desperate anger overwhelmed him all of a sudden. *How*? Had he made such a transient impression, for Barton to shake it off in only two days? Had Barton felt nothing of his power? Was Loki truly his *whore*—Barton's toy, and not the other way around?

Gritting his teeth, he slid his hand out and walked around the archer to face him. He looked down at him for a second—at least he was still taller than Barton, and how pathetic to find comfort in such insignificant details—and cupped his cheek. He could have slapped him, but he knew that coming from a declared enemy, gestures of intimacy were more disturbing than physical assault. And indeed, Barton's eyes flickered down again. He was here to submit, there was no possible doubt. But why had he *forgotten*?

“It has only been two days,” Loki said, in a tone he hoped flippant enough. “Yet you are on edge again.”

He desperately wished for an explanation, but he hadn't explicitly *asked* for one; so of course, Barton didn't answer. In a renewed pang of anger, Loki slid down his hand to the archer's throat, thought of squeezing, thought of choking the life out of him, thought of feeling his spine *snap* like dry wood—

“What happened?” he asked.

Oh, he *sounded* calm enough, but his blood was throbbing in his ears. Barton's submission had allowed Loki to reach the serene mindscape of those who *control*, and are in *control*. But if it had been but a pretence, if it had been but another lie, if Barton had ridiculed him...

“Sitwell,” Barton muttered.
Loki stilled. And waited. His fingers jolted on their own volition and squeezed the archer's throat —no, he thought, scared at his own impulse, no. Give him a chance. Give yourself a chance. The look in his eyes after the whipping—the thanks he gave you—those were not fake.

“A SHIELD shrink,” the archer went on. “Not important.”

Loki frowned. Shrink? Was Barton talking about the same man who had so laughably tried to help him? No—his colleague, but they were one and the same anyway.

“We met,” the demi-god said in a low voice. “And you let that man get to you?”

This was why Barton was unsure again? This was the reason Loki had to tame him all over again—because someone had made him doubt? The demi-god felt a strange, bitter feeling clench at his chest—disappointment, he realized with mild surprise. Barton had let someone else get between them, when Loki had explicitly stated at the end of their last session that nobody was to be placed side by side with Loki even in Barton's thoughts.

“I'm sorry,” Barton mumbled.

Something bright and almost painful flared in Loki's chest. But, oh—the archer was apologizing. He knew he had done wrong.

Or perhaps he just wanted his daily fix; wanted his time with his personal whore.

Loki grinned inwardly. Either way, he knew exactly what to do now. He knew how to punish. And Barton had to learn that Loki could make him suffer in ways he couldn't possibly enjoy.

He let the archer go and said icily, “You are not worth my time.”

Now that got him a reaction. Barton looked almost panicked and Loki's grin bloomed out this time. “Oh, worry not,” he breathed. “You will still be taken care of.”

Confusion and anxiety crossed the archer's face. Good. Let him stew a little. Loki gave him another mocking grin, then turned away and ordered him to follow. Glancing back as he opened the door of his room, he noticed Barton was still dressed.

“Strip,” he ordered. “All of it.”

Barton swallowed, but obeyed and he bared his entire body, without trying to hide his groin. Well. He was learning, after all. He already knew that his body didn't belong to him anymore; that it was Loki's choice to expose or hide it. Maybe he could learn more.

Loki’s despondency had completely vanished by now, but his will to chastise Barton was all the stronger for it. This time, the lesson would not be forgotten.

He noticed Barton was climbing on the mattress and hissed through his teeth. “Did I tell you to get on the bed?”

Barton froze, then retreated and bowed his head. “No.”

His reflexes were coming back quickly enough. All was definitely not lost. And his tendency to forget—this stupid misplaced pride Loki would have to uproot from him one day—only made the challenge more interesting.

Let's see how low I can make you fall.
Loki began by staring at him. He took his time, relishing the slow growth of the archer's embarrassment. Midgardians really hated being nude—or Barton did. *Good.* Loki observed his strong pecs and abs, his arms built by warfare, the small but distinct scars studding his body. Lowering his gaze, he took in his cock resting between his strong thighs. The frizzly hair couldn't hide the fact that Loki's examination was not left unanswered. Oh, so humiliation *did* please Barton.

Loki was only too happy to provide.

“Kneel,” he said, in a voice which was growing husky. “Keep your hands behind your back.”

Barton knelt down—and what a beautiful, *beautiful* sight. Loki was seized by the urge to crush his face into the carpet, to humiliate him more, to bring him *down.*

The monster was waking up. Loki shook himself up. He had to focus.

He invoked a swirl of ropes and got to work. He had never truly tied down anyone before—not for his pleasure, anyway; but he was a skilled artist with a clear view of his goal. *Restrain. Humiliate. Torture.*

And *tease.* That was the most important part. He wanted to drive Barton *insane.*

He started by tying the archer's arms in his back—tying not the wrists, but the forearms together, so his shoulders would be at a stiff, awkward angle. He strapped Barton's upper arms to his chest, then lifted him up on his knees and slid two more ropes between his ass cheeks.

Barton startled, then got very stiff when Loki pressed himself against his back, tugging at the ropes to make them chafe against his rim. *No?* the demi-god thought mockingly.

He wrapped a hand around Barton's cock and stroked him until he was dripping wet in his hand; then he collected the beading pre-come on his thumb. Barton understood and jerked back, but he only managed to press himself against the chest of his torturer. The ropes in his ass were still wrapped around Loki's fingers, and they chafed against the archer's rim when the demi-god raised his hand to grip his hair. He immobilized him in a firm hold and raised his other hand, thumb wet with pre-come, to Barton's lips. The archer tensed and gave a hint of a struggle but Loki held him even firmer.

*Yes,* he thought, shivering with delight. *Such is my will.* He could tell Barton hated it, could tell he desperately wanted to escape at least *this* humiliation—and it made it all the more orgasmic to push his soiled finger past those tight lips, breach them open, and feel the archer sag in defeat.

Point made, Loki grinned then let go of Barton's hair and pulled his thumb out, before taking him in hand again. He wrapped the ropes around the archer's inner thighs, *tugged* again and apart so they would spread his ass open, then wrapped them again—but this time, at the base of his cock, then around the pulsing balls which tightened in agony.

Barton flinched but didn't say a word. Always this misplaced pride. Loki liked him better when he begged. He tightened the knot again and again and *again* until a desperate moan bubbled past the stubborn archer's lips. *Ah*—still no actual words, but this would do for now.

Loki pushed Barton down and finished his work—he tied him in a fetal position, down on his knees and forehead almost touching the floor. Ropes were connecting his neck to the middle of his thighs, and other ropes binding his crossed wrists to his ankles. By the time he was done, the archer was positively shaking, and—what was worth mentioning—throbbingly hard. How he hated this; yet how obviously he was *made* for it. Heat flared in Loki's entire body, but he had to control himself. The game was all about *not* touching.
There was still a sliver of Barton's freedom left to be taken away. Loki grinned at his helpless victim, and put two fingers under his chin. “Do you think we are done?” he asked pleasantly.

Barton screwed his eyes shut. Oh, if he didn't answer—

“Yes,” he panted, in a dry, shaky voice.

Loki smiled in triumph. “You are wrong. Open your mouth.”

He invoked a leather gag—not the awful steel muzzle he had been made to wear, but something softer and almost warm, something with a rich scent and taste which would achieve its purpose much more gracefully. Of course, as much as he liked the idea of bound and gagged, he couldn't deny he preferred to hear Barton—the things he said always surprised Loki so wonderfully. But today's game was all about not touching; not hearing; not even being there.

He pushed the gag between the archer's teeth, then got up, resisting the impulse to dust his hands after a work well done. Now that he was towering above him, Barton made for an even more maddening sight. Absolutely helpless. And he did realize it, too—a trusting lover would not have truly believed Loki could hurt him or her; would not have experienced true fear, true abandon, true gratitude at being handled skilfully—though cruelly. But everything about Barton was sincere, because he hated Loki.


He turned away. He must leave, because this was part of the punishment—but also because if he stayed here for a second longer, he would do, or say, or think something he would regret.

He sat on the very floor behind the door, and closed his eyes. At first, he heard nothing; then Barton's ragged breaths started coming through, as well as the subtle chafing of rope against flesh as he struggled to find a comfortable position. To be left alone—or so he thought—and to be forced to humiliate himself must be excruciating for him. Because if a standard enemy like Doom had put him in this uncomfortable position, he could have hated and planned his vengeance and looked for a way out. But here? He wasn't supposed to free himself. He had agreed to this and ultimately, he only had himself to blame.

Loki opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. It was weird—the thought of a helpless, humbled Barton should have aroused him enough for his thoughts to white out with pure lust. But now that he was alone, he was left to think about the man in his room and what this man meant to him.

Loki made every rule; however, it didn't change the fact that every time Barton left, the game stopped and he went back to his other persona—the one which had shot an arrow at Loki's eye; the one which fought on the battlefield. Loki was his whore, no matter how hard he struggled to deny it. Strange, that he must feel so helpless against Barton, even when that same Barton was bound and gagged at the foot of his bed.

Loki took his head between his hands. This was ridiculous. Yes, the archer was somehow using him, but Loki was the one in control. So what, if he had to teach Barton his place all over again each time? It was even better. It wasn't like Loki had honestly thought he could make the archer his; to pretend was enough, and Barton's pain, his fear, his shame were undoubtedly real. Every time he left, he
would heal his shattered dignity; and every time he came back Loki could break him again. This was a cycle they could both accommodate to, without—

A loud moan was heard behind the door and Loki startled and instantly got on his feet. He took a second to compose himself, then turned the doorknob and walked inside.

Barton had not surrendered to his restraints, but his constant shifting and struggling had caused the ropes to start burning his skin. The leather gag, of course, was making him drool. Loki saw pain, hatred and refusal in his eyes, but also something frantic which did not express a will to get away from the demi-god, but closer. A desperate need, a longing to be taken care of—or at the very least, acknowledged.

Loki's mood improved drastically but, sadly for Barton, his sadistic urges were equally revived. He gripped Barton's hair and almost mewled with pleasure at the wince he got in return; invoking a small piece of cloth, he wiped the saliva off the humiliated archer's chin and breathed, “Manners, Barton. This is really off-putting.”

Anger made his victim shake, but he seemed otherwise fine, if in great discomfort; he must have moaned only to attract attention—or because he couldn't hold it in anymore.

Loki gave a not entirely insincere sigh. Why must Barton make this so hard on himself? He knew he could not win. He had come here on his own volition. Why couldn't he walk the path down just as willingly? Why could he not blink this anger away, bow his head and surrender?

“Why not?” the demi-god murmured. “Why not yield now, and save us some time?”

Barton's growl of hatred was enough of an answer. Loki just smirked at him. Well, more fun for him. “Suit yourself.”

Barton was still so hard. He must be in agony. How could he ignore that signal, Loki had no idea. “Your body's the wiser,” he supplied helpfully, in the improbable case Barton just hadn't noticed.

But he had; in fact, he actually looked away as though he could still hope to hide any part of himself from Loki. What was this? Oh, no—this was too cute. His own arousal still embarrassed him? Loki wanted to fuck him—fuck him now, while he was still ashamed even of an erection. Oh, he would sob...

But no. No. Loki could still toy, though.

“What's the point of looking away, when I have such an obvious manifestation of your pleasure just before my eyes?”

Who knew rubbing it in could feel so glorious. Barton's breath hitched and oh, Loki wasn't done.

“You are loving this,” he whispered in his ear, so close, like lovers, like it was tenderness. “And you cannot hide. Not from me. Not from yourself.”

Tears welled up in Barton's eyes and Loki shivered with delight. He loved a good truth. Truth was what made his lies worthwhile. As it was, this particular fact was so unbearable to the archer that he managed to jerk free in spite of his restraints—which burned him all the more cruelly in return. Loki laughed, then got up again; Barton was close, getting desperate, but he wasn't completely ready yet. Breaking him would require a bit more humiliation; a bit more despair.

“Have fun,” he said, leaving again.
He thought he heard Barton moan in protest before the door closed, and the sound made him shiver with base, feral bliss at the thought of how used, how objectified he must feel.

Loki couldn't help smiling and even chuckling alone, before it turned into a deep, heaving sigh as he leaned against the wood. Yes—it would be fine. A game, but a game which obfuscated reality while they played it. There was nothing more he wanted.

*  

It took Barton some time to finally yield to his own desire—it would have happened eventually, what with how hard he was and how his position forced him to dwell on that fact. Loki heard his second moan and knew he'd won.

He got up and pushed the door once more. Like he thought, Barton had climaxed—not much, since he was untouched and his virility was so cruelly restrained; but enough to stain the floor and make him shiver in utter humiliation. He was still fighting it, though—it was obvious with how tense his muscles were. Loki's eyes narrowed. He had told Barton he wouldn't waste his time on him, and he had kept his word until then, but his patience had its limits.

He crouched down next to his panting victim and clasped open the muzzle. Barton spat it in his hand, drooled again and gasped for air—then Loki pressed at the back of his head to make him bow and face the white stain of his come. Barton profoundly disliked fluids, and anyone would have been utterly humiliated at being made to lick the floor. If this didn't work, nothing would.

“Clean it,” Loki ordered.

Barton shuddered and tried to free himself. Loki narrowed his eyes. Fighting still—? Oh, he should have made him stay here for five hours, this arrogant little—

“Clean it,” he hissed, pushing Barton's head down.

The archer tensed some more—and then snapped.

Loki distinctly saw it happen. Everything—wrath, tension, even humiliation—left his body like air out of a popping balloon. He bowed his head and licked, like a dog made to clean his own mess, shuddering, tears welling again behind his closed eyelids. When he was done, he sagged completely in his restraints, with a deep, deep, deep sigh.

He was finally broken. Finally at rest. Loki had wanted this to happen all along, yet he still found himself gobsmacked by the phenomenon. He craved submission in others so fiercely that it was always somewhat miraculous when it was offered to him.

It had never been offered to him before Barton.

“Finally,” he murmured without thinking.

Barton was here on his own volition, like Loki had repeated himself a thousand times already; which meant his shame, his pain, and his acceptance were all gifts indeed.

Loki's fierce arousal had dissolved into calm, fulfilling well-being in accordance to Barton's surrender. He hadn't even needed to come physically. The evidence of his power, of the archer's
abandon, was enough. This was all he ever wanted; for someone to belong to him absolutely, body and soul.

And really, was it so horrible?

He took in Barton's tortured body and bristled. Yes, it was. Because if violence was the only way to achieve it, then surely it wasn't meant to be. Loki was still a pervert, a madman, a monster—and Barton a sick person for craving this.

But it didn't change anything to the fact that for now, everything was good and quiet.

Barton was still in pain, though; and that pain was cumbersome to him now. Loki wanted nothing to get in the way of their shared peace. He thought about making the ropes vanish, but he wanted to do this himself—and also, it might not be a very good idea to set Barton's blood flow free so suddenly. Hence Loki untied the rope which forced the archer to stay curled up, then grabbed him under his arms and heaved him up in his lap. He freed Barton's cock—this seemed like the most important, but even that pain had seemed to fade, along with the archer's arousal. The latter did not express any wish for further relief. His gaze was vague, hazy, and it almost frightened Loki for a second—Barton trusted him so much right now, it was so stupid and dangerous even the demi-god himself felt he should warn him against it.

He untied the archer's wrists instead; Barton tried to get up but Loki firmly brought him back down.

“Too eager,” he scolded. “As always.”

A small smile came over the archer's lips, and he let his head fall against Loki's chest. He had completely surrendered. Loki felt his own power throb in his veins, utterly conscious of how utterly he owned this man. Yes—in this instant, everything was perfect. He was holding Barton in his hands, so fragile, like a newborn. And this responsibility filled him not with a sadistic urge this time, but with pride, and the need to protect and soothe and comfort. He could be a benevolent god.

He wrapped his arms around the archer and started rubbing his stiff limbs get the blood circulating again. Was Barton truly alright? His body was so weak. Maybe he sagged against Loki only out of sheer exhaustion. Maybe he had passed out—

“Thank you,” the archer whispered, in a tone so relieved, so heartfelt it brought sudden tears to Loki's eyes.

He blinked them away, but they were replaced by more.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Barton was saying with each breath, limp and warm in Loki's arms.

Loki clenched his teeth and suddenly wrapped him in a tight, tight embrace, like he was holding onto him not to fall. He took a deep, shaky breath. How was this possible? How could Barton be so grateful for Loki's awful display of power—for his sadistic whims, his merciless tortures? How could he find such beauty amidst such horror?

For the first time, Loki wondered exactly what Sitwell had told him to drive him in that strung-up state. The shrink had made Barton doubt himself, that was for sure. Barton, who was brave enough to face his most dreaded enemy. To surrender to him.

“That man,” Loki mumbled with a sudden, violent anger. “He knows nothing of your real strength.”

Barton only sighed, a little more peaceful with each second, and Loki held him; he wanted nothing but this moment—the perfection of this shared moment, when their flaws clicked together in a
seamless puzzle.

Chapter End Notes

And here we start sticking a bit less to StO. :) There WILL be original Clint/Loki scenes, if anyone was wondering.
The elegant voice of Stark's disembodied servant stirred him awake from a stream of pleasant, if imprecise, dreams.

“Assemble.”

Loki heard a loud crashing noise coming from Thor's room and groaned, rolling on his back. If really this oaf must save the pathetic planet he had so foolishly sworn to protect, could he not do so in silence?

There was a hurried knock on his door and Loki sank further down in his pillows. “What?” he groaned.

Thor barged in, shining in his silver armor, armed and ready for battle. “Brother,” he boomed, “I beseech you—come and fight by my side.”

“Oh, why not,” Loki said.

Thor's eyes widened. “Do you mean it?”

“No.”

Loki buried himself under the covers not to see Thor's unimpressed look at his childish quip. It had been puerile but he felt in a puerile mood. His nostrils were still filled with Barton's warm, heady, human scent, and his hands still prickling with the frail warmth of his body. Maybe this species could grow on him after all.

Not that it would ever be enough to motivate him out of bed to save it.

“Close the door on your way out,” he yawned.

“Brother.”

“What, Odinson?”

Thor bristled, but didn't comment. “Tis Doom who threatens us today,” he said. “Do you not resent him enough to consider fighting?”
Loki rolled on his stomach then propped himself up on his elbows to give Thor an amused look. *Resent* him? Doom was his *benefactor*. Without him, Barton would have never knelt at his feet and begged to be used in any way the demi-god wanted.

“Hm,” he said. “Let me think about it.”

He let himself plop down again and drew the covers over his head, leaving only his long black hair to be seen, curling on the pillow; then he let out a deep sigh of contentment.

Thor waited for twenty-five seconds. “So?” he finally said.

“Hmmm,” Loki answered, stretching out like a cat under the sheets. “Let me think some more.”

Thor let out an exasperated growl and strode out without a word. Loki rolled on his back again and smiled to the ceiling.

“Oh, this is going to be a good day,” he said. Then, on a sudden whim, he added, “What do you say, voice?”

*The weather does look wonderful,* Jarvis answered in a flat tone.

Loki’s grin widened, then slowly faded as he stayed there, thinking.

“Voice,” he said. “You watch me, do you not?”

*In accordance to Mr. Stark orders, I am constantly monitoring your body heat indeed.*

“But you also *listen* to me. You are doing it now.”

A pause.

“I do.”

“Then surely you heard what repeatedly happened in these chambers.”

The voice sounded impossibly tight-lipped now. *That is correct.*

“You seem to disapprove,” Loki said, smirking at the ceiling. “Yet you do not denounce me?”

“You are merely answering Mr. Barton’s request,” Jarvis said. “My purpose is not to restrain the inhabitants of this tower, but to ensure the completion of their every wish.”

“Even if they wish for pain? Even if they wish for death?”

*Mr. Barton does not wish for death and your contract stipulates that you are neither to kill him nor maim him.*

Loki chuckled. “Aren’t you the clever one.”

“I do my best.”

“So you will tell no one?”

A reluctant pause.

*Unless they directly ask—no.*
Loki's grin grew sharper. “I can tell you this, then. I intend to make Barton suffer so harsh a punishment that he will black out. And when he wakes up, I will hurt him some more; when he begs for mercy, I will only laugh. And I will know you to be listening all the while.”

He waited for an answer; but nothing came.

The demi-god huffed another laugh then got up. Enough playing with this disembodied robot. He had important things to do.

* 

Standing under the warm flow of the shower, he stared at the tiled wall in deep thought. An idea was beginning to shape itself in his head. Sooner or later, he would fuck Barton again—they both craved it too damn much for it not to happen. However, this would be quite big of a step for the confused archer, who was at odds not only with the preferences of his soul, but with the inclinations of his body. Male bottoms were generally despised in Asgard—seen as women, which had always infuriated the Lady Sif. But slaves couldn't sink further down, and their bodies were meant to be used anyway. They were often trained for the sexual pleasure of their master.

Loki felt a hot flush at the very distant memory of the slave market. He imagined Barton chained and naked, collared and marked by the iron, his eyes downcast and his brain washed blank—but he had to push the thought away. Barton was not his slave—he only pretended to be in the bedroom.

And it was fine by Loki. But it also meant said bedroom must be furnished adequately. The demi-god needed to make Barton so desperate that he would be dying to be taken—begging for it, crazy with the thought, like Loki was crazy with the prospect of owning him, owning someone entirely...

Stop, he thought sternly. Stop.

But his train of thought was beginning to show him the solution. The teasing of the ropes had nearly broken Barton's resistance last time. It had been obvious, too, that he craved not only restraints, but the hand of a master. He would not be satisfied with a mere toy up his rear.

Loki would therefore have to start with this. And watch him realize what he really wanted.

Yes, this could work. And if it didn't—well, the demi-god still got to watch him suffer, so it would be well.

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower.

“Voice,” he asked again, drying and dressing his body by the force of sheer will. “Surely this place is not as desolate as to ignore the art of lovecraft?”

“I am not certain what you mean,” Jarvis answered with obvious reluctance.

It was a riot how Stark's AI was displeased with Loki. The latter grinned and articulated, “I am asking if those hairless apes fuck themselves with something else than their cocks or fingers sometimes. Is that clear enough for you?”

“It is,” the servant said coldly.
Loki waited; after another second of silent dislike, the robot complied and a display of erotic devices appeared on the living-room's screen out the open door. Loki stepped out of the bathroom and closer to the holograms, studying them with great interest. Most of these things he could have conceived himself, but—*huh.*

Vibration? What a *fascinating* idea. Loki could certainly see the point of it, and the possibilities were both exciting and virtually endless. It wouldn't be too hard to craft such a thing, too. Experimentally, he made a small, metallic sphere appear in his cupped hands, hovering above his palms, then willed it to start buzzing. The gleaming thing shivered as though it had received the gift of life.

Loki closed his hands, and it vanished like the flame of a blown candle. *Good.* But he wouldn't be using this on Barton just now; one step at a time. He kept sliding the holograms in and out of existence; after a while, he realized that the *BDSM* category was more fitting with what he had in mind. He had no idea what those initials stood for and he did not care, but it seemed like Barton was not alone in his love of pain, what with the whips and restraints on display there. There was one huge difference though—those accessories all came with safety warnings. And safety was not of Barton's concerns, and certainly not of Loki's, either.

“Voice,” he said. “Now show me how the people of this planet torture each other.”

He looked at the new images in silence for a long while.

*Well,* he thought, closing the display with a flick of his fingers. Finally, a field where Midgardians rivaled and even outclassed the Aesir. Not everything was to be thrown away; the electricity was an interesting thought, as well as the various devices and machines from the 15th century; the water, too, why not—but Loki still felt a bit sick. There was an ugliness to raw torture which he profoundly disliked. He loved Barton's reluctance, but it was indeed only *reluctance*; there was true pleasure to be dug out of him. In the most painful ways possible, of course, but still. There was a difference between plain, practical torture, and the ordeals Loki inflicted on Barton.

Even a disembodied voice could tell.

---

So—something to fuck Barton with, with as much distance as possible between him and Loki, so he would grow insane with the need to be taken by his master rather than a toy. Something uncomfortable, which could be used as a punishment. A mere artificial manhood would not do the trick. Loki thought of impalement from the Spanish Inquisition, thought of sex chairs from the BDSM site, and smiled.

He invoked the shadowy shape of a wooden chair, then made it so he could buckle his victim's arms and legs to it, with leather straps. On second thought, he added restraints for the waist and thighs as well. Then he grew a dildo on the seat of the chair, made it long and thick—then stopped to think. Surely, Barton's weak body would not bear such girth. He shrank it down; shrank it down another notch, then restored it to its previous size, before shrinking it down again. It was still quite impressive, and likely to cause intense pain—but no injury, if Loki guided his pet well and made this right.

He smirked. He had every intention of making this right.
He dusted his hands even though there had been no actual handiwork involved, then stretched himself. What now? To keep working on new ways to break Clint Barton would have been very enjoyable, but Loki's arousal was beginning to hit critical thresholds. And he wasn't simply waiting for him, like a wife whose husband is away at war, anyway. He needed a distraction.

First he could start by leaving those stifling chambers.

He cast a simple hiding spell on the chair, in case Thor happened to wander in his room again—thick as he may be, he still probably wouldn't fail to notice that kind of furniture eccentricity—then left the room into the more brightly-lit corridors, which he walked up with a lively gait. It was a beautiful, sunny day indeed, and if not for the distant explosions shaking the city, everything would have been as quiet and pleasant as spring in Alfheim.

It suddenly came to Loki's mind that Barton was out there fighting as well. That fragile, human body, that body marked with the lash and the chafing of ropes—exposed to the fire and the fury. Loki had known it, intellectually, but he hadn't realized what it implied until now.

“May I inquire of your destination, Mr. Laufeyson?” Jarvis politely asked.

“Do not call me that,” Loki hissed, distracted from his worry.

“Very well. How shall I call you, then?”

“You shall not call me,” Loki sniffed.

He walked to the great, pleasantly lit living-room, then sat on the couch and looked around him. How strange, to find himself there; he knew the Avengers and Thor gathered here after battles to drink and pat each other's back like the brutish warriors they were. But now, their place was taken by Loki's slender, dark silhouette, standing out against the snow-white couch. He let his mind wander; imagined Barton coming back from the fight, bloodied and exhausted. He saw him walking inside—without any of his teammates though; only him, blood trickling down his face, reeking of sweat and adrenaline. He would see Loki, come to him and kneel without a word—with relief, gratitude, and fatalism; in one word, with utter, absolute submission—and in this great, silent room, the demi-god would have him, have his sweat and blood until...

Loki briskly shook his head and shivered. Hel!

“Voice,” he called snappishly. “Show me the Avengers.”

“They are not currently in the Tower.”

“Your world is filled with steel ears and metal eyes, and you claim to be the greatest of them all,” Loki pointed out. “Show them to me.”

Jarvis stayed silent; then, after a while, the holographic screen turned on and an invisible hand zapped through the channels until what Loki wanted appeared on the screen. The quality was remarkably poor—the image grainy, the angles awkward and messy; it was probably no legal footage, probably something broadcast almost live from thrill-seekers on the battlefield. The skalds of this realm, Loki supposed. It was mostly Iron Man and their beloved Captain. Lots of that green monster, too. Thor, when they could catch a glimpse of him. Iron Man again. Then Thor once more, except this time, he stopped and turned to face the camera, and Loki had to remember they weren't watching each other in the eyes.

And then Barton.
The quality was suddenly a lot better, the angle excellent and the video quite long, too. A woman's voice rose in the background. "This exclusive video has been taken by an urban drone. The super-sniper certainly outdid himself today, taking down more than half of the enemy strength by himself in a matter of hours. Experts claim that Barton's accuracy can only be of supernatural origin, despite his repeated protests that he is not a mutant, nor the beneficiary of any sort of enhancement. Today's footage seems to prove the contrary, with a flawless performance from..."

She went on at length but Loki was not listening. He leaned forward, staring at Hawkeye's face. His eyes were masked behind thick sunglasses, but his features were obviously calm and perfectly relaxed, just like the muscles of his back and shoulders, working smoothly under the skin. His stance was assured, both feet firmly planted on the roof, his bearing proud and somehow focused. He was sharp, sharp as the arrows he was shooting, but there was a great serenity to his demeanor which was wonderfully familiar.

*I did this,* Loki understood in breathlessness.

He hadn't believed until then that their sessions had a true impact on Barton outside the bedroom. But he couldn't have asked for further proof. The archer had been nervous, jumpy every time he had come to him. Last time, though, he had left in a state of blissful quietness despite—or maybe because of—the rope marks on his wrists, arms, ankles, and thighs. And the quietness had stuck. He had taken it with him on the battlefield, and it was as if Loki was there and guiding his every gesture, pushing on his spine for him to straighten up, holding the fingers which pinched the arrow, releasing together to hit the bullseye.

Loki realized he was smiling; not his usual, disdainful smirk, but a smile of pride and wonder he had never felt on his lips before. He quickly swallowed it down—the video had just ended anyway; it was the monster again, reducing Doom-shaped robots to pieces with this brutish rage of his.

The demi-god felt a bit dazzled. When the stolen footage came to an end and the screen switched back to the newscaster, he got up and left, feeling thoroughly confused and powerfully aroused—but not in a sexual way; or not only. Above all, he wanted for Barton to come back to him; he wanted to feel the archer's body melt under his fingers, wanted to taste the trust and the desperate gratitude he had glimpsed yesterday. He wanted Barton here with him; he wanted Barton here, with him.

*

When the door opened several hours later, Loki dropped the book he had been pretending to read and stood up—but of course, he realized half-way through, it was only Thor. The thunderer was exactly how Loki had pictured Barton earlier—quite breathless and covered in blood.

“*So,*” the trickster sighed. “*How was it?*”

“We fought well,” Thor only said.

He sounded bitter.

Loki was surprised enough to let the memory of past battles seize him. Thor always mocked him and belittled him for his tricks and his agile, nimble way of fighting. But they used to banter afterwards, to dwell on common memories; and although Loki had grown more and more bitter at Thor's thoughtless comments, not everything was dark back then.
He shook his head, then flicked his fingers at Thor, who flinched when golden magic rippled over his skin, closing his forehead wound. He blinked in space, then up at Loki, gingerly raising a hand to his forehead. “Brother—?”

“You were bleeding on the couch,” Loki said coldly.

Thor stared at him, dumbstruck, then smiled a little. Loki turned away. He should not have done this—he was not the person he'd been back then. But, ah—just this once, for old times' sake.

For the joy he'd felt today.

“Brother,” Thor said. “I am to report on the Helicarrier, now. You promised to come with me and meet Fury.”

Loki sighed again and rubbed his eyes. He must do this—if only to ensure more nights unsupervised with Barton kneeling at his feet. It was unsettling how quickly he had become addicted to this. But he couldn't bring himself to shake himself free of the influence his long-hidden desires held upon him.

“Very well,” he said. “But you will clean yourself first.”

Thor outright grinned this time. “Always so pernickety, brother.”

“Do not push me,” Loki said in a low voice. “Go.”

Thor went; Loki heard the shower turn on a few minutes later.

An another few minutes later—someone knocked on the door.

Loki turned round with an initial movement for frustration—no! He had just agreed to leave, he could not do anything to Barton except...

... make him wait.

His spirits went back up as brutally as they’d fallen down. He sauntered to the door and opened it on Clint Barton indeed. He was not bloodied, but he looked disheveled, and well—that was a good start.

“Ah, here you are,” Loki said, grabbing his jacket to pull him inside.

Barton's protestations were cut off with Loki's brutal tug—he had to be quick; the shower had been turned off in Thor's room. He dragged Barton through the living-room and towards his own chambers.

“Hey,” the archer managed to say. “I'm not here for—”

Loki slammed the door shut with one hand and pinned him to the wall with the other, pressing his palm over the archer's mouth just as Thor's voice echoed outside.

“Brother, are you ready?”

“In a minute,” Loki said, grinning at Barton.

The latter was staring at him with wide, furious eyes, chest heaving as he remembered to breathe through his nose. Thor was just outside. How delightful.
Without removing his hand from his mouth, Loki gripped the archer's face and forced him to turn his head on the side. He remembered his fantasy from earlier, the taste of Barton's sweat and blood. He licked his lips, then glanced up at the horrified look in the gray eyes. Thor so close, and yet Barton was thoroughly helpless.

“We cannot be late,” Thor called.

“I know,” Loki said lightly.

He leaned in and kissed Barton's exposed neck. When he felt the throat muscles relax in wrongful reassurance, he opened his mouth—and sank his teeth into the flesh.

**That was** something he could honestly say he had never done before—not even the Trickster resorted to biting in battle. But it was extremely enjoyable, and sent a savage thrill through his spine, like lions must feel when breaking a gazelle's neck—Barton startled and struggled wildly to break free; Loki fitted his palm against his lips to muffle the scream bubbling up behind them, then sank his teeth even deeper, felt the coppery taste of blood and the warmth of it as it trickled down Barton's clavicle. Giving in to his urge, he released the tortured flesh and licked the crimson drops with a raspy tongue. Barton let out a shaky, halting moan, which didn't sound all that pained.

Thor knocked again, sounding exasperated. “Brother—we must go.”

“For Hel's sake,” Loki said, marveling at the control he held upon his own voice. “We are gods. SHIELD can wait a while longer.”

*More,* the monster commanded—and Loki bit again, close from the first wound, but so deep he almost thought he would reach a bone for a second. Barton arched and yelped behind his unforgiving hand, and it was **fantastic** to press their bodies together and feel his, shuddering and breaking into spasms with pain. Oh, he must do that again sometimes.

Thor was growing truly impatient, though. Loki licked Barton’s blood again, feeling a flush of heat at the sight of his gray eyes screwing shut in refusal—or pleasure? Who knew with that odd man. Anyway, he had walked into the lion's den and Loki wasn't letting him out anytime soon.

“You,” he breathed in Barton's ear, “are going to wait for me.”

He lifted his hand, wondering how the archer would sound after such treatment.

His ragged, hoarse voice was a delight to hear. “Yes,” he panted, just yes, and oh, wasn't he **perfect.**

“Good,” Loki murmured.

He slammed Barton against the wall again and ripped his clothes into shreds; the archer startled but didn't fight it, nor did he fight Loki's grip when the demi-god grabbed him by the hair to drag him towards the bed. He made him kneel then tied his hands behind his back—there was no time for a more elaborate position.

Or was there? He remembered images of the slave market and, in spite of how unreasonable it was to start giving in to **this** particular fantasy, Loki fashioned a leather collar with metallic buckles and strapped it around the archer's neck.

**Now a leash for the pet.**

He was getting so aroused that he might not be able to leave this room and face Fury after all. He invoked a black rope, very **short,** and strapped it to the foot of the bed so Barton couldn't get up
without being in danger of strangling himself. The archer was keeping his gaze downcast, breathing fast; Loki cupped his chin to make him look up, and stared into his eyes with a morbid fascination.

Barton looked overall surprised, as though he had been expecting something much worse. Of course—he knew, like Loki did, that eventually the demi-god would claim his body like he had done under the influence of the golden serum. And he had thought it would be today—not that he was wrong, really, but it was excellent to let him stew like this; to prepare him to the thought of his taking.

“Disappointed?” Loki teased.

Barton flushed and looked away. He seemed angry now. Well—nothing a few hours of patience couldn't help. He had to learn this lesson as well; he was here for Loki's pleasure, and if Loki's pleasure was to make him wait, to torture him with expectation, then he would suffer it all the same.

For now, he had looked down without answering and that called for immediate retaliation.

Instead of slapping him—although Loki loved this, the sound of flesh against flesh, the very faint sting on the palm of his skin, the jerk of Barton's head, the way he closed his eyes against the blow—he stuck his nails into the bloody bitemarks and twisted them. Barton sucked in a sharp breath and muttered, “Sorry!”

Loki smirked. It was so obvious how Barton was desperate for more. It would be all the more enjoyable to make him wait.

“You could beg,” the demi-god murmured.

He lifted two bloodied fingers and painted a red stripe across Barton's cheek. “If you want more, you could just try and implore me.”

He would not get it easily, that was for sure. He would beg and crawl and grovel before Loki consented to honor him. And he would scream, too. A lot.

“Spread your legs,” Loki breathed on a sudden impulse.

Barton stiffened and stubbornly stared at the carpet. Loki grinned—and smacked him, hard. Oh, Hel, it was like being drunk with the sweetest mead of Asgard.

“Do I have to say it again?” he said with the faintest amusement in his voice.

Oh, make me say it again. But Barton, almost disappointingly so, spread his double-bent legs, knees chafing against the carpet.

More, growled the monster. Too easy. Made him squirm. Make his breath hitch in terror. Loki had invoked his spear before he knew what he was doing, and now he was crouching down to get a closer look as he pushed the blade against Barton's throat.

The archer went very, very still. He could have screamed for help. But he just stayed there, barely breathing, his eyes shifting nervously from Loki to the blade to Loki again.

The demi-god put a possessive hand on Barton's thigh and rubbed it up and down.

“Wider,” he murmured eventually.

The archer swallowed, then tried to comply, but his position made it difficult for him. Or maybe he was just lazy. Either way, this wouldn't do—Loki put down his spear, then gripped Barton's knees
and spread them apart until he heard something crack. Again, Barton inhaled sharply but still said nothing. Loki frowned, then grinned in understanding—he had told the archer he would be begging before the end, so he was doing his best to make Loki lie.

_Let's play then._ He reduced his spear to a rod of steel and tied it to the archer's knees. Spreader bars were another interesting Midgardian idea. And Barton did make for a wonderful sight like this—not to mention the wait would be so much more _uncomfortable._

And put his mind in the right place.

“There,” Loki smirked, getting up. “That should keep you entertained.”

_Me also, and how._

“BROTHER!” Thor exploded behind the door.

“In a second,” the demi-god said, and went out indeed, leaving Barton on the metaphorical rack for who knew how long.

---

“What were you _doing_?” Thor growled as they left their floor.

“Oh, merely torturing a friend of yours.”

“I am in no mood for jokes.”

Loki chuckled so heartily Thor frowned even more. “What has _gotten_ into you?”

“Nothing. I am just in a particularly good humor today.”

“Asgard still shivers at the memory of the days you were in a _good humor._”


Thor huffed and didn't answer—probably because he had been the target of those pranks as well. Loki _had_ been quite successful in his time, come to think of it. He found it hard to believe those days had even existed. Such innocuous ideas could not come to him anymore now. Everything he did bore the mark of pain and darkness.

Barton could probably tell.

Loki worried his bottom lip. He had left Barton alone on a whim, because he thoroughly enjoyed the thought of discarding him there like a piece of furniture—but he _didn't_ know for how long he would be gone.

And Barton was so humanly frail.

Well. The room was well-heated, so he wouldn't be cold, at least. And Loki's collar could not possibly strangle him—even if Barton fainted, the leash was long enough for him to lie down on the floor. And why would he faint, anyway? His restraints did not trouble his breathing, and although the sun had set, it wasn't so late that he would be in danger of falling asleep. He would be fine. Loki
just had to bask in the thought of him, squirming in humiliation, and slowly filling up with hatred and despair at his unwanted desires...

Still. He didn't know for how long he would be gone.

Three hours, he decided. Three hours were a maximum—whatever happened on the Helicarrier, he would not stay for a second more.

He remember that Barton didn't know either for how long Loki would be gone, and that thought brought the smile back on his lips. His anxiety. His growing nervousness, his discomfort, his shameful hope for him, for Loki to come back and free him...

“Brother,” Thor said. “Are you well?”

His question broke down Loki's fantasy and the trickster found himself wincing again. Pain, fear, humiliation—he wasn't supposed to enjoy this. When he was with Barton, the monster was taking over; but now, Loki was leaving a tortured man behind; and he was only torturing himself with the thought of the suffering he inflicted, and the pleasure it gave him.

“I am well,” he muttered.

They had gotten on the roof without him realizing it. A Quinjet was waiting for them. There were no stars above; only an ugly, orange light.

“I will never understand what you see in this world,” Loki murmured.

Thor huffed a joyless laugh. “What makes a world, brother? Not the number of its trees or the color of its sky—but its inhabitants.”

*Thank you,* murmured Barton in Loki's memories.

So. As much as he hated admitting it, Thor had a point. There was at least one Midgardian worth protecting.

Yet Loki was doing the exact opposite of protecting him...

He shook his head briskly, gritting his teeth, and decided he would make Barton scream twice as much when he came back. As a punishment for tormenting him so. He knew how childish and absurd it was but—he was done listening to the voice of reason for today.
Oooh, this was fun to write. ^^ Thoughts?
“There is no way you can hope to understand this,” Loki said, finally losing his patience. “How many times do I have to say it?”

“No, no, this is ridiculous,” the lab girl said—so young, how could they even think—“If it exists, it can be understood.”

Loki prayed the Norns to give him strength. “Look, miss—” he narrowed his eyes. “Fitzsimmons, is it?”

“It's just Simmons,” she said.

“How old are you exactly? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“I'm twenty-six,” she protested indignantly while her male twin hid a snorted laugh. He was no better—he looked even younger, if that was even possible. Twenty-six years!

“Well, Simmons,” Loki said, articulating the name as though it was an insult, “magic needs time, and mortals simply do not have enough time. It is about knocking your mind in the required shape. It is about the gut feeling of a knowledge so great it turns into power. You do not live long enough to acquire such certainty.”

“Well, you're gonna have to give us more than that,” Fury snorted from the corner of the room.

Loki snapped at him. “Director,” he said in a dangerously controlled voice, “I am afraid there is no more I can give.”

“You won't teach our lab agents about magic—”

“—I have just told you—”

“You won't do field ops—”

“Your wars are not mine, director,” Loki spat. “I am staying here and posing no current threat; I find it quite generous already.”

“Loki,” Thor mumbled, but Fury spoke over him.
“Generous? Talking to me about generosity? We're letting you stay for free when a thousand people here would rather use you as a lab rat.”

“No, bring them to me!” Loki said with something too aggressive to be called a smirk. “We can have some fun.”

He glanced up at the digital clock. He had been there for two hours already; and already, he wanted to go back. As much as he hated to admit it, he was worried and wished he hadn't been so careless. He wanted to hurt Barton, he wanted to humiliate and break him, but—he didn't want to injure him. Injuries would mean he wasn't in control of himself. And he craved control, more than anything.

Thor was getting up. Loki glanced up, then realized—Fury had dismissed them. He hadn't even paid attention.

Finally!

“I'll go ahead,” he announced dryly. “I need to rest from all this nonsense. And if I were you, brother, I wouldn't disturb my sleep.”

He wrapped himself in golden lights and jumped back to the tower.

* *

He appeared before the door of his own room, and stayed in the dark for a few moments. Glancing down at his hands, he realized they were shaking.

He was enraged at Fury—this presumptuous worm, thinking he deserved the help of Loki Laufeyson, taking it for granted—but it wasn't the main reason for his halting breath. He must go in. He must go in and face the consequences of his own actions, whatever they were. Intellectually, he knew Barton couldn't be badly hurt—but the uncertainty frightened him. And he hated himself for it; and he hated that he was so dependent on Barton that he hadn't stuffed Fury's words down his throat like he should have. These people—they thought they had rights over him, they thought they had power over him, and even though Loki knew it to be false, it still infuriated him—he was dying to let them see the true extent of his power, to make them recoil in fear, repent before the god he was—

—the god he was, so terrified with the thought that he might have hurt one of these ants...

Clenching his fists, he took a deep breath, then pushed the door and walked in.

His shoulders instantly sagged in relief.

And the next second, the heat of his pleasure was delightfully curling in the pit of his stomach. Barton was still on his knees, as Loki had left him. He was breathing fast, flushed hot with pain and obvious arousal. He was so hard it must be a torture in itself. The collar looked fantastic on him. Kneeling there, he truly looked like a slave waiting for his master's pleasure.

The monster inside Loki didn't need anything more to roar to life again.

He slammed the door behind him with an insane grin, which widened at Barton's startle. Crossing the room, he stopped before the kneeling archer and towered above him. It felt so good looking down at someone. He had no idea why—but it felt so good.
“So,” Loki breathed.

Oh, how Barton wanted it. It was written all over his throbbing length and clenched muscles. But how he refused to acknowledge it, too.

“Are you ready now?” the demi-god asked, although the answer was obvious.

The archer glared up at him, and the pure hatred in his eyes sent a tingling sensation up Loki’s spine. More for him to break.

He slipped his booted foot between Barton's erect length and his tightening balls, and pressed against them, ever so slightly. The archer instantly went extremely still.

“I asked you a question,” Loki purred.

There was a rushing sound in his ears as though he was standing near a titanic waterfall. Again, he felt like his own blood had been replaced by something hot and purple and black, a syrupy mixture of power which heightened all of his senses, and made his heart throb almost painfully in his chest. Dominance. He felt drunk, he felt drugged, and he loved it.

“Sorry,” Barton breathed hurriedly, but the monster wouldn't care for an apology—Loki allowed his foot to jerk forward; ever so slightly for him, but obviously not for Barton, who doubled over with a scream of agony.

“God....!”

“Ah, yes,” Loki murmured, barely hearing his own voice. “Painful, isn't it?”

MORE, the monster was howling. HURT HIM MORE, MORE MORE! MAKE HIM PAY FOR THOR—FOR FURY—FOR ALL OF THESE FOOLS THINKING THEMSELVES ABOVE YOU!

Loki crouched down and grabbed Barton's leash to tug him close. “Not a good day for testing me, Barton,” he whispered.

He hoped the archer would understand the warning; and giving it helped him calm down, too. He had almost lost control over his own urges—again. It wasn't good. He had to restrain himself, as well.

He cast a soundproof spell over the room, then released the shaking archer and got up. “Now. Are you ready to beg?”

“Yes,” Barton whined—thankfully for them both, “yes.”

“I'm listening.”

The archer swallowed audibly. “Please,” he said, but then stopped himself and clenched his jaw. How he hated it. Loki almost pitied him for a second. It must be so demanding to stifle one's dignity so. He didn't know where Barton found the strength to do it; he knew he couldn't have done it, not in a million years of torture.

“Please fuck me,” Barton spat out.

Loki's brief flare of empathy vanished, and the monster purred again, both with so he does want it and oh, no, I don't think that will do.

“You call that begging?” he mocked. “I will just leave you there for another six hours.”
“No!” Barton exclaimed.

“No?” Loki said composedly, raising his eyebrows.

Bow, Barton. Bow your head low.

“Please,” the archer stammered, “please, no more. I am—I am ready, I... I will be good.”

Loki let out a snort, but Barton went on, “Please, I need—I need it. I will do everything you say.”

The demi-god's hands trembled again. He had to admit that was better—much better. And Barton wasn't even done; now that he was under way, he kept going. “Just... just don't leave me here. Fuck, please, I'm—I'm... begging you.”

Loki grinned. You see, it wasn't so hard. “Better,” he breathed hoarsely.

And then his sadistic urges spiked up. “But not nearly enough.”

Barton stiffened, breathing fast; then he seemed to sag somehow. He swallowed again—Loki loved how his Adam apple bobbed up and down—then screwed his eyes shut and, to Loki's delighted surprise, bowed in the submissive position he had been taught, on his knees with his forehead almost touching the floor.

“Please,” he said desperately—despair over the urgency of his desire, or the intensity of his shame? Loki did not know. “Please, fuck me. Take me, use me—any way you want. I implore you.”

Loki forgot how to breathe for a second.

No, this wasn't happening. This was too brilliant. In that second, he was so grateful to Barton that he just wanted to untie him, lie him down on the bed and make him come undone with sweet pleasure.

Then the monster inside him sneered. How nice, but I have other plans.

Other plans indeed—his arousal blazed inside him like a stream of pure fire, and he caught his breath with a wide, insane smirk. Time to go test that torture chair.

Barton was eyeing him anxiously, awaiting his reaction; he looked a bit relieved when he understood he wouldn't be asked to beg again—Loki honestly couldn't see how he could have debased himself more, anyway—then grew nervous again at what would come next.

Loki wished the spreader bar away, then untied Barton's leash from the bed and yanked it—he loved that feeling too, Barton's weight on the other end.

“Up,” he commanded.

The archer gritted his teeth, but didn't fight it. How wise of him. Loki smiled in the corner of his mouth, then turned away and led the archer towards the other end of the room, lifting the spell he had put on the chair. When Barton saw it, he stopped so abruptly Loki couldn't resist tugging on the leash to make him stumble a little. The archer didn't even seem to notice—he was too busy staring in horror at Loki's creation.

The demi-god grinned. “Problem?”

Barton stiffened and clenched his jaw. “No.”

Oh, how Loki loved that pride. It made it all so much funnier. He tugged Barton close and cupped
his face in that loving way the archer hated. “Why so appalled? You did beg for it.”

He was amusing himself way too much, but he sobered up a little when he realized Barton wasn’t just reluctant and angry, but truly scared.

“We will take it slow,” he promised, rubbing his thumb along his jaw.

The archer obviously didn’t believe him one bit. “Thank you,” he still muttered. Well, he was beginning to learn, at least. And he couldn’t hide the fact that his arousal hadn’t wavered at all.

Loki pinched the head of his erected cock to make him well aware of that fact; Barton startled, but kept his mouth shut.

“Are you ready?” the demi-god asked.

He studied Barton's eyes intensely—no matter how mocking he might sound, this was a true question. But despite the fear, the hatred, the disgust, there was not in Barton's eyes the dreaded spark of pure and simple refusal. His urges were the strongest. And indeed, he only mumbled, “Yes.”

Loki smiled, then untied the archer’s wrists and dragged him forward before clapping off the leash as well. “Climb,” he said, nodding at the chair.

Barton exhaled through his nose, then climbed on the chair and positioned himself above the wooden dildo; the armrests were too low for him to brace on them while standing, so he had to twist his arms in an awkward position to grab the back of the chair behind him. He was trembling already, what with the effort of half-crouching after kneeling down for so long. Loki grabbed his hips to guide him above the artificial cock; Barton braced himself, obviously willing himself to endure whatever would follow. Loki then pulled him down.

The dildo was too big—just on the right side of too big, for Loki anyway—but then he caught a scowl of agony on Barton's face when the head popped in. He instantly pulled the archer upwards. This wasn't meant to traumatize Barton, but to make him squirm in discomfort, and wish he could get the real thing instead.

Besides, Loki knew the pain of being taken dry—he had experimented a lot with his thirteenth lover—and he knew how intense it could get. He wouldn't mind using it one day, but not so early in the game.

Barton looked surprised, the wince of pain still lingering on his face, almost comically so, as though he didn't know what to do with it now that the expected agony wasn't coming. Loki smiled at him and said, “Relax.”

He was pleased to notice Barton complied—maybe unconsciously so. Loki brought him down again, let the wooden cock push in; he watched the progression of Barton's scowl, and when it got too wide, hoisted the archer up again. Barton blinked at him with obvious astonishment this time, and—could it be?—gratitude.

Loki felt a very different warmth overwhelm him and tone the monster down. He still felt the clarity of dominance, but it wasn't the purple and black of sadism. Not entirely so. The idea of a Barton trembling with thankfulness made his heart thump almost harder.

He could be a merciful god.

“I told you,” he murmured. “Slow.”
Barton nodded shyly, chest heaving. He was still scared, but at least he wasn't trying to go into lockdown anymore.

“Can I—brace on you or something?” he asked awkwardly.

Loki felt his pupils blow. For some reason, Barton requesting favors was really working for him—it was also a relief to the tiny sane, non-monstrous part of him, the part who feared that Barton was just too terrified to speak up and that Loki was indeed raping him. But no—the archer did dare to speak up when he felt the need, and Loki was only too happy to see him take his first steps towards their common goal.

“Of course,” he smiled.

Barton looked even more puzzled, but gave another hesitant nod, and muttered, “Thanks.”

He gingerly grabbed Loki's shoulders; and when the demi-god felt the shift of his weight, he almost melted. Barton leaning on him, both literally and figuratively, was just—just—irresistible. Loki tightened his grip on the archer's hips and rubbed his thumbs in circles. How ridiculous, such sentiment even as he was about to properly impale him—but he couldn't stop himself.

“Ready?” he asked, mindful of any hesitation in the archer's eyes.

But Barton's gaze was more assured now. “Yeah,” he said, in a firmer voice.

“Well then”, Loki murmured.

He pushed him down, down, down, until Barton's wince of pain became unbearable even to him and he brought him back up yet again. He didn't mind going slowly, if it meant Barton trusted him a bit more.

“Please,” the archer panted, tightening his grip on Loki's shoulders as he was being brought down again.

“What?” Loki smiled.

“Please,” Barton breathed, “can you make it... slicker? Just—spit, oil... lube... anything.”

Loki stayed speechless for a few seconds, then grinned. It almost looked like it was a personal challenge to Barton now.

“Why, Barton. You are making progress.”

He hoisted him up a bit harshly, just to feel him startle when the dildo chafed inside him, then conjured lube on his left hand and dutifully slicked the wooden cock. Looking up, he realized Barton was staring at this parody of masturbation with flushed cheeks and an even more flushed cock. He crossed Loki's gaze, then outright blushed and looked away.

Loki couldn't have stopped smiling if he'd tried.

“Again, trying to hide?”

He let go of the wooden dildo to grip Barton's warm cock. It felt so good in his slicked hand; Barton let out a tiny moan, but still wouldn't look at him.

“What,” Loki pressed. “Do you want me to cut it off?”
“No,” the archer mumbled.

The demi-god grinned all the more, then pinched the head, twisted, dug his nails in until Barton squirmed and panted, “Please! Please—I'm sorry.”

This is just too cute. Loki let him go, then firmly grabbed Barton's hips again. “Shall we?”

Still looking away, the archer only gave a small nod—then shuddered in surprise when Loki pulled him down and it went inside with incredible smoothness. He let out a hitched breath of astonishment, as though he only discovered now that he could be taken and like it. Last time, there had been the serum; but Loki had guessed quickly enough that Barton had denied his homosexual tendencies for quite some time. Right now, he looked like the world had just been unveiled before his eyes.

Then he stiffened a bit again, and started struggling against Loki's grip. “Please—I can't take anymore.”

Loki hoisted him up, if only to reward him for speaking up; but before the cock could leave his body entirely, he pushed him back down, slowly, slowly, letting Barton impale himself on the giant dildo.

“No,” the archer squeaked. “Too big—please!”

Loki was going to hoist him up, he was, but he just wanted to enjoy this for another moment—this split second of pain, of panic, when Barton depended entirely on him.

“Tell me more,” he murmured, “tell me how it feels.”

“Wrong, please, stop, it's too—it's too much!”

Alright. Loki stopped and waited, watching the intense emotions playing over Barton's face. When fear and agony were replaced by apprehension and discomfort, then curiosity and unease, Loki started pushing him down again. Barton could take a lot more already than when they'd first started this—but then he started to writhe and beg frantically, “Please, please, please, please, please!”

Loki sighed, then helped him hoisting himself up until the dildo had left his body. Barton was trembling and leaning on his shoulders; he wasn't conscious of his own strength. He was almost there—this was just last minute panic this time. They were too close not to go all the way.

Let's.

“Brace yourself,” Loki warned, then made him take it all in one go.

Barton cried out and started struggling again—then stopped with a shocked expression when his ass touched the seat of the chair. Obviously, he hadn't thought he could actually make it. Loki was proud he'd calibrated the toy just right.

“Ah,” he appreciated, “we are getting there.”

He let go of Barton's hips, then grabbed his left wrist and pinned it on the armrest to strap it there; he did the the same with the other one, then tied up Barton's ankles as well, and buckled his waist and thighs, effectively pinning him to the chair. Barton was twitching nervously on the chair, drops of sweat rolling down his naked body. Brief, violent shudders rippled through him from time to time.

How wonderful.
“Now,” Loki murmured, cupping his cheek again. “That is a proper stretch.”

He wondered if it would be enough for Barton to break and melt into his state of absolute submission. It was always fascinating to watch; and every time, Loki got to feel how absolute a power he'd reached, if only upon a single soul. He yearned for that completion; but Barton wasn't breaking.

“Still not enough,” Loki mumbled.

He grabbed Barton's collar and tugged; the archer cried out when the wooden cock inside him did not allow him lean forward. Loki wrapped a hand around Barton's cock and experimentally teased then tortured the tip until he had Barton panting and squirming—but not breaking.

It was about time for him to be properly taken.

“My patience is wearing thin,” Loki warned.

He unbuckled the waist and thigh straps, then said, “Time to break you,” as he freed his wrists and ankles. He hoisted him up all at once and gave a vicious smile at Barton's cry of agony.

Reaching the bed in two steps, Loki threw him down on his stomach and tugged his arms behind his back to tie them down again. He had enough. He was trembling with arousal and he just wanted to *fuck* him—to have him, to take him, to make him *his* and end this little game. He pushed his fingers inside the archer's hole, fluttering with overstretch, so wanton.

“Missing something?” he grinned.

He pushed two digits inside and heard the archer stifle a moan of unmistakable pleasure. But it still wasn't *good*—Loki could tell from the way he held himself, the tension in his back, the clenching of his thighs—he was still *thinking*, still planning ahead, and it was not *good*. Loki was the one who planned, who decided, who took control. Barton shouldn't be *thinking*.

And Loki knew just the way to make him stop.

“What is this?” he said negligently, thrusting his fingers in an out. “You are *too* loose. I'll have to make you clench again.”

He waved his hand in the air; but Barton's offered ass wasn't begging for a leather lash. What appeared in Loki's hands was a thin wooden cane he smacked against his palm, once.

Then he raised his arm and brought the stick hissing down against Barton's ass.

The sharp sound surprised him and Barton buckled so hard Loki thought he hadn't controlled his strength. But the red mark which bloomed across the skin wasn't a dark, bloody bruise. The cane just really *stung*. Loki smirked, then cupped Barton's ass before sliding a finger in, laughing when he felt him flutter and clench around the digit.

“Already better.”

He took a step back and heard Barton's sharp intake of breath before the cane whacked him again. The archer fought back a spasm; Loki hit again and Barton choked out a yell that was also a sob, tugging frantically at his bonds, legs jerking against the bed.

Loki had been hard before, but his arousal seemed to double with each blow. *Pain*. Barton hated it, Barton could not stand it, it made him cry and yell and he was so *perfect* when he fell apart.
The rush of power took Loki's breath away; he hit him again—hard—and almost climaxed just from Barton's frantic, inarticulate yell. He was shaking and each of his shudders triggered its twin through Loki's own body. He hit again, and again and again and again, a bit harder with each blow until Barton couldn't help screaming each time—each scream different from the previous one, a bit more broken, a bit more uncontrolled and frantic. He sagged on the mattress after each blow now—then stiffened with each new one, and screamed, screamed but never begged, never pleaded for it to stop, and that was what kept Loki going until he was almost out of himself with the savage pleasure of torturing someone. Making him yell, making him suffer, and relishing every second of it. And oh, how he was going to hate himself afterwards; but right now it was too good, too damn good, and Barton's screams were so shattered and halting now that it sounded like he was about to black out...

NO, the monster roared. He suffers until the end.

Loki stepped forward to grip Barton's hair and force him to turn his head so they could look at each other. The hazy, drugged look in the archer's eyes almost made him come on the spot yet again. He was so close. He really did desire pain—it was impossible, it was fantastic, and now Loki wanted to hurt him even more.

“If you faint,” he said breathlessly, “I will kill you.”

The words shocked him as soon as he heard them coming out of his mouth.

Was he serious? He couldn't be. He had promised himself he wouldn't go too far. But right now, his arousal had reached such impossible heights that the thought of murdering Barton, to see him on the point of death, only excited him more. And wouldn't it be the pinnacle of domination? What more would be left to take, if he took Barton's life?

“Understood?” he panted.

“Yes,” Barton slurred.

He sounded like he wasn't even conscious of what was happening anymore. Loki caught his breath. He wasn't going to kill him. He wasn't.

But he was going to make him scream some more.

He hit and Barton shouted, impossibly long and loud, and Loki snapped—he threw the cane away, wished his clothing to Hel, then cupped Barton's burning ass, parted his cheeks and buried himself inside the tight heat.

It was so good he almost sobbed. The torture had made it all even hotter and tighter; Barton was still in mild agony and Loki could feel every flinch of his panicked nerves. He let himself slide up to the hilt without any difficulty, slick and incredibly easy, impossibly perfect, and underneath him Barton moaned something which sounded barely human—undoubtedly, unmistakably, a noise of pure concentrated pleasure. And it made Loki's bliss flare all the more. For Barton to like this—to love this—after everything, after such excruciating pain? That was impossibly thrilling—and it pushed the guilt away like it had never been there. Surely, what Loki had done until then was right, virtuous even, since it transported them both to such indescribable heavens.

Loki thrust and Barton moaned again, echoing the whine Loki forced down his own throat.

“Getting there?” he panted instead.

“God—fuck—yes!”
Oh, yes, that was how Loki loved him—completely shameless, completely his, completely devoted down to his flesh and mind. He held him down, hands gripping the sweaty shoulders and forcing them down against the mattress, and thrust again, again, again, harder and deeper each time, and Barton was crying out and babbling nonsense and suddenly Loki heard him say, “Goddammit please don't stop—fuck me—ah—sir, fuck me!”

Loki stilled completely—memories of Manhattan flashing though him, of Barton's blue eyes and the casual 'sir' always on his lips, a mark of respect, a metaphorical bow to his boss. How—? Was he still—?

“I am yours,” Barton was sobbing. “Fuck, I—I belong to you. This is was I need—what I want—I'm, I'm your fucktoy, your pet, whatever you like, you fucking own me, alright?”

No, no, no, no, this was a trick, this was impossible, this had to be trick of some sort.

“I admit it—I just—I can't—”

“No,” Loki hissed. He couldn't allow it. The demi-god knew returning to normal would be painful enough—what with the summits of torture he'd reached and his goddamn death fantasy—but if he had to cope with the impossible hope of true ownership, he was likely to break down for good.

“Stop lying this instant,” he spat. He knew this was a game, he knew Barton would shake off Loki's dominance as soon as he left his chambers; and he didn't want anything more—it would have been foolish of him.

“I am not—” Barton choked. “—not lying!”

He sounded so desperate, so submitted, so eager to please that Loki couldn't find it in him to be angry. “Maybe not,” he admitted reluctantly. “But you will forget as always, Barton. You will return, yes; but reluctant and stubborn. Until I tame you again.”

“No sir,” the archer gasped. “Not this time. You broke me. For good. I am your slave. I am your slave. Please, sir.”

Loki was petrified.

Now, this—this was—had someone told Barton? Did he know about Loki's shame, about his secret hunger? Was he really playing him? He had to be. It was impossible otherwise. Loki hadn't done anything to deserve this. No monster ever got his wishes fulfilled...

But Loki was weak, and Hel—of course it was a lie, of course it was an illusion, Barton was just fucked out and out of himself, but if this illusion was the only thing Loki would ever get, he would take it.

He took Barton again, took him all the way, slowly, deeply, and bent down to whisper in his ear, “My slave.”

The words he had never hoped he could say.

And Barton came. He came and clenched erratically around Loki who thrust one, two, three times before the world exploded in stars behind his eyes and his entire body came ablaze as well in a silent howl of approval, Yes, or maybe Thank you, thank whichever Norn had mixed up a monster's life with a blissful existence, if just for a minute of lust.
Then Loki's fire died out, and he slumped forward, panting, and the guilt and shame just crashed onto him like rocks thrown from up high. He'd let himself go way too far this time.

He pulled out and untied Barton's hands—but the archer was so blissful, so obviously delirious with orgasmic afterglow, that even Loki's overwhelming, gut-clenching guilt hesitated. This was not the face of a hurt man.

He ended up taking Barton in his arms and lying him down on the bed; then he climbed in with him and drew the covers over them, because the archer was shivering—and come to think of it, maybe Loki was, too. He felt thin and unpleasantly light, on the edge of something too big, too intense for him. They stayed there for a very long while, panting, trying to catch their breaths, and looking into the other's eyes. Was Barton even seeing him? He was so far away.

No—he was actually inching closer. Loki blinked, but there was obviously something Barton still wanted.

And it was him.

Loki didn't think. He should have, but he felt like he was torn in half—one half pulled away by the wringing shame and you are a pain-eating, death-loving monster—and the other half a desperate cry of, but he wants me!

Me!

He wrapped his hand behind Barton's head and kissed him, hungrily, messily, open-mouthed, and Barton kissed back with a surprising energy, as though he was making a point—I do want you, and Loki's chest hurt so bad that he thought he was having a seizure, and inside he broke down into spasms, inside he curled up on himself and gripped two fistfuls of his hair and screamed, howled, MINE.

Barton sort of melted against him, his eyes clouding over until exhaustion enveloped him in its warm blanket; and abruptly he went completely limp.

Face buried in the demi-god's neck, he caught his breath for a long time. Loki stayed there too, still and dazed, until he himself stopped sounding like he was gasping for air. Barton had drifted off; he was now sleeping soundly—and soundlessly, curled up in their shared heat.

The demi-god propped himself on an elbow, the cover sliding down his naked body, and kept watching him. The archer's body was completely relaxed, and he had a blissful expression on his face. He looked so at peace, that Loki almost envied him for a second. If he had been like that—if he had wanted to receive instead of take, maybe things would have been easier. No guilt.

But no, he could have never been at peace with himself, he would have constantly fought his own urge to submit, deemed himself weak and despicable for it. Barton magnificently overlooked such petty issues. If his soul told him to kneel, he went to his arch enemy, to a monster who could have snapped him in half with his bare hands, and bowed as though it was nothing.

He was so strong—so impossibly unflappable. Loki had broken him and yet, he was the one who felt weak; because Laufeyson had given in to his urges, while Barton had claimed his—and it was two very different things.

Mine, he thought, but without any despair this time, only a wistful weariness. He quietly brushed Barton's cheek. The archer looked so quiet now—the hatred and anger and pain gone from his features. He looked only happy, as though Loki had taken care of him instead of viciously torturing
him for hours.

“I don't understand you,” the demi-god murmured.

He leaned in to kiss Barton's forehead.

“What a fool,” he breathed against his skin. “Surely I will kill you next time.”

Barton's bliss wasn't marred in the slightest. Loki gave a small, sad smile, then knelt up, the covers completely falling off them. Barton's golden, naked body was wonderful against the dark sheets, and wonderful too the thick collar around his neck, his only piece of clothing. Loki thought about how it would be to have him like this, forever; it Barton could really be his.

He invoked loose, floating clothes for himself, then dressed up Barton as well. It was with his bare hands, though, that he unbuckled the collar and carefully removed it, to let it vanish in the air like a memory of old.

Then he took Barton in his arms again and lifted him up, careful to let his head rest against his shoulder. He stepped out of his room; Thor could have been waiting for him out there—he didn't care. He didn't care either who he might come across when he opened the door and walked out into the hallway. While he was in the elevator, he just leaned against the wall with his precious weight in his arms. Barton had not twitched—he slept, as though Loki's arms were the safest place in the world.

*You fool,* Loki thought again, sadly.

The doors opened on Barton's rooms; Loki walked inside and carefully set him down on his cold bed. He drew the covers over him, then stayed there, watching him sleep. Barton may hate him, may consider him his enemy—but still, he had allowed himself to fall asleep in his arms.

And it was the greatest token of trust Loki had ever received.

Chapter End Notes

Few hours late, sorry. Hope you're still liking this, readers. Thank you SO MUCH for all the comments, please, do keep telling me what you think. :)
Someone knocked on the door and Loki hazily opened his eyes. Who—?

It couldn't be Barton. *Idiot.* This was the door of his bedroom, so it must be Thor. Loki slipped a hand out of the disheveled heap of covers and waved it in the general direction of the torture chair. He was almost certain he had hidden it again last night, after bringing Barton back to his room, but he wouldn't take chances with that. Seconds later, the thunderer walked in, oddly dressed in Midgardian clothing. Loki sighed and closed his eyes.

“Did I tell you to come in?” he grumbled in his pillow.

Thor just sat on chair by his bedside. Loki had undressed himself again after last night, and he had thrashed so much in his sleep that the sheets had ended up twined around his body, leaving a pale leg uncovered and cold, just like his arms and torso. He curled a bit on himself and slid his leg back under the sheets, leaving only his foot out.

“Brother,” Thor murmured. “I want to be angry at you after last night, but I can't.”

Loki froze.

What?

“I am only anxious. This fury inside you, this—this will to harm; I know not how to make it stop.”

Loki scrambled upwards. “Thor—”

“I know you've always had a taste for others' distress; but when you cannot help hurting yourself in the process, I can only consider it has gone too far.”

“Thor!” Loki almost squeaked. “What are you talking about?”

Thor looked surprised and a bit irritated. “Your behavior with Fury, brother. What else is there to discuss?”

*Oh thank all the Gods.*

“Attacking Fury can do you no good. He is the only one willing to protect you from the Midgardian justice.”

“Yes, well, those are my problems,” Loki said, settling back on his pillow. “What do you care?”

“What do I care?” Thor said in a very low voice.
His dark tone made Loki look up.

“Is that what you were telling yourself while you were flaying yourself in Odin's cells? What does Thor care? You think your blood matters not to me? You think I watched you fall into the void only to go on with my life afterwards?”

Loki huffed through his nose. “There is no need to be so dramatic—”

Thor burst out with laughter, a bitter, unpleasant laugh which resembled Loki's way too much. “How can you be the one saying this, brother!”

“I am not your brother,” Loki childishly protested.

“Yes, you are,” Thor snapped. “Maybe I am not yours anymore, but you are my brother, until the end of days.”

“What an unenviable share,” Loki yawned.

Thor said nothing. This was unusual enough for the demi-god to glance up again. The deep weariness he saw on Thor's face unsettled him—this wasn't like him, the golden, careless prince of Asgard.

“Do you have to watch me while I lie naked?” he asked eventually.

Thor just smiled sadly and shook his head. “Loki,” he said, very softly. “So many times I thought I'd lost you forever.”

You did lose me forever, Loki thought. Whoever Thor held for his brother was not inside this dark-haired, pale-skinned body. It was an empty shell which only pain and cries could fill. If there had been someone there, if Loki Odinson had ever been something else than façades and lies, those days were over. Had been ever since—

(But no. He didn't think about this. All forgotten)

“Loki,” Thor repeated. “Brother. I know I can trust you again. Let the others see it, as well.”

Loki thought of Barton falling asleep in his arms. What a fool. What an utter fool. To let his guard down like this—he hadn't felt Loki's delirious craving for his blood. He didn't know the demi-god's greatest wish was to watch him die.

“You cannot trust me,” Loki murmured, more to Barton than to Thor.

But Thor was the only one who heard it; and he only shook his head and left.

*\

Loki just lay in bed until he heard low voices outside his door. When he caught his own name, he froze—and went even stiller when he recognized that voice. Barton! Barton was back—already?
—and talking with...

...Thor.

That could not possibly be good.

The demi-god jumped out of bed and dressed himself in a flick of his wrist before walking out the room. As soon as he got out, though, he stopped—and understood the true meaning of Barton's codename. Those gray eyes rooted him to the spot. Barton must be here to tell Thor everything. He had woken up after last night and realized just how slippery a slope he was on. He was here to shatter their frail balance. And indeed, the way he looked at Loki was not submissive in the slightest—on the contrary; he looked victorious, and even eager.

Something awful twisted Loki's stomach in a tight knot, and he swallowed as audibly and visibly as Barton had, last night.

Thor was looking between them both and growing paler at every second.

"Barton," he said in a hoarse voice. "Please."

Loki startled. Thor—begging Barton?

"My friend. Loki's situation is... extremely precarious. Whatever he did, I am certain we can talk it out."

Loki's stomach twisted all the more to the point of almost making him sick. If Barton told Thor everything—if he revealed the true extent of Loki's real nature, of his cruelty, of his monstrosity, would Thor beg for his little brother's life still? He shouldn't have begged anyway. But that was what Loki did, wasn't it—everything he touched turned sour.

"Hey—no," Barton said.

Both gods looked up at him in surprise. "Don't worry. That's exactly why I'm here—to talk. I'm not gonna report to Fury."

Thor relaxed so visibly that Loki felt a pang of anger. The thunderer's worry had no reason to be; Fury was no threat to Loki. And even if he was, Loki didn't want anyone to worry about him. He wanted nothing. Nothing at all.

He had managed not to want anything until Barton walked in and knelt at his feet. Not that such a thing was likely to ever happen again after last night.

"If you told me what he did or said...," Thor was saying already, but Barton cut him off.

"I'd rather have it stay between us. But I won't report against him whatever happens—you have my word. Okay?"

Thor was so relieved he didn't even notice what instantly struck Loki—Barton wanted to talk with him only? This couldn't possibly be about engaging in their sick games once more. Last night should have left them both sated for at least several days, and Loki didn't think Barton wanted anything more to do with him after the lengths of torture he'd been put through. Was he there to redefine the rules, then? But Loki wouldn't have that.

Actually, after what had happened last time—*your slave, sir*—he wasn't even sure *he* wanted to go on, himself. To be tantalized like this was too painful. And the physical pleasure wasn't enough to
make up for it, no matter how intense. Not to mention what those sessions brought out of Loki—things he would have preferred never to see.

*If you faint, I will kill you.*

He knew he was a monster, he *knew*, but to know it and to face it were two very different things...

Barton coughed and Thor finally realized he was meant to leave them both alone. He got up hesitantly, then walked out; he made a point in brushing Loki's shoulder on his way out. *Brother.* Whatever happened, *brother.* Until the end of days.

*I am not your brother,* Loki thought. *I am a monster.*

But he never had the courage to say that second part out loud.

So he said nothing at all and just stood there, staring at Barton with a hollow feeling. It might be better to simply ask and put an end to it.

“Why are you here so soon?”

As if Barton had ever been likely to come back—soon or not. Indeed, the archer frowned in incomprehension.

“Okay, what the hell?” he said.

He straightened up and went on, “Did yesterday happen, or was it just a really fucked-up dream?”

*No,* Loki thought, breathless.

No. No, no, no, this was impossible. Was Barton... *disappointed?* Had he *meant* it? Was he here to have Loki uphold his end of the deal?

Loki almost felt like he was about to have a panic attack; he quickly looked away and crossed the room to sit on the couch facing Barton to hide the trembling in his legs and the dizziness of his mind. By the time he sat back, he was composed again. No—he couldn't let himself believe in any of it. Surely, there was another explanation, one which would cruelly disappoint him if he allowed himself to indulge in his stupid, wicked fantasies yet again.

“You were out of your mind with endorphins, Barton. I did not take your words for granted.”

*It was* true. Loki had noticed, by now, how impossibly pliant Barton was rendered by his own submission. Surely, pain was no stranger to this phenomenon—pain and *pleasure,* since they were similarly tools when it came to take over someone's body and mind.

Barton looked amazed for a second, then just scoffed. “Yeah, well. No. I meant it. And I still do.”

Loki could only stare at him.

*Insane.* Barton must be insane. Or this had to be—a trap, but he wouldn't have gone to such lengths of depravity and self-harm just to *trick* Loki. Unless Barton sought revenge for Manhattan, past caring for a body he already regarded as lost? That might be more likely. *Anything* might be more likely than Clint Barton—than anyone—declaring himself willing to be Loki Laufeyson's slave.

“You hate me,” Loki protested. Maybe Barton had forgotten that little fact.

He was almost relieved when the archer didn't deny it. At least he hadn't gone completely crazy.
“Yeah,” he nodded. “Doesn’t change the fact that I need you.”

Loki frowned. Was this all about physical needs, then? But slavery was about soul and spirit, not just body.

“I can’t live without you—literally,” Barton went on.

He didn’t look happy about it, not in the slightest; but his voice was steady and sullen, like he was exposing plain facts before going on an unpleasant mission. “So I might as well admit it right now, save us some time.”

Could he be so dependent on Loki? But it made no sense, it made no sense! Why not seek out anyone else? Anybody who wouldn’t be likely to hurt him—to kill him on a mere whim? What could Barton possibly see in him?

“But do you trust me?” Loki asked, incredulous.

Barton looked almost offended. “What? Oh, come on! I’m telling you I want to be your slave for the rest of my goddamn life.”

Loki completely forgot to breathe yet again. Thank the Norns for Barton's bluntness. Even his paranoid mind could find no loopholes in such a brutal statement.

“And you want to know if I trust you,” Barton snorted. “What do you think?”

Loki just kept staring at him. He was so besides himself that he still wasn’t breathing. He hadn’t done anything to deserve this. His very existence—his very nature—meant he would never deserve anything. So why? How? Oh, how he wished he truly believed in the gods, so he would have someone to thank for this.

A slave. A slave. A willing slave. Someone who would be his—rightfully his. And once he had him, once he’d claimed him and conquered him, he would never be alone...

The innocence of the thought made him cringe and he instantly wished it had never crossed his mind. Besides, he was getting carried away, like the fool he was. No—this was just a game, just for his fun. Barton didn’t realize what he was asking for. Whatever happened next, they would still be pretending and Loki must not let himself forget it. So what if he had a mortal pet? Like it mattered. Like it would change anything to the great things he wanted to accomplish.

But in this second, he couldn’t think of a single one, though. They all grew dim and colorless next to the prospect of owning Clint Barton.

Said Barton was eyeing Loki with wary eyes; he’d lost his irritated bravado and grown more and more uneasy as the demi-god kept silent. He cleared his throat and said hesitantly, “Look—I’ve—uh—I’ve only made... assumptions so far. I assumed you would want this.”

If I want this? Only the acute knowledge of Thor's presence in the other room kept Loki from standing up and fucking Barton on the spot.

“I do,” he said instead, in what he hoped was a remotely calm voice.

Barton's pupils actually dilated. Unbelievable. He did want this. He did want this, with the same intensity Loki did.

But no—he had no idea what he was getting himself into. And Loki wasn’t going to trick him, not
“I am not playing, Barton,” he said hoarsely. “You must understand the meaning of that word.”

His licked his lips and articulated, “Slave.”

Just saying this word, when it might soon become real—not real; a game, just a game, but the very game he’d been dying to play—sent a lecherous shiver down his spine. He opened his mouth, lost in thought for a second, then went on. “No will of your own.”

That about covered it, but he went on to make sure Barton was on the same page as him. “No things of your own—everything you have will belong to me. Forbidden to take your own decisions. Forbidden to choose your food, your clothes, your—your entertainment.”

He paused to lick his lips again. A thousand-year-old monster was stirring in his loins, flaming bright in his veins, growling for this man's blood.

“And no going back, of course,” he breathed. “The rest of your life. It is not just a figure of speech.”

A lifetime of suffering. A lifetime of torture, of submission, of kneeling at a monster's feet. A lifetime of isolation and pain, a lifetime of misery and humiliation and begging everyday for the permission to exist.

“Is this what you want?” he said, so low he could barely hear himself.

Nobody could possibly want this.

But there was a dark flame in Barton's eye, and he licked his lips in turn and said, voice rough and cracked, “Only if you want me.”

Loki's muscles clenched and unclenched and something stirred deep inside him, like a parasite heaving up his organs as it stretched awake. He realized he was breathless yet again. No, no, this wasn't good—this couldn't be.

“Seven days,” Loki panted.

The archer frowned. “What?”

“A week to think. To think of—everything you will lose. To imagine how it might be to belong to me with no turning back. Think, Barton. Picture the most horrendous ordeals you can think of. Think of your life seeping away between my fingers. And if you still want it in seven days, come back to see me.”

He rose. “If you do not, I strongly advise you never to find yourself in my presence again.”

If Barton had been leading him on, consciously or not, he would need more than the Avengers to save him. Loki's mind was a confused tangle of desire and lust and anger and pain. If this was another false hope—no. Barton was the one who was supposed to torture himself with apprehension. Not Loki. Never Loki. Nothing mattered to him. He wouldn't let it matter.

He sharply turned his back on the archer and walked inside his room, if only to flee those gray eyes he wanted to kiss—or pluck out, he didn't know.

Thor was sitting on his bed.

He got up at once when Loki entered. “Brother—”
“Worry not,” Loki said, in a voice which, he knew, did not sound untroubled.

“What did he want?”

Loki took a deep breath through his nose. “It matters not. We are done. This time, we are both done.”

He didn't know if he wished he was telling the truth or not. He plunged his face in his hands, then ran them up his hair, fingers tangling in the knots. “Get out, you oaf.”

“But—”

“GET OUT!” Loki shouted.

And Thor slipped away like a shadow.
When Loki got out of his room, it was the middle of the night. Thor was waiting in their common rooms; he was sitting on the couch with a distant look, like he could have stayed there all night and the day after this. Loki sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Look...” he began.

“Loki,” Thor said in a low voice, as though Loki didn't know he was there. As though he didn't know Thor was there, always, had been there from the beginning and would likely be there for ever; even if Loki found in himself the will and strength to kill him, even if he managed to spill the Odinson's blood, Thor would still be there, always, always always, looming over Loki and weighing down on his every action.

As it was, the thunderer got up. “Loki,” he repeated, and just this—just his name—made Loki's anger flare up all the more.

“What?” he snarled.

“I am leaving,” Thor said.

Loki turned to him.

“What?” he repeated, in a very different voice.

“I haven't yet seen my dearest Jane since my return,” Thor said, in that weary voice which didn't suit him. “I will leave in the morrow to visit her for seven days. And Erik Selvig.” His eyes darkened ever so slightly. “Surely you remember Selvig.”

The trickster sneered. “Are your words meant to awaken my guilt? I fear no such thing can be found inside me.”

“Make no mistake,” Thor said in a drier voice. “I am still waiting for you to forgive me, but it does not mean I forgave you.”

He looked up and his burning blue eyes crossed Loki's gaze. “You call me an oaf and a fool. But ever since we arrived here, you have behaved like a spoiled child, and I am getting tired of your
moods."

Loki scoffed. “Whatever happened to ‘brother until the end of days’, I wonder?”

“You are my brother,” Thor said calmly. “But I am not your slave.”

The demi-god stiffened.

“Do not use that word.”

“Why not?” Thor asked nonchalantly.

An awful pang of doubt flickered through Loki's mind. Surely, Thor didn't know—he hadn't heard —?

The thunderer took a step forward and Loki an unwilling step back.

“What are you doing with Barton?” Thor asked.

Loki disguised his sharp intake of breath into a disbelieving snort. “With Barton,” he repeated. “Barton is an outdated toy; just like the rest of your petty friends.”

“You are their prisoner,” Thor reminded him.

“And you, the free man, can hardly wait to escape this place.” Loki scoffed.

He straightened up. “Yet I, the prisoner, will follow you everywhere you go. How does that make you feel? It is me you will see in Selvig's eyes; me you will find in your beloved's thoughts...”

“It is you who watches those outdated toys on their own screens,” Thor said, raising an eyebrow.

Loki’s eyes widened. Damn this disembodied, ever-watching presence—

“A spoiled child, brother,” Thor hammered. “Ill becomes you to enjoy the sweets you are being offered. But soon they will rot away, and it will be too late then.”

Loki showed his teeth. “Did you know me better, you would know I have no taste for sugar coatings.”

Thor stared at him for a second; Loki could feel his own nostrils flaring. It seemed like one of them was going to pounce on the other any second now.

“What do you want?” Thor asked.

Loki narrowed his eyes. “What do I want?”

“I have never tried asking you,” the thunderer said. “What is it you wish for?”

The trickster balled his hands into fists. I wish. I wish for all the things you ever had and were. I wish Odin had let a blue-skinned spawn die in the snow. I wish I could kill Barton and have him thank me for it. I wish for monsters to rule this world and feed upon the guilt which devours me.

“I wish,” he said slowly, “for all the things you cannot give me.”

Thor pursed his lips and stepped back, shaking his head. Loki smiled, although he felt like screaming, and said, “Giving up?”
“Perhaps a week apart will do us some good,” Thor said.

The demi-god swallowed. This was... basically what he had just told Barton. Doubt seized him all over again. Had Thor heard? Was he playing him, trying to get him to unveil himself?

“And perhaps it will change nothing,” he said under his breath, but Thor had already left.

Loki hadn't realized all of this meant he would find himself completely alone in Stark Tower for seven days. At first, he paced his rooms like a caged tiger and thought he might die of frustration. What was he doing here? Why wasn't he leaping to the quietness of his house, and from there, into the stars? Why was he staying on this planet of concrete and mud as though he had never dreamed of glory?

He knew exactly why. If he left, Jarvis would ring the alarm and he could never come back—not amidst this relative peace. He wondered what he would do if Barton didn't show up on the seventh day—which was most likely. Surely, the archer would realize that only a bottomless despair could drive a man to surrender his very self to someone else. And Barton wasn't desperate—he was uncomfortable in his new skin, he was troubled with thoughts of inferiority, and he was very probably hating himself, but not to the point of giving himself up. No. No, Loki had lost him. So why was he still there?

Hope. It made him grit his teeth like nails on a black board. Hope! What a fool he was. Whatever had happened to his good resolutions? Not to feel anything ever again. Not to hope for anything ever again. He'd thought he flayed his soul as well as his skin out in Odin's cells. But as it turned out, his soul, like his skin, had grown back, and he couldn't deny it anymore. He was hoping Barton would, against all odds, show up on his doorstep.

So what? Was Loki Barton's slave now, to be at his beck and call like this? He didn't understand—the more he asserted his dominance over the archer, the less in control he was. At first, it had been but a game. And now...—but it was Barton's fault, it was, he was the one who'd offered to be Loki's slave, like this fool knew what it meant! To be a slave was big enough of a step, but to be a Jotun's slave—to be Loki Laufeyson's slave! Hadn't Barton felt what monstrous desires lived at the dark core of his enemy? Had Loki not killed enough people, wrecked enough buildings, for Barton to realize he should have stayed away? But he had gotten closer, and closer and closer, and now Loki hoped for more and he hated himself for it.

He would wait. He would wait until the seventh day, and after Barton would fail to present himself just as planned, Loki would...

...leave?

He thought of Thor's weary look and a burning anger seized him yet again. No—he was done with Thor. He was done! That was the most important decree he'd made as he picked his skin off with his nails—never in Thor's shadow. Loki would become a shadow himself if he had to, but never again would he allow the golden oaf to get to him.

As it turned out, he couldn't even believe the promises he made to himself. He wanted to think about Thor even less than he wanted to think about Barton, and that was saying a lot. So in the end, he sent
it all to Hel and decided that yes, he would go to the damn gym, since his body was so restless anyway.

Jarvis guided him to the training rooms. Loki feared he might come across Barton; but the disembodied voice assured him the archer wasn't currently in the gym, although it wouldn't tell him exactly where he was.

Not that Loki cared. By all the gods, this was just one single mortal. And now he really needed to let out some steam. He strode inside the empty gym and startled when the ground gave a little under his feet—a mat, he realized. No wonder those apes were so soft. Loki had always trained on plain stone.

He took a glance around, let his gaze sweep over several machines which looked almost more barbaric than the Spanish Inquisition devices he'd looked up; he overlooked the ring as well, then zeroed on the punching bags. The dusty smell made his nose wrinkle. Were these things filled with sand?

Whatever. He just needed to exert himself, and the sooner, the better. As he walked towards the heavy bags, he let his leather coat peel itself off his body to shift into loose, dark fabric.

“That's a pretty neat trick,” someone said.

Loki stiffened and turned round. Stark was standing in the doorway, having obviously every intention of training, himself. He had bandages wrapped around his hands. The demi-god sneered at him, then turned back without a word.

“I see you're in a good mood,” Stark said.

He walked inside and nonchalantly plopped himself down in a chair. “I was wondering—what do you do all day? When you're not busy moping and watching us on the news, I mean. If you want to be on the team so bad, just say so. We can hold interviews. Although the whole crazy conqueror thing might be a no-go.”

Loki turned to the bags and shifted his feet in a fighting stance. “Stark,” he said. “Do you remember what happened the last time you teased me?”

The billionaire scoffed. “Yeah, but you're all unicorns and rainbows now, aren't you?”

Loki jabbed at the bag and his fist went right through it in an explosion of yellow sand. He hissed, then moved his hand inside it until he grabbed a torn piece of leather, and tugged so hard he ripped the whole bag open; then he tugged again and the chain broke down, letting the remains of the bag fall heavily on the floor.

The demi-god shook his sandy hand, then turned back to Stark and smirked at him. The billionaire's eyes were so wide it almost made this day worth it after all. And for once, he was speechless.

“I feel... on edge,” Loki said in a very soft voice.

He took one step towards Stark and relished the hurry with which the billionaire got to his feet. Loki wouldn't hurt him, of course. But it was nice to imagine he could.

“Very much so,” he went on under his breath.

Then he turned away in casual disdain. “But everything in this room is as useless as I thought it would be.”
Stark finally managed to close his mouth. He coughed and said, “May I interest you in an iron punching bag?”

Loki gave him his serpent smirk. “A red-and-gold one?”

The billionaire scowled at him. “We're not sparring until you adopt at least three kittens. Jarv', get us Thor's blocks down.”

A trap opened in the ceiling and a punching bag made of iron indeed—or something similar—came down right before Loki. How interesting; hiding gear inside the walls. He must keep that in mind for when he would finally be able to go back to his house.

“Knock yourself out,” Stark said. “I'd stay and watch, but—”

“No,” Loki said as he delivered a first blow which rang out in the entire room.

The metal was barely dented. Good.

“Figured,” Stark shrugged, but his flippant tone didn't quite match the hasty way in which he exited the room. Trying to salvage his ego, or his life? Loki didn't know and certainly didn't care. He clenched his fists, and for once in his existence, wished his body could overthrow his mind, only if for a few minutes.

★

After an hour, he felt a bone crack as he punched the metal again and decided it might be time for a break. He was drenched in sweat—he didn't usually train so hard—but he felt a bit less restless. He steadied the block of iron and pressed his forehead against the cool surface.

“The Agent Barton is coming down, along with Captain Rogers,” Jarvis informed him smoothly.

Damn. All the tension he'd shaken off was back in Loki's shoulders. This was why he hated training—in the end, the exertion of his body had nothing on the agitations of his mind. He frowned up at the ceiling. “Why are you telling me this?”

“There is no reason for me not to assist you in your plan to stay away from the Agent Barton.”

Loki snorted. “You are quite cunning, voice.”

“I aim to please.”

The demi-god let go of the dented and almost chewed-up metal and took a step back. Jarvis obligingly opened the door for him and Loki hastily went up the corridor, sending sparkles of healing magic along the nerves in his hands.

He spent the rest of the week in a quieter state. Well, maybe exhausting himself had actually helped him to settle down a bit, and he was able to interest himself in Midgardian literature again. He practiced his magic, too, long-forgotten spells among the most harmless he could recall—he did not mean for Jarvis to ring the alarm—and teased the AI when he got really too bored. But he couldn't hide from himself the fact that he was waiting, like a damsel in her tower, and it infuriated him so
much that sometimes he just had to get up and pace the room again, biting his knuckles and praying for his mind to be quiet, like it had been after Odin's cells, for a few, blissful weeks.

But those days were gone.

By the end of the sixth day, Loki did not know whether he was most mad at himself for his recklessness, for his untamable urges, for his passive waiting or his disobedient body. Most likely all four at once. Whether he was building his hopes up or not didn't matter anymore—the situation had become so unbearable that he would have given anything to know. He simply couldn't stand this state of anticipation anymore; he'd been way too familiar with it over the course of a thousand years by Thor's side, waiting to know whether he would be prince, waiting for the unlikely days of his glory. And after he'd fell in the void...

He shuddered. He didn't like to remember this moment—it had felt like years to him. He had no idea for how long he'd actually fallen. He only knew that it had been dark, and cold, and that he had called for his brother, called for his mother like a little child, sobbed and cried and beggled them to come and save him, saying he was so sorry, he was so sorry, but they weren't coming and then something red and burning had opened inside him and he'd cursed them all with the most venomous words he could think of, cursed them in old Norse and old Vanir for abandoning him, swore to kill them and then sobbed again and then, finally, passed out—only to...

At this precise second, someone knocked on the door.

Loki's gaze snapped up. What? But there was still a day left before—

His gaze fell on the clock and his heart jumped in his chest. Midnight. Either Thor had come back two days early...

...either Barton couldn't wait. And if he couldn't wait—

Loki strode to the door and almost torn it off its hinges. Barton was there, with a haunted look in his gray eyes and dark rings under them, looking pale and drawn, but also filled with a somehow insane fire.

“Yes,” he panted as though he'd run all the way there. “Still a yes.”

Loki's insides turned into liquid fire. He searched Barton's eyes for a trace of deceit, but there wasn't any and Loki was so tired of trying to be reasonable.

So tired.

He took a step back and said hoarsely, “Come in.”

Barton was more jumpy than ever as he walked in; he was full of tics and and twitches and kept licking his lips as though they were drier than sand. He was so nervous, so on edge, so febrile that Loki actually calmed down in return. As always, he reacted to Barton as though he was his opposite half. The more panicked the archer was, the more composed Loki felt; the more there was to control,
“What happens now?” Barton muttered, pacing the room like Loki had for these six long, excruciating days. “Do we, what, shake hands? Do I have to sign something? Do you still want it? You do, right? Because if you don't, I'm not—”

“Calm down,” Loki said in a low voice.

The archer took a deep breath and screwed his eyes shut in helpless despair. Loki couldn’t stand it—he took a step forward and cupped Barton's cheek, rubbed his thumb along his jaw, and it felt like relieving a physical ache when the archer leaned into it, looking for all the world like he’d been let off an actual hook, too. And Loki wanted so much, it hurt.

Only then did he realize he had no idea what to do. He’d been so busy trying to convince himself that Barton wouldn't return, that he hadn't planned anything in the impossible case of an actual surrender. But Barton was here, and he was willing—for some unfathomable reason—and Loki had nothing in store.

He thought of the slave market again and felt his own fingers twitch against Barton's stubble.

“Ideally,” he murmured, “I would take you away for your breaking in. We would spend months together until you were knocked into shape. I would make you forget even your own name. Satisfying me would be the only thing left in your mind.”

Barton made a sound as though Loki had been pleasuring him, and the demi-god nearly lost it. How he wished he could do exactly this. But he couldn't. He wasn't enough of a mad monster not to realize that, should he take Barton away from his home and friends, the archer wouldn't be long to reconsider their deal. This was all a fantasy to Barton. Nothing but a game, like Loki had tried to convince himself it was to him, too. He had kind of lost the battle on this one, but no matter what Barton said, he wasn't ready to be a true slave. He just wanted insurance. Something to rely on.

A permanent mark.

“But given the circumstances, I cannot afford to claim you publicly,” Loki went on. “I will mark you, though. Your life as a free man will be nothing more than a façade afterwards.”

That was a lie, a half-lie, or a half-truth, maybe. Loki would get to call him his slave and treat him like his slave and it was wonderful enough. Of course, it also meant he was stuck on Midgard for who knew how long, but that was the least of his worries right now.

“Kneel,” he breathed.

Oh how good it felt to watch him sink down. It wasn't even all about sex—Loki could feel his own body relax, his tensed back unknot, as though he'd knitted up a gaping wound. He felt right. He felt as he was meant to feel, as though by going down Barton had pushed him up.

“I am taking you,” he said in a low, vibrant voice, relishing every word. “You no longer belong to yourself. You are mine to hurt, to maim, to kill. You are my property. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Barton said—and for a split second Loki loved him.

“Yes,” he said hoarsely. “Take your clothes off.”

Barton obeyed so fast Loki was almost touched. To think of the first time he'd given this order—the archer had been so viscerally terrified, then. So convinced Loki would take him without as much as
giving it a second thought. For the first time, the demi-god realized how much things had *changed.* How long a path they’d imperceptibly walked.

Barton was naked now, and anxiously waiting for his next order. This time, Loki didn't have to ask himself. He knew precisely what he wanted—what he'd always craved, ever since his foolish visit of the market and the smell of scorched flesh which had invaded his nostrils and made him run away so his blood wouldn't start boiling in his veins.

He invoked it in his room, then motioned Barton to follow; when he got in, it was there, waiting for him.

A great wooden X with restraints awaiting a human body. Barton swallowed audibly, but it didn't sound at all like he was having second thoughts. On the contrary—when Loki turned to look at him, Barton seemed almost more eager than the demi-god himself was. The fact that he was throbbingly hard probably had something to do with it. Raking his eyes up and down the tan body, Loki realized it was covered in bruises and scratches. Obviously, the demi-god wasn't the only one who'd tried to exhaust his frustration in a training room.

He grabbed Barton's wrist and guided him forward until he could press his front side against the wooden cross. He spread Barton's legs and tied his ankles down, then made him raise his arms and strapped down his wrists as well. The archer was panting quite raggedly now, but he still wasn't saying a word. Loki wondered if he had any idea what would happen to him next.

Well—there was a very simple way to check *that.* The demi-god waved his hand in the air and closed his fingers on the long, thin shaft of a branding iron. The weight of it—what it *meant*—made him shiver.

He was almost afraid, himself.

He trailed gentle fingers through Barton's hair, enjoyed the strange softness of it, then gripped and made him turn his head. He could pin-point the exact second the archer caught sight of the branding iron. His eyes widened; his breath hitched and a full-body shudder rippled through him. But he still said nothing, staring at the branding rim. Loki glanced down at it.

“This is my personal rune,” he said.

The archer didn't react and Loki felt more stupid than he'd felt in over a century. Obviously, Barton couldn't have cared less what the rune meant—not to mention that it was kind of obvious. His breath kept hitching and he was unconsciously twitching his arms in the restraints, trying to break free, to run.

One part of Loki wanted to heat up the iron and relish Barton's mental and physical agony as he marked him against his will. But he couldn't. Barton was human, naked, and in shock. Even a worse monster than Loki would have been disgusted with such a despicable act.

“Barton,” he murmured gently.

But then the archer shook his head and snapped out of his horrified haze. “Yeah,” he breathed, throat dry. He took a deep breath and pressed his forehead against the wooden cross, bracing his arms in the restraints.

*Preparing* himself. He was willing. He was willing.

And Loki was weak, because he let go of Barton's hair and cast the heating spell on the iron before his resolution could start wavering again. When the archer heard the crackle of the white-hot metal,
he swallowed thickly and took a very deep, very shaky breath.

“Do you want to be gagged?” Loki asked in a low voice.

If he’d been in his place, he would have appreciated something to bite down on. But Barton shook his head and panted, “Whatever you want.”

Loki cursed his own stupidity once again. Barton was already having a very hard time convincing himself not to try and break free—now wasn’t the time to overwhelm him with even more choices.

“I do love hearing you scream,” the demi-god mumbled pensively.

The monster inside roared and scratched bloody gashes through his stomach. Yes. YES. Make him SCREAM.

Yes.

Loki’s mind was blown out like a candle.

YES.

“No muzzle, then,” he breathed hoarsely. “Prepare yourself, Barton.”

The archer sucked in a breath and tensed even more. His body was glistening with sweat, as though he’d been oiled for Loki’s pleasure.

Such an entrancing sight. A few seconds more, and he would be Loki’s. He would he Loki’s slave. His to hurt, to maim, to kill. But more importantly—his. Rightfully his. The iron was going to burn his freedom out of him—burn everything out of him, and leave only submission. Perfect, orgasmic submission. He was willing. He was actually willing.

NOW, the monster shouted—and Loki snapped for good. He showed his gleaming teeth in a feral grin.

“This is going to hurt,” he purred—and pressed the iron against the small of the naked back.

Barton arched and screamed—his flesh sizzled and hissed under the hot iron, and Barton was struggling like mad against his restraints and screamed so hard his voice broke down and cracked into sobs, frantic sobs which melted in a blur of hysterical pleas before bubbling up in a scream again which broke into the room and sounded against the ceiling, a scream like it would never end, and everything smelled of scorched flesh and Loki screwed his eyes shut and came—came in his pants, and he was devoured with awful shame for it, but it couldn’t be felt over the triumphant roar of the monster within.

And then Barton’s shout stuck in his throat and he sagged in his restraints. He had passed out.

Feral delight and panicked worry clashed into Loki’s mind. He hurriedly removed the iron—had Barton not withstood it? Had the shock been too great? Was he—but before he could worry further, a cough escaped Barton’s lips and promptly morphed into halting sobs.

Relief washed through Loki—as well as a renewed pang of lustful bliss. The pain had just been too unbearable. But it was all part of becoming a slave; learning that the master’s pleasure tasked the entirety of the slave’s forces. Fainting was an important step in Barton’s journey—in abandoning himself to Loki.
The demi-god snapped the restraints open and grabbed Barton to keep him from falling down into a heap. The archer was limp and heavy in his arms, softly sobbing in shock, and gasping for breath.

“You did good,” Loki murmured, rubbing circles in his shoulders as he helped him kneel down. “You did good. You did good.”

He was shaking, himself. Barton didn't answer; Loki wasn't even sure he'd heard. He did notice the archer had crossed his hands behind his back, though; he needed something to secure him, to ground him, and Loki was only too happy to oblige. A leather strap promptly tied Barton's wrists together; he shuddered violently, but then his sobs became less frantic. As he kept rubbing his glistening shoulders, Loki peered down the archer's back. The brand was there, a bright red against the tan skin, Loki's rune neat and perfectly defined against the skin. It made his mind sway in such an intense way that he couldn't control himself—he extended his arm and brushed his fingertips over it.

Barton startled so violently he scared them both; Loki immediately withdrew his hand. But he couldn't help a huge grin from spreading on his face. He knelt down with Barton and took his face between his hands.

“You are mine,” he said in an utterly blissed out voice.

Barton was panting, and still crying with pain and shock. And yet the next words out of his mouth were a hoarse and shaky “Thank you, sir.”

Loki didn't realize he was kissing him until their mouths were crushed together.

He pressed against Barton, pushed into him like he was trying to devour him, and he was suffocating with love, because this was everything, everything he'd ever wanted, and he'd felt so dreadfully guilty for it—but now Barton obliterated all shame again. Thanking him.

When they parted, the demi-god saw that Barton had fallen down more abruptly than ever before—his eyes hazy and his features as relaxed as they could be, considering the circumstances.

“Excellent,” he breathed, and Barton was so obviously overjoyed with the smallest praise that it felt like the demi-god's heart was torn up. You—you incredible creature. You wonder. You miracle. He pressed their foreheads together and stayed there, breathing deep and shaky, like he'd been the one enduring the ordeal.

It started sinking in. He had done it. Actually done it. One of Thor's friends—of Loki's enemies—he'd claimed him as his own. Marked him. Since when did he do such definite, final things?

He opened his eyes and was distracted from his angst by the evidence of Barton's desperate arousal. How could he—after such torture? Loki smiled, almost ruefully, because this was just too perfect to be real. Yet when he brushed the hard shaft, Barton's hips jerked up and he shuddered so hard he could have dismantled all his bones. For a second, Loki thought of giving him what he wanted, but Barton was too drained. And he was his slave now, wasn't he? So his master should be the one deciding what was best for him.

“You are not coming on the night of your branding,” he breathed in the archer's ear.

He strapped his cock in a leather ring to mark his words, tightening it maybe a bit more harshly than necessary around his balls. Barton moaned, but didn't protest and leaned against Loki, completely shameless, completely dependent, completely his.

He was shaking so bad.
“You can faint, now,” Loki suggested.

And Barton said again, extraordinarily, *amazingly*, “Thank you, sir.”

And then he blacked out.

He had actually awaited Loki's permission to faint.

At this moment, he was so submissive. So perfectly *tamed*. Loki thought he would feel bliss again, but what seized him rather resembled fear—or vertigo. He wrapped his arms around Barton's limp body and buried his face in the crook of his neck. His breath quickened and became more ragged; he screwed his eyes shut, but tears suddenly forced their way through and rolled down Barton's wet skin.

He knew it was a lie; he knew the illusion could only hold as long as they stayed in the shelter of this tower, pretending to be what they were not. Thor shared a pure and tender love with the one his heart had chosen; but his brother, the monster, loved only the pain and chaos he left in his wake. Fit only to writhe in darkness and bathe in decadence.

But just for tonight, Loki wanted to believe that even a monster could find a bit of happiness in this world, without having to suffer for it. He wanted to believe that despite his taste for Barton's pain and despite the howls of the beast within, there was a grace to what united them. Something worth salvaging.

So he let his tears roll down Barton's shoulder; quiet tears no one saw, not even the man who had called them forth.

Chapter End Notes

Lol how is this chapter so long? Loki's inner voice rambles like crazy.

Anyway *wheezes*, there! Thoughts, please? :)

---
When he woke up the next day, Loki wondered if it hadn't been all a dream. But he heard noise outside his room, which meant that Thor was back and that seven days had indeed passed.

For once, it was the trickster who got up and went to see his brother, instead of sulking in bed and waiting for someone to get interested in his sorry self. Thor looked both mournful and distant, like he wasn't sure whether to bask in memories of the past week, or push them away.

Loki leaned against the doorframe and asked, “How was she?”

Thor looked up, gaze guarded and dubious. Loki only raised his eyebrows slightly; he wasn't about to give Thor a clue whether he was being ironic or not. In the end, the thunderer gave a brief nod and said, “She is well.”

“And Selvig?”

Thor clenched his jaw.

“He's a clever man,” Loki said, straightening up. “I watched him for over a year before coming to Midgard. I always knew I would need him to carry it all out.”

“You drove him mad,” Thor said in a very low voice.

Loki stilled.

He wondered if what he felt was guilt. He didn't know. He was mostly hollow.

He guessed it made sense. Selvig—Loki had had to twist and tear up his mind to knock it into shape. It was bound to leave confusion and panic in its wake. But Barton... for Barton, it had almost been a relief. Loki had felt it as he was piercing his heart. Selvig had fought and screamed and yanked his chain. Barton had... yielded.

“He shouldn't have fought me,” Loki said. “But in doing so, he did manage to defeat the Chitauri. Let him hold on to that flicker of strength.”

He shrugged. “It will be enough. I know how insanity feels; I know it will not make much difference to a mind like Selvig’s.”

Thor looked up with weary, dubious eyes. “Why do you sound like you are trying to comfort me?”
A joyless smile tugged at the corner of Loki's lip. “Maybe I am.”

The thunderer stared at him for a long time.

“Something is happening to you, Loki,” he said slowly, gravely. “Something I cannot fathom. Whichever tide rumbles inside you, I hope it is my brother who will be washed up on the shore.”

“For you to realize he is but a swollen corpse with barnacle eyes,” Loki murmured.

There was a ruefulness lurking inside him like a layer of mud. It had been stirred up by the very peace he had been offered the night before. Barton knew who he was, and yet he had bowed. It made Loki hope again. He should have been furious at himself, but he couldn't find it in him just now. He was only weary.

“We can spar,” he offered, surprising himself.

Thor glanced up at him.

“Not just now,” Loki precised. “But should you happen to wish for it again, I might indulge you.”

Thor nodded. He was pressing his lips tight and his eyes were still dark. But for all the suffering Loki had inflicted, the thunderer still clasped his shoulder as he left the room.

Brother, Loki thought, experimentally.

He should have known better than starting to hope again, really. But today, he couldn't help himself.

*...

“...I guess this is where I oughta be,” Barton said.

He still looked in a bit of shock from last night, but he had recovered enough to come as soon as the other Avengers exited the tower. When he saw him, Loki felt his back muscles relax, as though Barton's mere presence caused a physical pain to subside inside him.

“Of course it is,” he said lightly.

Barton nodded, licking his lips. Loki stepped on the side. “Come in.”

Oddly enough, it seemed like the traumatizing violence of the branding had somehow appeased his hunger for pain. As though he was sated, if for a short time. He wished to control Barton, to feel him his, but he didn't want him to be fainting in agony this time. He wanted him to feel it as well; how completely they belonged.

“You must be tired,” he said.

Barton only hesitated for a split second before answering, “I am, sir.”

A thrill of bliss sparkled inside Loki. Mine, he thought, feeling himself relax even more. He had long forgotten the taste of certainty before this day.

(It was an illusion, he knew, he knew, but it was such a believable one.)
“Have you tended to it?”

Barton's left hand shifted minutely, as though he'd thought of brushing the small of his back then decided against it. “Yeah,” he said. “It's not my first third-degree burn. I know how to deal.”

“Good,” Loki approved.

He closed the door. For the first time, Barton had come to visit him during the day; they shouldn't engage in anything too rough, not when he was likely to report for duty on short notice. But as said before, Loki wasn't in a cruel mood. It was a strange, but also welcome feeling—he was tired of hating himself each time Barton walked in. They both needed a bit of quietness.

“Follow me,” he said.

He walked to the chair by the window; Barton shadowed him, looking a bit nervous.

“How long do you think you can kneel?” Loki asked.

The archer shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe three, four h—”

Loki brutally caught his throat, strangling his last word. So much for not being violent. But his impulse was already settling down; it had just been a minute spike. He gave an affable smile.

“I'll give you another chance.” The vice of his fingers tightened. “How long can you kneel.”

The archer's throat worked against his palm as he swallowed. “As long as you wish.” Loki's fingers twitched again and he hastily added, “Sir.”

Loki grinned.

“Much better.”

He released him. “On your knees, then.”

Barton obeyed with a slow breath out. Loki guessed this position stretched the burnt skin in his back; but the archer was actually quite good at hiding his pain, when he bothered to try. After a short while, the line of his shoulders relaxed.

Loki sat in his chair and opened the book he'd left near the window; and for the first time in weeks, he was able to focus completely on the verses.

*Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery...*

Loki closed his book and looked down. Barton was still kneeling at his feet. His eyes were glassy and staring in space, his breathing profound and even. He looked as though nothing could ever disturb him again. He had sunk hard and deep, just from kneeling at Loki's feet and being ignored for several hours.
“Up,” the demi-god murmured, just to see.

The archer got up without missing a beat—albeit quite slowly; his legs must be very numb. Loki wouldn't hold it against him. Barton looked blissed out, but also quite drawn. The pain of the brand must have kept him awake at night.

The demi-god tilted his head on the side; Barton had clasped his hands behind his back, waiting.

“Kiss me,” Loki ordered.

He was curious.

Barton hesitated; the demi-god was much taller than him, but obviously the archer wouldn't dare pulling him in—not while he was so deep down his submissive state. Loki smiled, then obligingly leaned down, and Barton's lips met his in a pleasant enough kiss. At first, the archer tried to take the lead, since such were the orders; but when Loki started responding, he let himself be claimed with obvious relief.

“Fetch me a glass of water,” the demi-god murmured when they parted.

Barton obeyed with mechanical gestures and came back a minute later with a crystal glass. Loki took it from his fingers, nodding slightly in thanks. He watched the light play in the water for a while; he remembered the very first time Barton had come here. The demi-god had pressed that very same glass to his lips then.

He took a small sip.

“Kneel,” he murmured, licking the moisture off his lips. “And bow your head.”

The archer was doing everything he was saying without as much as a hint of doubt, or irony, or weariness. It was almost frightening; even the mind-control hadn't pulled him so far down. Loki drank a bit more, then grabbed Barton's hair to bend his head further down, and poured the rest on his nape. The water trickled down and darkened the already dark shirt of the archer, who shuddered violently when the cool liquid soaked the cloth over his brand mark. His shoulders relaxed again a minute after.

“Come to me,” Loki murmured, trailing his fingers across the short hair. “Whenever you can, come to me.”

Barton nodded with another shiver.

“Out loud,” the trickster reminded him, not unkindly so.

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you slept well last night?”

“No, sir.”

“Would you like to rest on the couch?”

Even in his hazy state, Barton seemed seized with a sudden doubt. “...If that's my place, sir,” he said slowly. He was probably right to be cautious, but Loki wasn't trying to trick him. Why trick someone who took your every order?

“Your place is what I say it is,” he said, with a hint of steel in his voice.
Barton relaxed again. “Got it, sir.”

“Good. And remember. From now on, you are to shadow me whenever possible.”

The archer smiled a little. “Gonna stretch your patience in the end, sir.”

Loki blinked, then smirked in the corner of his mouth. “That is my call, now, isn't it?”

Barton nodded, still smiling, and got up stiffly before going to curl up on the deep couch in the middle of the room. He was asleep in a matter of seconds, Loki Laufeyson's control having apparently overthrown the pain of the burn.

* *

Another couple of hours later, Jarvis's voice fell from the ceiling, soft and low like he'd been contaminated by the peace overflowing the room. Loki realized he didn't really know what he'd done until then. Read another book? There was one in his lap, but he had no memory of it. Only of Barton's quiet, regular breaths.

“If you will pardon me,” the AI said. “Avengers Assemble.”

Barton was instantly awake; he sat up slowly—then froze, remembering where he was. He turned to Loki, who nodded at him. “Go. We mustn’t blow your cover.”

Barton acquiesced in relief, then got up. He looked a lot more energetic and well-rested than when he'd first come in, and Loki felt just a teeny bit proud for it.

“Keep tending to that burn,” he said. “And to any other injuries you might sustain today.”

He flipped a page of his book. “And of course, you are forbidden to die.”

Barton smiled in the corner of his mouth, with eyes still unsure, but pleased nonetheless. “Roger that, sir.”

He turned away and left with long strides; Loki leaned back in his chair after the door closed.

“You are being strangely considerate today,” he told the ceiling.

“So are you,” Jarvis answered.

Loki smiled.

“I find it hard to believe that you didn't ring the alarm last night,” he went on. “Have you grown to trust me, by any chance?”

“You gave me no reason to do so,” was the haughty reply.

“But don't you feel like we're accomplices?” Loki grinned.

The AI didn't answer.

“How alive are you?” the demi-god suddenly asked.
“I'm just a rather very intelligent system.”

Loki narrowed his eyes, but didn't press the matter.

Barton came back late at night, after the battle.

He looked like he'd just cleaned himself, but he must have done so in a hurry since there was still dried blood along his hairline and a nervous twitch in his shoulders. He looked anxious, fidgety. Longing.

Loki threw his book aside and got up.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

“Out for after-battle drinks,” Barton answered, and for all his exhaustion, Loki heard in his voice the same urgency he felt now.

He pulled Barton in and crushed their mouths together.

The archer let out a ragged moan then pressed against him all the more, kissing back with burning eagerness. Without breaking the kiss, Loki pushed him back towards his room; he unzipped Barton's uniform and pushed it off his shoulders before undoing his belt and letting the entire garment fall down. Intentionally or not, Barton had gone commando. Loki grabbed his ass and made him grind against him, then slid his hands up and felt a thick bandage under his fingers, over the brand; he could have pressed down, could have made Barton yowl in pain, but he didn't.

He wished his own clothing away and pushed Barton back to climb with him on the bed. They still hadn't broken their kiss, which was growing hotter and messier by the second. Loki licked Barton's lips, then pushed inside his mouth again as he parted his thighs. They hadn't had sex in more than a week; Barton was bound to be very tight.

Loki didn't mind.

He roughly lubed himself, then grabbed Barton's hips and lined himself up. When he pushed in, the archer threw his head back with a hiss which turned into a pant, then a moan; his hands hovered over Loki's shoulders, then gripped them tight when he wasn't brushed off. Loki loved the feeling of Barton clinging onto him even thought the demi-god hurt him so much. Loki could never stop marveling over it—that Barton should seek reassurance in his very torturer. How could it be? How could he both run from and towards him?

Loki pressed his lips against Barton's neck, then sucked a hickey into the flesh, as though he hadn't already marked him, as though he could never mark him enough. He finished it by pinching the skin between his teeth until Barton whined in pain.

The ragged sound set Loki's blood on fire, and he pinned his slave—his slave—on the bed to take him, pounding into him until the archer was writhing and gasping; and then Loki leaned over him, ploughed into him, buried himself up to the hilt and hissed in Barton's ear, “Come.”

The archer cried out and climaxed all over his own stomach, arching under Loki and raking his nails
across his shoulders.

“Are you done?” Loki murmured.

The archer nodded wordlessly before catching himself and stammering, “Yes—sir,” between two gasping breaths.

“Hmm,” Loki grinned, leaning down to nibble his ear. “Too bad.”

He pulled out and turned Barton on his stomach. The archer's breath hitched; he flinched when Loki cupped his ass and grabbed the cheeks to part them. The demi-god kneaded them for a second, then ordered, in a delighted voice, “On all fours.”

Barton sucked in a breath, then pushed up to get on his knees and elbows. Loki gripped the archer's hips to angle him right and penetrated him again. Barton let out a high-pitched noise and let his head fall down. His fingers twitched then gripped the sheets, twisting them; every thrust pushed a breath out of him.

“Oh, yes. Loki loved him when he was begging.

Please, sir—”

“I don't think so,” the demi-god said, relishing every word.

He hit the archer's prostate—making him shudder and cry out.

“Oh,” he grinned. “Shall we do that again?”

He rammed his cock inside him, against that same spot again and again, making him buckle each time until he was reduced to a quivering mess—and growing hard again, Loki noticed.

“So,” he purred. “What happened on the battlefield today?”

Barton whimpered, then yelled when Loki gripped his hair and twisted.

“Ah—ah!” Barton cried at the next impalement. “I—Skrull ship—”

“Mmh. And?”

“Hulk took it—took it down... No casualties—please!”

Loki pressed as deep as he could, making him Barton moan and gasp. He was very tight. All the better.

“And what did you tell them to get back here?”

“Told them I was—tired—”

“Tired?”

Loki slammed into him, eliciting a scream and something which resembled a sob. “And they bought that?”

“They don't ask—they don't think I'm much of a team play—please—please!”
Loki cupped his balls, squeezed him a little then said in his ear, “Come—” and Barton came again, convulsing and pulsing in his master's hand as he spilled over the sheets.

The demi-god pinned him down then—and ripped off his bandage. Barton went very still, breathing hard; the mark was almost glowing in the darkness. Loki hummed, then didn't touch it and thrust once, twice—and then he came deep inside the archer's ass, making him squirm and moan desperately in the mattress.

Barton stayed lying on his stomach, legs spread, body damp with sweat and trembling with pleasure and pain. But when Loki leaned down, Barton turned on his back with a heroic effort then let his head fall back against the mattress, welcoming Loki's lips against his.

The demi-god let himself weigh over him amidst the heavy, lewd scent of sex. The archer was panting raggedly beneath him; he looked happy enough to be pressed into the mattress, though. Good for him, because Loki didn't feel like moving anytime soon.

He still propped himself on his elbows to look down at Barton; as he did so, locks of black hair trickled down his shoulders and brushed the archer's collarbone, like a dark curtain around them. Barton gazed at him with hazy eyes, as he would have gazed up at a star-filled sky. Loki liked the feeling of being on top of him, trapping him under his own naked body, pressed flush against him with his arms on each side of the archer's head. And Barton loved it, too. Loki could tell with how he struggled minutely against his weight now and then, only to relax each time a bit more when he realized he really was secured.

“You,” Loki said under his breath. “You will always come back to me. Whether you come willingly or not. You will be mine, and mine alone. Do you understand?”

Barton's lips quirked in a tired, content smile. “Yessir.”

“My slave,” Loki murmured, leaning down to inhale deeply against the skin of his neck. “My own.”

*My love,* his mind supplied.

But he pushed that away.

Chapter End Notes
Wanna hear Loki say this out loud? Turn the volume up. Then simultaneously, close your eyes and click. You have to thank ColdAsphyxiate for showing me this glorious thing.

Also, kudos to whoever finds out what Loki's reading while Clint is at his feet. It's not a very difficult guess.

And of course, as always, thank you for commenting. ^^
Loki knew he should have been more cool-headed, but he couldn't help himself. He could not remember having been so enticed, so excited ever before. What could possibly compare? Nothing, if maybe the days Frigga had taught him about magic; if maybe the day she had put Gungnir in his hands, and he'd felt the thrill of true, righteous power climb up his spine. He was slowly recalling what his madness had brought him to forget—that what he cherished was control, rather than its object itself. And Barton... Barton had given him full control. Or the pretense of it.

Of course, he was a but a mortal; but it didn't matter; what mattered was that he was Loki's, and that nobody could ever free him from Loki's grasp, for he'd walked willingly into it this time.

The demi-god remembered the moment he'd put the point of his spear against Barton's heart, and seen his gaze change as he looked up, defiance replaced with unquestioned trust and plenary obedience. Somehow, that look was now back in Barton's eyes, although they had not turned again a sickly blue. No lover had ever tasted so good. Barton sated Loki, satisfied both the monster and the prince, and yet let them always eager for more. He offered both the sugar of his veneration and the salt of his suffering.

Thus, as usual when presented with the object of his wishes, Loki Laufeyson grew... careless.

“Crawl.”

Barton stiffened on the doorstep. He hadn't even said a word yet—he was just here as ordered, spending all his free time in the gods' suite. Loki smirked at him from his chair by the window; he leaned his chin against the back of his palm and raised his eyebrows in expectation.

The archer swallowed back his obvious anger and stiffly got down on his knees. That might be the part Loki loved the most—humiliating him until the truth of his state reminded itself to him, and he eventually let go of his unwelcome dignity.

“Crawl,” Loki repeated, delighted. “Come to me.”

Barton bowed his head, hateful eyes fixed on the carpet, and crawled across the room on his hands and knees.

“Stop,” Loki ordered when he was half-way.

The archer obeyed without a word, stopping on all fours in the middle of the room, but his arms were
trembling with repressed anger. Loki might have to beat it out of him today.

Not that he minded.

Then he picked up a shuffling of feet, and sighed.

“Get up.”

Barton frowned, but still didn't say anything. He straightened up fluidly and looked questioningly at Loki, who nodded towards the couch. “Sit.”

Three seconds after Barton had taken a seat, Thor walked into the room. He looked preoccupied, but his worries were momentarily frozen on his face when he caught sight of the archer.

“Barton?”

“Hi,” Barton said in his sullen, flippant voice, and Loki marveled once more at his talents of dissimulation. He would have made an acceptable God of Mischief. “Came to chat with your little brother.”

“So I gathered,” Thor said, looking askance at Loki who shrugged as if to say, *I just live here.* “Your quiver again?”

“Nah,” Barton said. “We leveled up to the arrows now.”

Loki couldn't keep a smile from tugging at his lips. The archer got up and stretched himself. “I sense family business going on. I'll be back.”

He left without another word. When he was gone, Thor turned to Loki with a shrewd look.

“What?” Loki smiled.

“You seem curiously invested in Barton's weaponry, brother.”

Loki's smile widened. “I do confess I have not found a better pastime. Problem?”

Hiding the truth in plain sight was one of his best tricks. As it was, he looked so overly shady in his dealings with Barton that Thor could only assume he was being tricked, and thus ignore it altogether.

And indeed, the thunderer only answered, “No,” before sitting in Barton's place.

He stayed silent for a few seconds, then said, “I am going back to New Mexico.”

Loki didn't feel hurt—he couldn't. First, he had decided never to get hurt anymore; and second, he felt so much like he was floating these days that nothing could really get to him. He still tasted a faint bitterness in the back of his throat when he swallowed.

“Very well,” he said. “And I am to stay here.”

Thor nodded. He looked weary again; Loki wondered if he always did everywhere he went, or if he discarded his golden shell only in these rooms they shared.

“Thor,” Loki said in a low voice, seized with the ridiculous and sudden need for a sliver of sincerity. “What is the point of my presence?”

His brother looked up at him.
“You are a prisoner.”

The demi-god snorted. “We both know I could escape in a second.”

“Why haven't you?” Thor said, low.

But Loki slowly shook his head with a slight smile. “I don't think so, brother. I asked my question first.”

Thor leaned back against the couch. “You are here,” he said, “because only here can you be safe from both Midgard and Asgard.”

Loki nodded, glancing across the room until his eyes were fixed on the wall. He knew it was the truth; maybe that was the precise reason it was so harsh to his ears. “So,” he said. “You never believed in my redemption after all.”

“Did you?”

Loki said nothing.

“I know this situation can and will not stand,” Thor said. “But I have learned to enjoy peace whenever and wherever it is found; as long as it lasts.”

Loki glanced up at him again.

“You used to be so full of fire, brother,” he said after a long while. “Whatever happened to the God of Lightning?”

“I grew up,” Thor simply said.

There was a pause. Eventually, he shook his long hair and stood.

“I do not know when I will be back. Probably a few weeks. Selvig is doing better,” he added after a second of reflexion, “and Jane is as busy as ever.”

It was obvious, from the sound of his voice, that he missed her dearly. Loki thought of Barton, of the neverending stirring of his entire self towards Barton.

He got up as well. “Farewell then, brother.”

Brother, and the word had come out of his lips, without any irony, for the second time. He realized he had reached out only when Thor clasped his wrist, and he found himself clasping Thor's between his paler fingers, like they used to.

“I will return,” Thor said.

He looked like he wanted to say something more; for a second, his eyes sought Loki's, too blue with wordless emotion. But then he nodded, and let go of him to leave.

And Loki understood neither of them really wanted to fight anymore.
Barton returned later in the night. Loki straightened up; he'd spent the last few hours leaning back against the couch and gazing at the dark screen on the wall.

“You're supposed to turn it on,” the archer pointed out.

“Oh?” Loki deadpanned.

He nodded in invite. “Please do.”

Barton looked surprised, but grabbed the remote and brought the giant screen to life. He flipped through the channels without stopping, obviously finding everything either too ridiculous or too awkward or too inappropriate, until Loki grew tired of it.

“This one.”

The archer gave him a dubious look. “Seriously? A documentary film about...” he squinted at the screen. “...Bedford-Stuyvesant?”

Loki raised his eyebrows and Barton shrank down a little. “Alright, whatever,” he muttered, putting down the remote.

He walked to the couch in what was obviously an endemic reflex, but then thought twice and looked at Loki. The latter gave a rather unambiguous glance towards the carpet at his feet. Barton hesitated, but there was no sign of anger this time—the situation just confused him too much. He looked actually a bit relieved when he settled down at Loki's feet and against the cushion between his legs. The demi-god extended his arm to trail his fingers through Barton's short hair, and gazed absently at the screen without hearing a single word.

There was a rather long pause.

“Thor is going away,” Loki said eventually.

Barton nodded under his hand. “Yeah. He told us.”

Another silence. The speaker's voice was actually rather irritating.

“Turn it off,” Loki said.

The archer crawled forward to snatch the remote on the coffee table and kill the screen. When he turned back, Loki had already unlaced his pants. Without a word, he wrapped a firm hand behind Barton's head and guided him between his thighs. The archer looked nervous, but didn't protest and opened his mouth to swallow Loki down with a small muffled sound.

It took him a split second to adapt, but then he started sucking in earnest, taking Loki a bit deeper at each bob of his head. The demi-god closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the couch.

For someone with so little experience, Barton was quite good at this. He had excellent control over his gag reflex, and he paid very close attention to what made Loki shiver, so he could do it again and again.

“Your hands,” Loki said in a breath, head still thrown back. “Cross your hands behind your back.”

Barton did; the demi-god invoked a leather strap without looking, but he could pin-point the moment it closed around the archer's wrists—he sucked more eagerly then, as though he'd been freed of what was left of his hesitations. Yes, Loki guessed he could see it; restraints took away the guilt. Nothing
was your fault if you were being *forced*.

He let out a shivering hum when Barton hollowed his cheeks, took him deep and swallowed around his length—*sucked* again, wet, sloppy sounds in the quietness of the room—and Loki felt himself come inside his mouth with a deep shudder.

“Do not swallow,” he hissed, breath hitching. “Not until—I say so.”

He tried to keep his hips from jerking up—he had to be extra careful whenever Barton’s neck and head were involved. He tightened his grip on the archer’s hair to compensate and felt Barton flinch with *pain*, and that pushed the last wave of his orgasm out of him. He stayed lying back against the couch for long seconds, breathing deep with his eyes ajar, staring sightlessly at the blank ceiling.

He tugged Barton's head back to slip out of his mouth; he gave himself another second, then straightened up and leaned forward to brush his lips against the archer's ear. He didn't say anything, though, just stayed there for a little while, relishing that quiet moment in the dark room.

“Swallow,” he murmured eventually.

Barton swallowed the come in his mouth without a sound, then took a gasping breath he tried to tone down with little success. Loki smiled and brushed his cheek. The archer seemed to waver between humiliation and contentment.

“How is your brand?” Loki asked in a low voice.

“How is your brand?” Loki asked in a low voice.

“Swallow,” he murmured eventually.

Barton swallowed the come in his mouth without a sound, then took a gasping breath he tried to tone down with little success. Loki smiled and brushed his cheek. The archer seemed to waver between humiliation and contentment.

“How is your brand?” Loki asked in a low voice.

“Swallow,” he murmured eventually.

Barton swallowed the come in his mouth without a sound, then took a gasping breath he tried to tone down with little success. Loki smiled and brushed his cheek. The archer seemed to waver between humiliation and contentment.

“How is your brand?” Loki asked in a low voice.

“Swallow,” he murmured eventually.
in the anticipation of pain.

“Does it hurt so bad?” Loki asked in a soft voice.

Barton swallowed. “Yes, sir. Please, sir.”

“Let’s see,” the demi-god grinned—and he raked his nails across the patch of burned skin.

The archer clenched his teeth and blocked a scream down his throat, fighting convulsively against his restraints. When Loki did it again, he shook with an actual spasm and buried his face into Loki’s chest.

“Please,” he gasped frantically in a desperate, feverish voice, trembling all over. “Please, not again, please—”

Loki did it again and Barton shouted until the demi-god clasped his other hand over his mouth, turning the scream into a muffled, pathetic moan. The archer started breathing raggedly through his nose as tears welled up in his eyes.

Loki felt like his senses were sharpened and heightened by Barton’s pain, as though the archer was the stone and Loki the blade.

“One more time,” he said with a cruel smile. “One last time. Alright?”

He stopped gagging him and Barton started shuddering so bad it took Loki a second to notice he was nodding. He looked about ready to throw up with pain, so pale he was almost green.

“Ye—,” he managed eventually, nearly sobbing, “yes, sir.”

Loki pulled his hand out of his shirt and took his face between his hands to give him a long, deep, warm kiss.

Barton stiffened in surprise and confusion. Loki took the opportunity to claim him deeper, outlining the archer’s tongue with his own, fitting his lips against his. He waited until he felt Barton melt against him; when they parted, he grinned and said softly, “I lied.”

Barton closed his eyes and sagged in relief, breathing deep now that he’d been let off the hook. Loki chuckled a little and rubbed his back, then his neck, brushing his damp hair off his forehead before kneading his shoulders again. He loved this, comforting Barton after the most ruthless tortures. This was when he felt the most complete—when he was both the iron hand and the velvet glove; this was when he felt whole, when he controlled the archer through every possible means.

“Turn the screen back on,” Loki murmured.

Barton blinked with hazy eyes, then turned round awkwardly, knees chafing against the floor, to reach the coffee table. He stilled for a second when he realized his hands were still bound; then he reluctantly bowed his head and pressed the button with his tongue, or teeth maybe. The screen blinked to life; the documentary had been replaced by some kind of live broadcast of a great orchestra. Loki didn’t really care what was on, but that program was actually quite fitting—and something he could enjoy.

“Lie down,” he told Barton.

The archer leaned down rather awkwardly and lay down on his stomach, shifting his shoulders to accommodate himself on the carpet. Loki raised his left foot and planted it in the middle of Barton’s
back. His boot was made of very soft, supple leather; he wasn't pressing down, just letting it rest there, and he wasn't even close to the brand. But Barton's arms still tensed in his restraints.

“Are you comfortable?” Loki smiled.

Barton was so suffocated with humiliation it took him a second to spit out, “Yes, sir,” through gritted teeth.

“Good for you,” Loki only said, and he leaned back against the couch and completely ignored his slave for the rest of the night.

At some point, he did get up to turn off the screen and fetch his book; and Barton, who’d been drifting, stiffened again. He only relaxed once more when Loki sat back down and set his boot back where it belonged. It was now as though the weight of his foot squeezed all the tension out of the body of the archer, who took a deep breath and didn't move again. The demi-god was careful not to acknowledge him—tonight he was nothing but a foot rest; but Loki still couldn't help smiling faintly as he flipped the pages to find his bookmark.

* 

Much later, he pressed his foot down in a sudden jerk, chasing the air out of Barton's lungs and waking him.

“Up,” he said, removing his foot.

Barton got on his knees without so much as a flinch; when Loki presented the boot he'd been crushed under for hours, he didn't hesitate and brushed his lips against the leather, then outright licked the tip in complete, unquestioning submission. Loki closed his eyes and let the feeling bloom inside him.

Master.

Neither of them had ever said the word out loud, and Loki didn't feel the need—on the contrary; to say it would mean that Barton's devotion wasn't enough to make it obvious. Sir was different—that was obviously the archer's thing, his own ceremonial, and Loki didn't mind. But master was the word he repeated in the secrecy of his mind, with an utterly selfish delectation, like the guilty pleasure it was. Master meant Loki was his own master, too.

At times like this, he wished he could have shown the world that Barton was his. He wanted to put a collar on him everywhere they went. He wanted him to kneel at his feet every time he sat; he wanted to bring him down in public and watch the Avengers as they realized their powerlessness. How Romanov had begged to retrieve Barton! How hard Sitwell had fought to break him free from Loki's grasp! But they could not save Barton from himself.

And Barton did not wish to be saved from Loki. As he was, kneeling with his hands tied, so utterly pliant, so perfectly calm, he looked like there was nowhere else he would rather be. His serenity soothed even Loki's thirst for blood. And he suddenly wondered if that wasn't the true reason he needed Barton; as an outlet for all the cruelty inside him, but also as a way to dissipate it, to teach the monster that even absolute ownership came into multiple colors.
So yes. Loki Laufeyson was growing careless. So careless that he'd allowed his own life to revolve around one single soul; so careless that he'd shielded his eyes from the truth he should have acknowledged in the first place—that he was now completely dependent on Barton, maybe even more than Barton was dependent on him.

Chapter End Notes

Have another original scene, on the house. ^^ Next chapter, shit goes down.
As always when he was deeply addicted, Loki lost sense of time. Had it been one week, two weeks, three weeks when the incident occurred? He didn't know.

Barton's brand was fully healed by now, if still a little sensitive, enough for Loki's fingers to sent shivers up his spine every time he brushed the mark burned into his skin. The demi-god's hunger for pain was slowly growing back after the branding had temporarily soothed it. Two days ago, he'd whipped Barton quite violently, until he had him begging and sobbing through the fucking which followed—at which point the archer had ultimately given in, and melted into the sheets as his whines of pain morphed into strangled moans of pleasure. The memory was still delightfully vivid on Loki's mind; enough for him to be satisfied with a calmer form of control again.

When had the archer stopped looking so guarded? Loki couldn't replace it. Barton wasn't really comfortable—not when Loki made a point in never letting him know beforehand what he had in store for him—but he did look calmer whenever he walked in, as though he'd been conditioned to relax amidst the dark atmosphere of Loki's rooms. And he'd stopped glaring at the demi-god at all times, too. Now he only hated him when Loki wanted him to.

The day of the incident, Barton walked in with the usual mix of nervousness and expectancy in his eyes. The sun was beginning to set; the Avengers were all elsewhere busy. They had the entire night to themselves.

Loki felt overly playful—no, this was inexact. He felt... carefree. That should have been enough of a clue that things were likely to go wrong. But then again, he never did listen to himself.

As it was, the very moment Barton came in, Loki pulled him in for a long kiss. He could feel the archer's muscles relax in his grasp, feel him tilt his head to offer a better access. Sometimes, Loki felt the magnet rule worked both ways. Whenever he craved Barton's suffering, the archer put up a fight and Loki had to break him in the most violent ways; but if he happened to be in a more peaceful state of mind, Barton instantly mirrored it and complied to the orders, slipping down in his quiet state of submission in a matter of minutes, sometimes seconds. How could it be, that he always gave Loki what he wanted? How did he know?

I never deserved this, Loki thought as they parted, but the thought just made him all the more cheerful, because he loved getting things he didn't deserve. Which basically meant he loved getting
things, period.

Still smiling, he kept Barton close and started unbuttoning his shirt. The archer stayed still, maybe shivering a bit and closing his eyes with deep, measured breaths, hitching a bit with each button. Eventually, Loki peeled the fabric off his shoulders and ran his hands over his bare, firm chest, pressing his face against his neck to breathe him in. The way he felt; the way he smelled; everything was his.

“Hands up,” he said in his ear.

Barton obligingly presented his wrists. Loki invoked leather cuffs in his hands, then clasped them himself around the archer's wrists, tightening the buckles until they were gripping him in a way he could not ignore. He made him lower his hands and cross them behind his back, then clipped the D-rings together. The clicking noise made him smile. He smiled too easily—too sincerely—these days.

Now that Barton was restrained, Loki could taste him even more. Somehow, he really wanted to touch today; to feel the solid evidence of his slave's existence. He slid his hands up the toned stomach and the flat pectorals, followed the collarbones in a symmetric gesture, then squeezed Barton's hard shoulders. He slid his hands even higher up and laced his fingers around the neck. The archer took a deep breath when Loki's thumbs pressed against his trachea, but that was it.

Loki made him turn his head on the side, then on the other. A very faint crease appeared between Barton's eyebrows when he felt himself being manipulated like a puppet, but it soon disappeared and he only complied to the demi-god's slight touches, lolling his head without showing any sign of impatience. Loki grabbed his hair, quite gently for once, and made him lean his head back. Further. And further, until the curve of his neck became a bit alarming.

This was also a way for Loki to test Barton's physical boundaries. He'd never actually injured him, but once or twice bruises had appeared Loki didn't think would bloom before another dozen blows of the switch. Midgardians were so fragile. That was the demi-god's last source of frustration—the impossibility of going completely mad. He couldn't stop being careful and just abuse his slave without ever pausing to think. Barton's frailness was actually the best shield he had, even if he wasn't aware of it.

“Hmm,” Loki purred as the archer grew completely pliant under his fingers. “I want you on your knees.”

Barton obeyed without missing a beat. Loki relished the sight of him for a few minutes; then he sat on a chair and took the archer's face between his hands again, resuming his careful manipulations. Another change he couldn't pin-point was when his vague contempt had morphed into genuine curiosity—when it came to Barton at the very least. Yes, he was fragile; but then again, so were crystal glasses.

Loki trailed his fingers down his neck, then chest and sides. Barton's heart pounded steadily under his fingertips. When he breathed in, Loki felt his ribs expand and shift minutely before shrinking back.

“Breathe,” he ordered.

Barton obediently filled his lungs again, then held it in. Loki made him wait for a few seconds, then mumbled, “Out,” and Barton exhaled.

Oh, now he kind of liked this.
“Breathe,” he said again, marveling at being able to give such an order, as though he could have ordered him to love, or hate, or rejoice or cry.

Or die.

The thought pierced through him with breathtaking vividness.

_Die_.

What if one day he could give that order? What if one day he _did_? What if one day, he tortured Barton so ruthlessly that there was no hope of him ever coming back, and what if that day he uttered, _Die_, and sliced Barton's own jugular with a piece of glass and let him bleed out on the floor, with eyes wide and aware, still pliant and dazed even as he grew paler and paler, eyes fixed on Loki until the very end...

_“Out,”_ Loki almost squeaked, breathless as though he'd been the one holding it in for almost a minute now.

Barton exhaled steadily, but the demi-god felt sick.

Why _did_ he hurt Barton then?

He never really knew. Probably because he had just deeply scared himself and he was conditioned to take out his troubles on Barton. Probably because the most violent sessions always left him exultant and delirious with the joy of a monster who knew no disgust and no shame. He didn't know. He didn't even _want_ to hurt him today.

Whichever the real reason might be, he still tweaked Barton's nipple so hard that the archer let out a gasp which broke the pattern of his breathing.

Loki instantly felt he'd done something wrong—with the painful clarity of a musician wincing at a wrong note. He brushed his cold fingers over the flesh as if to wipe the pain away, but cursed himself for his stupidity immediately after—because Barton was fine, obviously. He had taken so much worse by now. And Loki did love a bit of unpredictability; more than once, he'd slapped the archer out of the blue, just for the pleasure of his shock and surprise. Barton was breathing normally again already. He was _fine_.

The demi-god tried to regain his own state of peace, but it was lost to him. He was left with the slight but really insistent feeling that he shouldn't have done this. This wasn't the pattern he'd established at the beginning of today's session. He had made a promise to Barton, and broken it.

_Hel_, was he even _listening_ to himself—a _promise_? Really! Barton was his damn _slave_. Loki used him as he pleased and slaves certainly weren't supposed to pick up intuitive clues from their master's behavior. Barton was _meant_ to be kept in the dark, and Loki owed him nothing. A _pattern_! He must be out of his mind—was he called the God of Chaos for nothing? No, he shouldn't worry so endlessly over such a tiny detail, he should...

Barton's breathing wasn't right.

It had grown ragged and shallow. He was now swallowing regularly, too; his eyes were still closed, but they moved restlessly behind his eyelids. He licked his lips and resumed his panting; his heart
was now thumping heavily under the demi-god's fingers.

Loki felt like his insides had been turned into ice and this time, there was nothing pleasant about it.

“Barton?” he asked.

“It's fine,” the archer said quickly.

No, Loki thought as his stomach churned again. Barton had felt it, too. Otherwise he wouldn't have answered so fast. And he wouldn't have answered that. He would have said, yes, sir, but now he was repeating, “It's fine, it's fine,” in a frantic murmur.

Suddenly, he jerked his head on the side, as if to chase a fly—or a nagging thought. “No,” he muttered. “No, it's not—it's not the same—”

He was talking to himself.

It scared Loki to death. A part of him still protested that he was getting worked up about nothing, but Barton was talking to himself in the presence of his master. Which mean either he ignored him, either he had forgotten he was here, either he would rather talk to himself.

Either way, something had gone terribly wrong.

“Barton,” Loki breathed. “Look at me.”

The archer obeyed, but what he saw then—whatever it was—only upset him more. He jerked his head on the side again, breaking eye contact and mumbling hurriedly, “No, I don't need—it's okay, I don't need to—I'm fine, I got it, I don't—” then he suddenly screwed his eyes shut and screamed, “SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

“Barton, snap out of it!” Loki yelled in panic.

He felt utterly powerless and breathless with confusion. What had gone wrong? What was he supposed to do? Barton was slipping away from the demi-god's grasp, but from his own grasp as well, into a place Loki couldn't possibly follow him.

“Nothing's wrong,” Barton was saying now, in that frantic, breathless voice, eyes wide and restless, as though he was looking for an escape, and he was struggling against his bonds but not in his usual way, not as though he was testing and checking them, but as though he was truly scared, as though he was terrified, “Nothing's wrong, nothing’s wrong!” and was he trying to convince himself? “It's not the same,” he gasped—not the same as what?

But then Loki got his answer when Barton gasped feverishly, “I'm not—I'm not compromised, I know what I'm doing!”

Loki felt sick—felt actually nauseous as though a poison was spreading through his body. Now he was beginning to see. Now he knew who Barton was talking to—and why he was so desperately, albeit unconsciously, trying to get away from him. The cruel realization dawned on Loki that he should have expected this to happen much sooner. He had dismissed the question because he didn't want to think about it. He'd just assumed Barton was fine.

Careless. Careless from the start.

“Barton!” he called urgently.
The archer shuddered—then stopped breathing.

From the look in his eyes, it was obvious he wasn't seeing anything remotely real. And of course every single clue of Loki's presence would push him further down his waking nightmare, but what else could Loki do—he couldn't stop being himself!

Or could he? he thought, eyes wide. Should he shape-shift? Let Romanov or Rogers reassure the terrified archer?

But no—no—he couldn't. What sort of master would he be if he walked away from this responsibility? Besides—what if Barton realized it was an illusion? What if it only sent his panic levels through the roof?

“Barton,” Loki repeated, begged, teeth clenched in frustration. He felt as though water was seeping between his fingers—except it wasn't water, but Barton's essence, and he couldn't hold it, “BARTON!”

“No,” the archer gasped. “No, I'm not a traitor!”

He was talking to Sitwell. Or Fury, or Romanov, who knew. “I'm not his,” he said in complete, nauseating panic, and Loki felt his own stomach heave at the sound of it—“It's just a game, it's just a lie, I flushed him out, I did, I did, please—”

Loki backhanded him across the face.

He froze and felt as though he'd been slapped himself. No—no—what had he done, he'd panicked, idiot—of course, he needed to make Barton snap out of it; and when he had heard him beg he couldn't stop himself, because Barton shouldn't be begging someone who didn't listen.

But now it looked like Loki had just shattered him. His crystal glass. Barton blinked, panted, gasping more and more; suddenly his eyes cleared, and it seemed like he was seeing Loki again. Loki stared back at him in frightful hope.

But then those eyes filled with tears, and Barton looked ten times more panicked than before, his face ashen and his shudders increasingly violent.

“I'm sorry!” he squeaked. “I'm sorry, sir!”

He was shaking his head in desperation. “I didn't mean it, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!”

Of course he had meant it, Loki thought, appalled.

Until then, he hadn't realized how much Barton must have suffered in the wake of the mind-control. The archer had come to him; he'd called him sir like before, and submitted like before, so Loki had foolishly assumed he had come to terms with their common history. But this whole time, Barton had been fighting against the terrible guilt of bowing to his enemy, of letting him humiliate and own him—that same guilt Loki had used to feed his own fantasies. He felt so disgusted with himself that he thought he was actually going to vomit. Barton had kept this a secret all that time; but it had been such a frail balance that one mistake from Loki had been enough to break it. To break him.

“Barton—”

“I can still, I can still be good,” Barton implored him. “It was a mistake, just a mistake, please, let me—”
He was so desperate. And for the life of him, Loki couldn't fathom why such a thought had amused him before. Of course Barton was desperate—why else would he have come to him? Only desperate people came to Loki. The archer had been so lost inside himself, so panicked over his newfound urges. And Loki? Loki had seen this as a mere game, when to Barton it was a matter of life and death. I can't live without you—literally. Why hadn't Loki listened? Why hadn't he understood the true extent of Barton's vulnerability?

The answer was simple. He wasn't ready. He'd thought it was all a game because it was easier to tell himself nothing mattered. But Barton was serious and Loki had been terrified to acknowledge it.

And now the archer was terrified by the thought that Loki might leave him, because of one single mistake—not even his mistake. It had all been Loki's. All Barton had done was reveal the truth; that he still viscerally hated Loki, but he had simply no other choice than going to him. And all the things which had delighted the demi-god before—Barton's uncertainty, his fear, his despair, his reluctance—were only sources of horror now. The vague guilt he'd felt in his post-orgasmic glow had nothing on the tidal wave which crushed him now. How could he—? What kind of monster would—?

“Please let me show you,” the archer was begging, tears rolling down his face.

“No, Barton,” Loki began gently, because there was nothing else to be shown, nothing to prove, he'd understood way too much already—but of course, Barton only heard his refusal and completely broke down.

“Please, sir don't leave me—don't leave me!” he sobbed hysterically. “Please, I didn't mean it, I'm yours, I am, please don't give up on me, I can still serve you, I will do anything—”

“Barton!” Loki snapped, because he had to shut him up before he said anything he might regret even more afterwards—and also because he just couldn't bear it anymore.

What to do? What to do? Barton was so shattered, and Loki had no idea how to fix people. He thrived in chaos and mischief, and he'd known from the beginning that he couldn't be allowed to be responsible of someone. A Realm? Certainly. A planet? Why not. But a person—such a complex thing, complex and fragile like a crystal glass—like a clock whose every cogs and gears would be made of glass... Fixing someone? Loki hadn't ever had any experience with that. He'd never fixed anyone, and no one had ever fixed him.

Except...

Barton's breath was hitching, and Frigga had taught Loki how to fight and how to practice magic, so he followed her lead again—he came down on the floor, on his knees with Barton, and pulled him in a tight embrace.

Barton stiffened, but his shudders subsided for a short while.

“No, you did not do anything wrong,” Loki said, voice hoarse and ragged.

He tightened his hug. He was so desperate to help, but he had no idea whether he wasn't making things worse. He fell back on what he knew—Barton was his, so he must be his to reassure as well.

“You are not allowed to think otherwise.”

“But—” Barton began in a distraught voice.
“Believe me,” Loki said, with all the authority he could muster. “You were good. There is nothing wrong.”

Barton was still shaking, but he wasn't trying to object anymore, and this slight detail was a disproportionate relief to the demi-god. He remembered how frantically Barton had tried to free himself during his hallucination.

He brought Barton even closer, enveloped him in what meager heat he could offer, and pressed his lips against his ear, for the same reason he did during the tortures—so Barton knew he was here, right here with him.

“Now,” he breathed. “I need you to tell me. Do you want to be untied?”

Barton stiffened so abruptly Loki cursed under his breath.

“No!” he gasped. “No—please sir, I can still—”

“How,” Loki said, in a soft voice even though Barton's endless litany of apologies made him want to scream—“I wanted only an answer. Everything is fine.”

“But—”

“Hush,” Loki insisted, and he must have sounded desperate in turn, because the archer did fall silent.

The demi-god started rubbing soothing circles in his tense shoulders, like he had done during their first true time together. Barton was even stiffer than he'd been back then.

“I am fully satisfied,” Loki promised him. “You were perfect.”

He realized he wasn't lying.

And consequently, he realized how far he'd fallen.

“I was?” Barton said in a lost, hopeful tone, which broke the heart Loki didn't know he still had.

“Yes,” he said unreservedly.

The archer swallowed; he was still shaking a lot, and fighting to catch his breath. “What, what do you want from me, sir?”

He was desperate to prove himself and Loki was desperate to let him, if only to soothe Barton's panic, to prove him that he was still wanted.

“Name it,” the archer gasped. “Name it, I'll just—”

Loki could have asked anything then.

He could have ordered, *Die.*

He said, “Breathe.”

He rubbed Barton's back in steady strokes. “I want you to breathe, as we did just before. Do you remember?”

Barton swallowed, shivered. “Yes, sir.”
“Good,” Loki said, because Hel if he wasn't going to praise Barton at every second for fighting off such hysterical panic. The demi-god doubted he could have accomplished such a feat, himself. No—he knew he couldn't. His experience in Odin's cells had been enough of a demonstration of exactly how little self-control he had.

“Breathe in for me.”

He waited, then: “Now out.”

Barton let out a shaky, shallow breath. Loki rubbed his shoulders again in encouragement.

“In,” he ordered softly.

Barton breathed in and it was a bit deeper and longer this time.

“Out.”

The archer's gaze had trailed down, and he suddenly started jerking in Loki's embrace—but the latter tightened it; not to trap him, but to ground him, to give him leverage. “Eyes on mine, Barton,” he said.

The grey eyes found his, blinked anxiously. “...Yes, sir.”

“Now breathe in,” Loki said patiently.

Barton did.

“Now out.”

He exhaled, careful and trying to do this right, and the demi-god felt a wave of excruciating fondness and terrible regret overwhelm him. “Excellent, Barton,” he said, forcing himself to sound calm and even distant.

The archer relaxed minutely. “In,” Loki ordered.

Barton breathed in. Steady, regular. He needed to breathe.

“Out.”

They both needed to breathe. Loki followed his own lead and felt himself calm down a little. He hadn't realized until then exactly how much he'd panicked. He felt a vague pang of shame, but Barton mattered most right now. The demi-god wrapped his arms around his shivering body again and held him close, as close as he could.

“I will stay with you until you find your way out,” he promised, rubbing his back. “And you will. Because there is nothing wrong.” He squeezed his shoulders. “Say it.”

“There is nothing wrong,” Barton repeated like he wasn't sure he understood the words.

“Indeed. Now in, then keep going.”

Barton kept breathing regularly; Loki was ready to help him again if he lost the rhythm, but after a while, it became obvious that the archer was finding his way home. His breathing started sounding less strained; his shivers began to subside, even though they were still so violent they rattled his teeth every time.

They waited for what felt like hours. The demi-god couldn't have cared less. He would have waited the entire night and the night after that if it meant Barton would get better. But the sun hadn't even begun to rise when the archer shuddered deeply for the last time, like a period at the end of a terribly long sentence.

“Are you back?” Loki said, very softly.

Barton swallowed again. “Think so.”

Yes, it did sound like him. The demi-god was so insanely relieved—but he pushed it back down. Now wasn't the time. Barton wasn't safe yet, far from it. Loki pulled back, just enough so they could look at each other.

“How would you feel about being untied?” he asked in a low voice.

Barton looked very uncomfortable with the thought, but didn't refuse right away. He seemed to struggle with the idea for a long while; eventually, he nodded, only once, jerkily, and Loki vaporized the leather cuffs without even unbuckling them first. Barton brought his wrists in front of him and started rubbing them absently. He was still kneeling.

“Sit down,” Loki said.

Damn him to Hel, why was he only thinking of that now? Barton was obviously very relieved to change his position—his legs must be awfully sore. He seemed drained and stiff, but the look of haunted insanity was gone from his eyes.

Loki suddenly felt completely exhausted. He sat back as well and stared at the archer. Barton was looking at him with unsure eyes; he still needed guidance, and for all his weariness, Loki couldn't let him down—not again.

“What happened?” he asked softly.

That might not have been the best question, but he had been very careful not to sound accusing in the slightest, and they needed to discuss it anyway.

“Nothing,” Barton said in his sullen voice, and it was so drastically different from his shattered tone from earlier. “I just remembered who you were.”

Loki felt like a sword had pierced right through him. He had guessed it already, but—hearing it was a very different thing. And Barton's sincerity was scaring him, too, because he had been so terrified to let Loki hear his doubts, and now he was just shamelessly displaying them as though he didn't care anymore.

The demi-god swallowed and said, face blank, “Do go on.”

Barton shook his head. He always did this—in dismissal. He always dismissed himself, always started by saying, *It's not important.*

How could Loki have been so sorely mistaken. Barton hated himself so much. All that time, and it had never been a game for him. It had eaten him away, until he broke down.
“It just hit me again”, the archer said under his breath. “How it felt exactly the same. This quietness, this... certainty.”

Loki nodded, feeling terribly weary. Of course it felt the same. How was it different? How were his cruelty, his sadism, different from the day he’d raped Barton's mind?

“Would you want me to apologize?” he asked.

Barton looked up at him, surprised.

Loki felt himself scowl hideously. “Because I will not,” he spat.

Apologizing would have been the biggest lie of them all. Barton deserved the truth—he'd earned it today.

“Never,” the demi-god hammered out. “I have no remorse, Barton. Not for the blood on my hands; not for the blood on yours.”

That was true. That was the awful, ugly truth. Loki was a monster, he fed upon pain and he brought only ruin to anything and anybody close to him.

The corner of Barton's lips twitched and he nodded, looking down. Loki could still offer him a more pleasant truth, though. “Regardless,” he said in a lower voice, “you can be certain of one thing. The spear did induce submission, but it was artificial. It was never yours.”

The violation, the hunger for power, the shameful delight had all been Loki's, though.

Barton scoffed at him. “I've been told that a lot after Manhattan.”

Sitwell, Loki thought, Sitwell and the likes of him—their false reassurances, their empty concern, their barely disguised contempt. Loki clenched his fists, but didn't let Barton see his anger and just said, “I am the owner of the spear.”

Barton gaped at him for a second. “Okay, point,” he muttered eventually.

The spear. Loki remembered what Thor had told him about Selvig.

He smiled without a trace of joy in it. “Selvig is a scientist,” he said. “His goals are numerous, scattered and hidden. He likes to be five steps ahead, to have an all-encompassing sight, to understand, tear apart, take control. He does not have a submissive soul.” He laced his fingers together. “He bent to my power nonetheless.”

And it was so against his nature that it drove him mad.

Loki licked his lips, then looked up at the archer. “You, Barton, are a sniper. Your targets are single and well-defined. You enjoy the quietness. The certainty. You have—”

“—a heart, but no brain,” the archer scowled. “That what you're saying?”

Loki sighed. “No. Your heart and mind are irrelevant here. Weaker, dumber men than you have been known to crave dominance. It is your soul that matters, Barton. Nothing else.”

The demi-god looked down and nearly smiled again at his own words. Well, he craved dominance; and indeed he'd proved today that he was weak and dumb.

When he glanced up again, Barton seemed almost angry. “Why are you doing this?” he asked
abruptly. “All of this? And don't fucking lie to me.”

Loki should have been offended with such disrespect; he felt merely hollow. Why was he doing this indeed? Because he wanted to. Not because he had wanted to help Barton, not because he had tried to redeem himself, not because he had happened to think about someone else than Loki Laufeyson for once in his life.

He got up. Barton was fine, and he probably wanted to get away from him; Loki couldn't deny that it was what he wanted. He knew he was running away, but right now, even the thought of his own cowardice wasn't enough to make him stay.

“You are dismissed for today,” he said. “You can use the shower before leaving.”

He had no idea why he'd said this ridiculous thing, as though it made any difference. He didn't know what he was saying. He just wanted to get out—his hands were shaking.

“You didn't answer me,” the archer called.

“You didn't want to hear a lie” Loki said without turning.

He walked inside his room and closed the door. He stayed still, pressed against the door, for a long minute.

Burning tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

He closed his eyes and scowled, but it was useless. Something was welling up inside him, something he couldn't contain—and he collapsed to his knees, grabbed his own hair with both hands and opened his mouth on a silent scream, which lasted one, two, three dreadful seconds, before he broke down into choking sobs of shame which shook his entire body—but still in complete silence; because Barton might still be in the other room, and Loki didn't want him to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! And BLESS YOU for commenting
By the end of the night, Loki was still curled up on the floor where he had fallen. He was completely drained, his mind washed out with shame and guilt. It felt even worse than his fit in Odin's cells. He had sworn to himself never to let it happen again; never to fall prey to such feelings again. But this time, he could only blame himself.

The sun was coming up. The stillness around Loki suddenly turned into the acute awareness of Jarvis' silence. Strangely enough, he was the only one who knew, the only one who had ever discussed the truth of Barton with the demi-god. But now, he wasn't saying anything, and the weight of his silence crushed Loki further down his pit of guilt. He was grateful to Jarvis for not ringing the alarm, but perhaps he should have. Someone had to take Barton away from him.

If he had had the strength, Loki would have walked away. He would have leaped to his house and never come back. But that would require him to move and he couldn't move; he could barely breathe.

He thought of Odin. Of Thor and his friends. Of Thanos, and even Fury, even Romanov to an extent. All the people who had once overpowered him, forced him to bow, to surrender a part of himself. He didn't hate them all—he felt only indifference towards the mortals. He did hate Odin.

He didn't know how he felt about Thor.

(He thought nothing of Thanos. It was safer to think nothing. To stay numb. All forgotten)

But the point remained that he would have rather died than submitted again to any of these people.

How could he ever assume Barton had no qualms about it all. No—that wasn't what he'd assumed. He'd thought about all this; he just hadn't cared. It made no sense back then to care; now, he didn't see how he couldn't care, and he realized again how much he'd let himself be carried away.

But now it was over. It was over. If Barton never came back, Loki wouldn't go chasing after him. In this moment, the monster inside was completely obliterated. Loki was lying down on the floor, scarcely breathing not to wake up the beast, terrified even to move. And in this split second of complete lucidity, he prayed that Barton would get some help. These people who pretended to be his friends—couldn't they pull him out of that pit of darkness? Loki was born from it; he couldn't be
saved. But Barton wasn't yet lost.

“Jarvis,” he rasped.

He swallowed thickly. “Tell Barton he's free. Tell him he won't have to come back.”

There was a second of ominous silence. Was he doing it already? Right now? Was Loki losing Barton forever?

“I take no orders from you,” the AI said softly.

So he had been listening all along—but what was this nonsense?

“You told me your purpose was to watch over the tenants of this tower.”

“You are not among them.”

“I was not talking about me,” Loki hissed, turning his face against the floor. “Don't you see? I am giving you the opportunity to help Barton. You told me you would not reveal our secret unless you were ordered to. Well I order you—warn them! Tell them!”

“I take no orders from you,” Jarvis repeated gently.

Loki scowled against the carpet, screwing his eyes shut. He had feared many things, he had expected to fail in many places, but not here.

“How are you? Loki growled, slamming a weak fist against the floor. He was suddenly trembling with hatred as he tried to drag himself up, nails digging in the carpet.

Who is manipulating you? Is it Stark? Fury? Who’s looking through your eyes?”

“None other than myself.”

“So are you—made of flesh and blood.”

Loki let his head fall back and stopped moving.

“Clint Barton's exact words were—” and a recording started playing, loud enough for Loki to hear Barton’s hitching breath and repressed sobs as though he had been right next to his ear, “Please, sir don't leave me—don't leave me, please, I didn't mean it, I'm yours, I am, please don't give up on me, I can still serve you, I will do anything—”

“ENOUGH!” Loki yelled.

The recording stopped.
“Shall I play it again?” Jarvis asked after a while.

Loki could feel power throbbing in each of the AI’s dispassionate words. He shivered with nausea.

“He was lost,” he mumbled. “He was terrified, he—he didn't know what he was saying.”

“Which makes it all the more sincere.”

The demi-god lay down for another minute.

“Do you wish for me to call Thor Odinson?” Jarvis offered. “His cell phone is within reach.”

Loki closed his eyes.

He considered it. He actually did.

“No,” he mumbled.

He painfully straightened up and sat back against the door, taking his head between his hands. His scalp hurt where he'd pulled at his own hair almost to the point of ripping it off. He stayed there for a few more heartbeats, then got up on stiff limbs and opened the door to walk into the bathroom.

---

The trickling water had settled his self-disgust, anxiety and shame into a thick layer of mud at the bottom of himself. When he clothed himself again, he felt slightly less miserable.

He stared out the window and into space.

Into literal space.

(He didn't want to do this, but he wouldn't touch the darkest corner of his mind. Only the theoretical knowledge of what was about to happen. This way he was safe. The rest was all forgotten)

The veil of reality tore up and allowed him to see the stars and galaxies behind the screen of the ever-blue sky. Odin’s vault was first. Loki had spent so much time there that although his power was nowhere near as great as Heimdall, he had no problem peeking inside the guarded chambers. He felt the blue palpitation of the Tesseract and shut his mind from it. This one was safe.

Now, the other five. Loki doubted the Midgardians had ever suspected the Tesseract was not unique. Thor probably knew it, but he obviously hadn't deemed them fit to know. Or as Odin would say, he didn't want to burden them with this knowledge. Loki scowled and looked for the emerald. He felt nothing. The orange gem was next; its glow was equally lost to him. He had never known where to find the yellow diamond, but in doubt, he counted it as lost. Were left the amethyst, stranded somewhere in the great tree of Yggdrasil—on Niflheim, maybe?—and the ruby, safe in Idunn House, the third most greatest vault of Asgard. Idunn House was famous for its immortal apples, of course, but also for its universal hospitality, on the sole condition that no magic should ever be practiced within its walls. Loki had preferred to build his own solitary haven. He considered his
house the second most greatest vault of Asgard, and thus of the whole Nine Realms. But an empty vault was of no use.

And as it seemed, Thanos already possessed three of the six gems of Infinity.

(In theory. All forgotten)

Loki ran his fingers through his long hair. In theory, the end of the world was near, and until then he hadn't cared;

(because not caring was the key. Stay numb. He had to stay numb. All forgotten)

but perhaps he should begin to care,

(No. Not caring was the key. Locking the door was the key. All forgotten)

because now he had something to protect.

He screwed his eyes shut. This pain—was that how selflessness felt like? If so, he'd rather stay an egoist.

And then someone knocked on the door.

The Universe vanished from his sight

(All forgotten)

and he spun round, heart hammering against his ribs; then he glanced at the window again. The sun was high beneath thick clouds.

He turned back at the door, and he couldn't tell whether he was terrified to open it, or desperate for it. He swallowed thickly, then crossed the room and turned the doorknob.

“I insulted you,” Barton blurted out as soon as the door opened.

He was resolutely staring at the floor, the stiffness of his entire body culminating into his clenched fists. He was every inch the slave gathering his courage to face the wrath of his master. Except Loki felt no wrath, and he wasn't sure if he was allowed to be anyone's master anymore—he never had been, after all.

“Barton,” he said in a low voice, as though someone could have heard. “This is the middle of the
Barton licked his lips, then looked up at him with eyes dark and haunted. “I was disrespectful,” he insisted. “I gave you orders. I forgot my place.”

Loki heard a hint of desperation in his voice and realized with a chill that Jarvis was right. In his state of vulnerability, Barton had spoken the truth. What terrified him the most, for all his doubts and hatred, was the thought of being abandoned.

Now here he was, begging for his punishment because he needed it to restore their lost balance. He needed Loki to be his master. The demi-god felt how incredibly easy it would be to break him again then. A sharp no and a door slammed in his face. Nothing more.

Loki swallowed, and realized he was scared to death. Barton wasn't the only one who'd lost control last time, and the mere thought of it happening again made the demi-god's blood curdle in his veins. But he couldn't back off. Take your responsibilities.

If Barton still wanted him as his master, Loki had to take him.

He took a step back and let him in. “Clothes off,” he ordered coldly. He produced a bottle of lube and tossed it to him. “Open yourself up. You have five minutes.”

This time, it wasn't about satisfying a sadistic urge. This was about punishment and how to carry it out right. Loki knew he had to be ruthless—that this was what Barton expected. Only when he'd gotten what he thought he deserved would he find his peace again.

For once in his life, Loki couldn't feel the monster stirring inside him, even though he was about to hurt Barton maybe more than he'd ever hurt him. He was relieved for it. He wanted to keep his mind clear for this. He swallowed anxiously yet again and willed himself to stay calm, but his breath was hitching with what had to be pure terror, because everything—in this moment it was everything—was his responsibility. And it was suffocating.

Barton stiffly but quickly undressed himself, then knelt on the carpet and twisted off the cap of the bottle of lube. Loki watched him slick his fingers, then push one inside, then a second one, then a third one, wincing with discomfort and urgency. The demi-god didn't feel excited in the slightest. He was counting seconds.

When he got to three hundreds, he grabbed Barton's arm and brutally hoisted him up on his feet, making him drop the bottle. He dragged him to the bedroom without checking if the archer was actively following or not. He unveiled the torture chair and shoved Barton towards it.

“Climb,” he said.

He knew how to make his voice ice-cold and razor-sharp. He knew how to pretend. He was burning low with something which resembled anger enough, but was actually resolve. He could do this. He could be Barton's master, in more virtuous ways than simply using him for his pleasure. He could be handed a sentient soul and handle it right.

Norns, but he hoped he could.

Barton was up on the wooden chair and bracing on the back like last time. They had fucked a few days ago, and he had just opened himself. He wouldn't be too tight. Loki wasn't supposed to care anyway—not this time. For both their sakes, Barton would have to take it.

Loki pulled him down on the too big dildo and watched his scowl widen around a moan, then a
growl, then something which sounded like a broken scream, only coming out in bits and pieces. In any other circumstances, Loki would have swooned in delight at this evidence of Barton's pain, and made it all slower to savor it. But this time, his body remained cold and still, just like his mind. He was as focused as a tightrope walker; careful to let it be agony, and at the same time careful not to injure Barton, no matter how bad it hurt.

He strapped Barton down, then produced a cock gag out of the same dark, polished wood. The archer was shuddering in pain, but the sight of the gag still made him cringe. “It’s not—”

Loki spoke over him like he had never even begun to talk. “Open your mouth or I will break your teeth.”

He was prepared to actually do it. He had to be implacable. He had to show Barton that he wouldn’t bend. This was a test and he was acutely aware of it, even if the archer himself was not. Loki had failed as a master; he must now regain the trust of his slave.

He clenched his fist, ready to smash Barton's mouth, but then the archer parted his lips—a great relief for Loki, who was careful not to let it show. He kept his features bland and cold as he pushed the wooden dick into Barton's mouth, watched him gag and begin to cry as the leather strap was fastened behind his neck. Another powerful spasm rippled through his tortured body—the pain from the dildo in his ass must be nearly unbearable.

Good.

Loki took a deep breath; he wanted to comfort Barton, to tell him that he wasn't mad at him, that there was nothing to forgive, that Loki had deserved every single insult and sign of distrust from him. Instead he said brutally, “There you are. Filled.”

He turned away and left without another word, clenching his fists again so Barton couldn't see how badly his hands were shaking. After he got out, he pressed himself against the wall and started counting the seconds again. He would leave Barton there for an hour.

One. Two. Three...

Oddly, he remembered playing hide-and-seek in his youth. Waiting for people to find him in the dark.

As soon as he was done, he swung the door open and stepped back inside his bedroom. Barton was a mess. Loki had heard him moan and squirm at times, but nothing more; he had never stopped crying, though, and he was shuddering faintly but endlessly with pain and strain. Unmistakably, though, his eyes were expecting more. Not hoping for it; only knowing it would come. And Loki knew, viscerally, that he couldn't afford to disappoint him.

More, then. He unstrapped Barton, then threw him face-first on the bed and twisted his arms in his back to tie down his wrists—but he was so febrile that he made a jerking movement and almost broke Barton's right shoulder.

When he felt he'd regained a little self-control, he grabbed Barton's ankles and made him bend his legs double to tie his ankles and wrists together. He had often thought of trying this position and never expected to do so in such circumstances, but it was a good thing—Barton was likely to feel even more used and objectified in a situation he didn't recognize.

Loki rolled the hog-tied man on his side and tweaked his nipple like he'd done yesterday, when his mistake had provoked this utter collapse. Fight evil with evil; he had to rewrite the feeling so it couldn't turn into a trigger. He produced a clamp made of stainless steel and put it on Barton's nipple; then he did the same to the other one, before grabbing Barton's half-hard cock.

The archer's eyes opened wide. He began to beg—he was still gagged, but the meaning of his muffled moans was obvious. Loki knew he had to ignore it. This was a test, still a test. He was the master. He shouldn't give in, or Barton could never trust him again—if he had ever trusted him to begin with.

Loki put the clamp on the head of the archer's cock and watched him thrash in his bonds, more tears of pain rolling down his face. He clipped more clamps to Barton's balls, then along his length, one by one until it seemed like the archer would pass out with pain. Loki wished he could have enjoyed it, but he was too nervous, too edgy with the pressure of having to do this exactly the way Barton needed it.

Loki took a step back and sat in his chair. He wasn't leaving Barton alone again; he could have invoked some subtle reason, but really he didn't want to be alone for another hour. He would suffer with Barton even though, hopefully, the archer wasn't aware of it.

Barton arched and fought his restraints, then let himself fall down and started panting, half-retching around his gag. Loki never looked away from him; he wondered if his gaze made Barton feel dissected, or supported. Either way, every time the wild eyes sought his, he met them and held. At some point, Barton started struggling again, but he only managed to roll down on his stomach and crush the clamps under him. Loki almost got up at once to turn him on his back—but he forced himself to stay seated. Barton wouldn't get his help. Loki would just watch him squirm and humiliate himself. He could see it—the focus in Barton's burning eyes, the effort he put in enduring the torture. He needed to prove himself he could do it, and he wanted to prove it to Loki. So Loki had to let him do it, and so he sat back, even though it was the single most difficult thing he'd ever done.

After a long time, way too long for Loki's taste, Barton let his head fall and this time, he didn't hoist it up again. He was crying softly with pain, his body limp and shuddering on the sheets. Loki decided now was the time—he couldn't wait any longer anyway. He got up and freed Barton from the clothespins and restraints, with so much relief it felt like he was removing them from his own body. When he took the gag off, Barton retched and choked and cried some more. Good. He had suffered a lot, enough for him to consider the forgiveness Loki would have been willing to give from the start.

The demi-god left the archer's hands bound, then stepped back and said icily, “Kneel before me.”

Barton gracelessly slid down the bed and sank to his knees. Loki could see how his body progressively sagged again in relief as the pain started to dull. He gave him a minute to catch his breath; he needed one, himself.

Now was the moment. He had to do this right. He had to make it clear to Barton that no matter what he felt, or what he did, he would not be left behind.

“Why did you come here today?” Loki asked.

Barton's voice was hoarse and low. “To be punished, sir.”
Loki could do it, could pretend he didn't care, could pretend it should have been obvious to Barton all along.

“Why?” he asked coldly.

“Because it was right, sir,” Barton murmured.

No. This was the same thing he'd said yesterday, as he babbled nonsense in an effort to salvage the only thread linking him to his sanity. Loki wouldn't have that. Of course, Barton was supposed to please his master, and of course Loki found his pleasure in Barton's pain. But this, right now, wasn't a game. This was correction, and Loki could feel the truth of it in the fact that he still wasn't aroused in the slightest. They had to carry this out, but they could never do it while Barton was still stuck in his wrongful guilt from the other day.

“Spare me this idiocy, Barton,” Loki hissed. “Why did you want to be punished?”

“To please you, sir.”

Loki slapped him and this time, it felt perfectly right. He could feel a sense of dominance coursing through his veins, but it was different from anything he'd ever felt. This wasn't the bestial pleasure of the monster within, and this wasn't the cruel delight of the decadent prince. This was something intensely calm and composed, almost ascetic. And he recognized it for what it was.

Responsibility.

He felt in control again and a regain of trust gave him strength. He could do this. They were nearly there. He could fix this.

“Last chance,” he said. “Fail this again and you'll spend the night on the chair. With the clamps. Understood?”

He would do it if he had to. If it appeared that the archer still wouldn't see the truth, Loki would carry out his punishment as long as necessary.

“Yes,” Barton squeaked.

“Why did you want to be punished?” Loki repeated sternly.

Barton squirmed and blushed.

“I... So I could be your slave again.”

The demi-god closed his eyes and exhaled a breath, or a silent prayer of thanks.

“Yes, Barton.”

The archer shuddered, once.

“And this was the reason I punished you,” Loki said more gently.

He trailed his hand through Barton's hair, and it felt so good that he had to grip it hard to remind himself that now wasn't the time for tenderness—not just yet. He had to make sure he'd made his point clear. “I branded you,” he reminded him. “Did you think my mark would erase itself if you disobeyed? Did you think you could regain your freedom so easily?”

Barton swallowed, but he looked a little baffled now. “...No, sir.”
“Fear torture, Barton,” Loki said. “Fear punishment. Do not fear abandon. You will remain mine, as long as one of us lives.”

In this second, he completely believed himself. Clint nodded, with something like desperate adoration in his eyes, and that was when he became Clint for the first time.

Loki tried to swallow past the lump in his throat; he cupped the archer's chin, let him lean into it. Barton nuzzled his palm slightly, then murmured, “I'm sorry.”

The demi-god froze, feelings of relief and victory vanishing at once. What—? Still apologizing, hadn't he understood there was nothing more to—

“What do you mean?” Loki asked before he could get himself too worked up.

“I fucked up last time,” Barton said, eyes closed against his hand, “and you still helped me.”

Loki looked at him with his mouth open for a short while. He remembered Barton saying something similar at the very beginning of their relationship—that Loki was doing this to help him.

“You already told me such things once.”

“I was just trying to get your foot off my neck at the time,” Barton said with the slightest smile.

Loki was awestruck. What did this mean? He knew Barton hadn't been truly sincere back then—but he'd been truly scared, and that had meant a lot already—but now, he was—?

“What are you saying, Barton?” Loki asked, his voice frailer than he cared to admit.

“Just thank you, sir,” the archer answered in the most grateful, adoring voice Loki had ever heard.

Clint, Loki thought again, eyes wide with wonder. Clint. He trailed his fingers along his jaw, brushed his fingertips over his relaxed features. My crystal glass.

Suddenly, he started shaking. He'd been so focused on doing this right that he was about ready to fall apart with relief now. The tension had evacuated his body, leaving him in a state of vulnerability which almost panicked him. This had been too much for him. For once, he was the one in need of reassurance. He wanted to remember that Barton came to him for more than a mere fix. He wanted to believe he did. He wanted to know he'd done right.

Close. Cold. He felt cold, he wanted to be close. To be one with him again. He grabbed the archer under his tied arms and heaved him up to let him sit on the bed. Barton had closed his eyes, and didn't open them as Loki undressed himself. He looked untroubled with the eventuality of being fucked even after such a harsh punishment.

What Loki needed couldn't be reduced to fucking anyway. He climbed on the bed with Barton, then gently made him lean back, and pushed inside him, slow and careful. The archer greeted him with incredible ease, and it was warm and good and perfect. He only let out a small sigh when the first tingle of pleasure fizzed through him, then tilted his head back as the demi-god started rolling his hips in a languid rhythm.

The archer was shivering with exhaustion, though, so Loki wrapped his arms around him to hold him close and support him; and when Barton's head rested against his shoulder, when Loki felt his trust, tears almost welled up in his eyes again.

He couldn't believe it—he'd done it. He'd fixed it.
Loki suddenly buried himself inside Barton and held him tighter, closer, as though they could be one. Barton. Barton. Barton. He didn't know what he wanted to say, but he wanted to say it. He needed him so much. He would have never even acknowledged it usually, but right now, in his raw, frail state, an ache he'd buried for eons was beginning to make itself known again.

He thrust a bit harder and stars simmered behind his eyelids; Barton let out a faint breath of pleasure. Loki didn't know what he was going to say, but he was going to say it. He knew it would be no lie. He was stripped free of all lies in this instant.

“Barton,” he murmured in his ear, voice shaky, trembling, uncontrolled, “Barton, I—”

Then he heard the door bang open behind him and the next second, a rod of fire pierced through his left eye.

Stark, he thought—and all was lost.

Loki pulled out not to get Barton hurt and threw himself off the bed right before the next repulsor beam hit him again. He convulsed, but Stark wasn't done with him—he was firing away like there was no tomorrow, and Loki wasn't in a state to fight back. He was naked and raw and he could only huddle down and wait for it to stop.

“Loki,” he heard, small and breathless.

Him. Barton was calling his name. It was such a harrowing, desperate noise that Loki found the strength to look up and catch Clint's gaze, and that was the second time Barton became Clint.

He was lying on his side with his hands still bound, and looking at the demi-god in hazy despair, like he couldn't understand what was happening, like he was begging Loki to give meaning to this pain as well.

The demi-god wanted to reach out his hand, but then someone else said his name in a very different voice—and a rod of lightning stabbed through him.

No, he thought desperately as his body arched and writhed independently from his mind. I was so close. I could have done it. We could have done it.

The lightning pierced through him again and all his thoughts went blank.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry I'm late ^^ Thank you for reading and please, please, tell me what you thought!
Someone was dragging him by his hair.

Loki let out an animal yowl and arched in the implacable grip; as a reward, he was dropped on the floor—then a boot slammed him down and broke two of his ribs. He screamed until he was breathless and automatically tried to invoke his armor; but he was only clothed with his undercoat when the boot hit in him in the groin and he curled up with another scream of agony, losing all control over his magic.

“How could you,” Thor said.

His voice was shaking with unspeakable rage and crackling with pain. Or was it thunder? Loki felt his skin bristle with the static in the air and he shook uncontrollably with the prospect of another electrocution.

“Thor—brother—please,” he panted. “Give me a chance to explain—”

Mjölnir came down and he could only fold his arms to protect his face. The hammer connected with his right shoulder and broke the bone, sending Loki crashing through the room until he hit the opposite wall.

“We are not BROTHERS!” Thor shouted.

He stepped towards Loki who could only scramble back and curl up in a corner like a terrified spider.

“What is there to explain when I come back to the evidence of your felony?”

“Please—”

“Please?” Thor bellowed. “Please? What about Barton? Did he beg? Did he scream for your enjoyment? I was told you were a monster, Loki, but you are even worse!”

“It's not—” Loki gasped, tears rolling down his face, “it's not what it looks like—brother, I'm begging you to listen—”

Thor struck him across the face, so hard Loki's brow split and a flow of warm blood trickled down the side of his face. Mjölnir pressed against his throat and under his chin, forcing him to look up. Thor was crouching above him, his eyes twin blue flames in the darkness.
“I swear,” he articulated in a very low voice. “Call me brother again and I will not wait another second to kill you.”

“Hey, Thor,” someone called.

The thunderer's head snapped round at Tony Stark who was standing in the doorstep of Loki's room. He threw something gleaming at Thor then stepped back inside. Loki heard the jingling of chains and curled up even more, but he was helpless.

“Thor—” he implored, but his brother didn't listen and forced the steel bit between his jaws, drawing more tears out of him. He buckled it behind his head and closed the muzzle over it, then drew Loki's wrists together—eliciting a muffled shout of agony from him when his broken arm was tugged forward—and clicked the manacles around them. Loki was left shivering in dread and pain. He tried to at least heal his broken ribs so he could breathe better, but Mjölnir came over his head and forced him to bow, effectively cutting off his powers as long as the enchanted metal weighed over his neck.

A black hole of despair had opened inside him and sucked down everything else. He hadn't reconciled with Thor, far from it, but still he had thought... he'd thought...

“My God,” said a low voice.

Steve Rogers had stepped into the room. “Thor, Jarvis told us...”

“Jarvis?” a milder voice said—Banner. “You knew?”

“Indeed, doctor.”

“Why haven't you said anything?”

“I was required not to, doctor.”

Loki closed his eyes. Was he delirious? It felt like Jarvis was trying to cover up for him, keeping things so vague. Of course, no one would assume Loki conversed with a robot; and no one would assume Stark's AI was somewhat of his accomplice. They'd all think Barton was the one who'd told the disembodied voice not to speak up. But Jarvis's efforts, if they were indeed real, were pointless.

“What are we going to do with him?” Natasha Romanov asked.

“No mercy for rapists,” Thor said in a low voice. “No mercy for monsters.”

Loki heard her walk away at once.

“Sounds good,” was all she said before entering his room.

Banner went with her; Rogers hesitated for another minute, then said a few words to Thor before following them—basically asking him not to kill Loki just now, not until they'd heard Barton's confirmation.

Barton. Loki thought of how far he had fallen the other day; how vulnerable he still was. His weak, miserable voice as he called him in a desperate breath. But Loki hadn't been able to pull him all the way out. He'd let him fall again...

“Did you have a good laugh?” Thor murmured.

They were alone again. Loki was holding very still under the hammer. His brother let it weigh down another notch and Loki scowled behind the muzzle as he bowed his head further down. Thor would
just have to open his hand to break his neck.

“Was it worth it? Raping a man too weak to defend himself. Was it fun?”

_He is not weak_, Loki thought.

“Why, Loki? Is it in your nature? Have you no feelings—no soul?”

More tears rolled down Loki’s cheeks and he screwed his eyes shut with a flare of anger. Die crying—no.

“For my own sake, I must believe there are times when you realize what you are,” Thor said, voice shivering. “Times when you regret.”

Loki thought of all the times shame had tormented him, but his anger only spiked up in return. His guilt, his regrets had not been for _Thor’s_ sake—Thor, who couldn't even listen, after all his promises! And Loki was not some kind of—of _beast_, who lost control over his own urges every other full moon!

He was not! He was _not_!

“But worry not, I will free you from this horror,” Thor promised. “To kill a monster, after all, is nothing but an act of compassion—”

His voice trailed off and ended in a strangled noise. “Oh—doctor.”

Loki looked up. Banner had opened the door of the trickster's room; he was staring mutely at Thor. His eyes trailed down towards Loki, and the demi-god thought he’d seen compassion there for a second. But it vanished instantly.

“I'm—just here for Clint's clothes,” he said.

He quickly gathered them in his arms and disappeared into Loki’s room again. The demi-god watched him walk away with a peak of despair—Barton! Why hadn't Banner told Thor more about Barton? How was he? Had he been the one asking for his own clothes? If so—he must be better. He must have found his way out himself. Loki had to hang onto this thread of hope, because there were none left for him. Indeed, even if Barton managed to shake off the shock of such a brutal interruption, what could he say? If he revealed the true nature of their relationship, his friends would simply deem him insane, or brainwashed still. And Loki would only suffer more before he died. No—Barton had to shut up. Let the Avengers think it was rape; let them think he was in need of help. Maybe he was.

“I will put a final end to your perversion,” Thor said. “I should have listened to them all—to you, when you told me I never had a brother.”

Loki felt pain and wrath contort his stomach. _Perversion_. Yes, he loved to hurt Barton, but he'd shared with him moments others could only dream of. Was it only perversion? Was there nothing here of some _worth_?

The door of his bedroom opened and he looked down in insane hope—and almost passed out with relief when Barton appeared, dressed and on his feet, his friends flanking him like anxious dogs. Loki looked down and breathed out through his nose. _Thank all the Gods_. Barton was so strong, so impossibly strong! Loki hadn't managed to catch himself, hadn't managed to gather himself together and fight Stark off; and now he was unraveling inside. Kneeling, bloody, beaten down. And Barton
standing strong.

Maybe the archer was enjoying the show.

“My friend,” Thor breathed, voice filled with the regret and pain he usually reserved for Loki.

Loki wondered what had happened in the room after Thor had dragged him out. He would probably never know.

“You see,” Stark was telling Barton in an unsure voice, “we got him under control.”

The monster writhed and wailed inside Loki. Humiliation. Submission. He had sworn to himself never to live through this again, never to let anything get to him again, and what a spectacular success it was! They were forcing him to bow—he was muzzled, broken, reduced to nothing...

“Clint, are you okay?” Stark was saying. “Clint? Clint—okay, guys, this was a bad idea—let's get him out of here—”

“No,” Barton blurted—and at the sound of his voice, Loki glanced up. Barton's gaze on him very nearly burned his skin. So are you happy? Loki thought with desperate rage. Are you glad? Is this what you wanted? But there was another voice, a more reasonable voice which spoke with a different kind of despair, Barton, if you care about yourself, not a word, not a word.

Barton shook his head, eyes wide. “They're going to kill you.”

I know. Not a damn word, Barton. Or had he said that to enjoy Loki's fear? But he didn't look happy. He wasn't happy? So—he cared? He cared?

But the archer's words could have been interpreted as a wan threat, and Loki's answering glare as a declaration of hatred—so Thor let Mjölnir slide down a few notches more and this time, Loki's vertebrae cracked under the shock. He let out a muffled scream and tried to bow even lower, hatred bubbling in his stomach like hot acid.

“Stop!” Barton was yelling. “Stop, stop, he's—”

Do not say it, you fool, you fathomless fool—

“—innocent!”

Loki closed his eyes. He would have really failed until the very end.

“What the hell are you saying, Barton?” Stark asked.

“He didn't do anything—”


“...Wasn't rape! Granted, it was very rough, but he wasn't forcing me!”

Will you shut up? Loki thought with rage and pain. He was about to die and still his slave didn't listen! Had Loki taught him nothing? Had Loki not proved that he knew better? Couldn't Barton see, from Loki's own bloodied and humiliated state, that truth would lead them nowhere?

“He's not himself,” Banner muttered. “Loki must be manipulating him again.”
I wish. If it had been the case, Barton would have been sharp and beautiful and deadly, like he'd been on the battlefield footage. Loki's.

“No—stop right there,” the archer said when his so-called friends started surrounding him. “I'm perfectly sane.”

“Then how can you insist on Loki's innocence?”

“Look,” Barton said, and Loki guessed from the pleading sound of his voice that he was talking to him, but he didn't want to look at this disaster—“I'm sorry, I've got to tell them.”

Do not tell them. It will only make it worse. Can't you see? How could they understand what even we fail to grasp?

“We didn't have a choice, okay? There was no other way.”

“What are you talking about?”

Loki braced himself. Here came the end—

“The serum,” Barton panted.

Loki snapped his eyes open.

No—wait—no—what?

“Doom's serum. It just keeps kicking in.”

Oh.

Oh.

Oh, he was strong, so strong, yes—so much stronger than Loki, already lost in renouncement and bitterness, but Barton had crafted a lie, a lie, and a good one, with that! The serum excused them both, excused Loki's violence and Barton's insanity—excused even their secrecy. Now could he carry it out? Barton, Barton, lying when Loki couldn't.

“The serum?” Rogers repeated.

“But it's been months since the incident,” Stark objected.

“And you were tested. There were no remnants in your blood,” Romanov added in a low voice.

“Ever heard of drug flashbacks?” Barton said dryly.

Loki held his breath.

“HPPD,” Banner muttered. “Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder.”

Loki exhaled. Yes—a good lie plunged its roots deep enough for everyone to start participating. They were trying to examine its veracity, and thus they were justifying its veracity. The idea that it
might be real, that the truth might be something more than they'd envisioned, was starting to plant itself in their minds. It could work. It could work; and with that hope, Loki's hatred flared all the brighter. Because he was bound, he was muzzled, and Barton didn't even need him anymore.

“Sounds about right,” Barton panted. “Look—you were never supposed to find out. Loki's really innocent—alright? I know those words don't sound like they fit together. And you know I'd be the last one to defend him. But I'm not enough of a bastard to let him take the blame. Besides—I need him.”

What?

What? Needing me. Bound and gagged and bloody. What is there to need? Is this a joke? Is this his idea of a taunt?

Loki started arching against Mjölnir without realizing it—and a deep, sharp pain in his neck made him jerk in his chains. Thor, he thought, anger flaring and pulsing. All of them, judging a wrecked man, deciding of the fate of a god—Loki's hatred burned all the more. They were no better. They were no better! They couldn't see Barton's strength, and they couldn't see Loki's wrath. It was bubbling inside him now, tearing him apart, because he was not meant to bow. His insides were twisting with how unnatural it felt. He was bound, he was down, and even Barton had bested him in the art of lying, and the monster was roaring for punishment. For the confusion to end, because Loki couldn't read Barton anymore so he had to break him down.

“But why him?” Rogers exclaimed. “Clint, you're under the influence of—of sex pollen, and the person you go to is Loki? Why didn't you tell us—anyone else? Why didn't you ask for help?”

“Because I was ashamed!” Barton yelled.

Loki glanced up, storming thoughts coming to a short halt.

“Can't you understand that?” His voice cracked with disgust and shame. “Can't you realize how humiliating this is? Can't you see why I didn't want anybody else to know?”

That was all truth now. Loki panted through his nose, dilated pupils fixed on Barton. This pain the archer felt, this shame—they were Loki's. His to consume or heighten or chase away. He wanted him. Now. Wanted to claim, wanted to feel empowered. Wanted to feed the beast within before it ate him entirely.

“But—” Stark was protesting. “You went into shock, you...”

“Because you interrupted us! It's like waking up a sleepwalker, Tony. It's... it's a trance, and you broke it.”

All truth. All truth. Had this even been a lie to begin with? Loki didn't remember. He didn't care. He was hungry.

“Look, I'm fine,” Barton said. “It's... can we focus on Loki for now?”

Loki was focusing on him. He wasn't seeing anything else. Barton. He wanted Barton. He needed to own and claim and possess.

“I don't forgive,” Barton insisted, “but he didn't rape me. And he's no more in control of this than I am.”

Oh, you have no idea, sneered the tiniest part of Loki which wasn't blinded with a red cloud of
predatory lust.

“Thor,” the archer was calling. “Thor, let him go!”

Loki barely noticed Thor as he lifted Mjölnir off his neck and took off his restraints; the sharp pang of pain when he moved his right arm cleared his mind for a brief second—enough for him to cast a healing spell—but when his bones knitted themselves together, the haze of lust came back at once, like a poisonous gas filling his entire mind.

“Out,” he spat the second the muzzle left his mouth.

“Loki—” Thor said wanly.

“Barton stays,” he ordered in a distorted voice, a monster's voice. “The rest of you—out! OUT!”

He had no idea how it happened or why they listened to Barton or why they ever agreed to leave the both of them together, but in mere seconds, they were alone in the room. Maybe Loki was delirious, imagining it all. He didn't care. He didn't care who was watching. He got up on staggering feet, feeling murderous. He was in agony with the very recent memory of his own humiliation. Thor's words. To kill a monster is an act of compassion. Was it? Was it?

Barton hadn't noticed how in danger he was yet. “I'm sorry,” he was saying, swaying a little. “This is —”

Loki slammed him against the wall and crushed their mouths together. Barton let out a muffled sound but the demi-god was completely gone—he was only cravings, only compulsion, and he pushed inside Barton's mouth and bit his tongue and gripped his crotch with his free hand, because this body was his, because he was in control, he was, he needed to be.

He was so hard it was only torture. He put a brutal end to the kiss by jerking Barton's head back and pushing him down to force him to his knees, taking the place Loki had been wrongfully crammed into. Loki invoked ropes around his body, around his wrists and crotch, and made them tighten so he would hurt, and tighten again until Barton cried out in pain. He stopped then, breathless, feverish, out of himself; he gripped his victim's hair again to press Barton's face against his crotch. Loki was going to fuck his throat if that was the last thing he ever did.

Still holding him, he unlaced himself with his free hand, freed his cock and pinned Barton against the wall before slamming into him. The tight, wet warmth made his mind explode in frenzy and he jerked his own head back—and just took it from him.

He used Barton with rough, hard thrusts, barely conscious of himself, crushed him against the wall again and rammed his cock deeper—he wanted him to choke on it, he wanted him to cry and writhe and suffer. But also he wanted him to come. To surrender every last bit of his control to Loki. He wanted everything. Pain and bliss. Give me everything!

He tightened his grip on the archer's hair, took him even more brutally—and somehow miraculously, the archer came.

Untouched; tortured; he came. He moaned around Loki's cock and relaxed in deep submission, as though he had been in tune with his master's madness from the start.

Impossible. Loki was so shocked that he almost didn't notice his own climax, but already it was rushing out of him in a painful loss of control and he braced against the wall and pushed deep Barton's throat for the last time with a long, violent shudder, and a helpless moan which sounded rather like pain than pleasure.
And it was over.

It was over.

The red veil which had came down over his eyes vanished, and his mind cleared a little. Pulling out, he looked down to find Barton glancing up at him. The archer was breathless and quite shocked, but there was only expectation in his eyes. If Loki wanted more, Barton was ready to give it.

The demi-god felt like he was falling completely apart; he started shuddering uncontrollably, and he didn't want Barton to be the witness of it, so he lowered trembling fingers to his eyes which fluttered close; and pressed a finger over Barton's mouth. The archer understood and bowed his head.

This time, Loki didn't try to hold back his tears, and let them roll down as he struggled to catch his breath, pressing his head against the wall.

What he had done just now. That was rape. That could have been called rape. But Barton had saved him from this monstrosity by accepting it. By wanting it. He was the only thing who'd saved Loki from turning completely into a monster.

Loki screwed his eyes shut and cried all the more, because he felt naked, he felt raw and ashamed, and desperate, and terrified. He didn't want to lose control ever again. He didn't want to be a monster.

He didn't want to be a monster.

Swallowing his distress back down, he trailed his fingers through Barton's hair. Barton, so fragile and so strong, who had managed to repair Loki's mistakes. The demi-god cupped his face to make him look up, but Barton kept his eyes closed and kissed Loki's palm in a gesture so respectful, so loving, that more tears rolled down Loki's cheeks. He hid his own eyes with his other hand.

“Thank you,” he breathed in a broken voice—and he didn't think he'd ever thanked someone so sincerely in his entire life.

* *

It took him a long time to gather himself together.

He'd wished away the ropes torturing Barton and stepped back. It took everything he had not to stagger as he made his way to the couch and sat with a deep breath, raking both hands through his black hair.

The edge of his fit had been taken away, leaving him utterly aimless. He didn't know what to do; he didn't know how to feel. He tried to remember what he had done the last time he'd lost control. Last time had been in Odin's cells; he'd violated himself like he'd just violated Barton, and then—what? What?

And then he'd killed everything left inside himself.

But it had grown back; it would be futile to try again. He could, however, reassert his control over himself. His animal panic was gone now; he had to start thinking again. He glanced at Barton, but the archer was rubbing his sore wrists with a faraway gaze. He didn't need him at the moment. Loki
closed his eyes in relief and rubbed his temples.

So the scales had finally fallen from Thor's eyes. He had understood what Loki had repeatedly told him—that the man he called brother was no man at all. Loki screwed his own eyes shut and tried to convince himself that it was a good thing, that he'd stop wasting his time and hopes over this golden oaf.

The look in Thor's eyes. As though Loki was...

Actually, he didn't want to think about him at all. He wanted to consider his options. Number one: stay in the Tower and play along with Barton's lie. That would be humiliating, but the demi-god had put on worse disguises.

Number two: leave.

He pressed a fist over his mouth. Why didn't he just leave? Thor and Barton had seen him for the monster he was. What was left for him? Why didn't he go and wait for the world to end?

“You're like me,” Barton said in a raucous murmur.

Loki stilled and kept staring ahead, but he was suddenly breathless. He heard the archer straightening up and clearing his abused throat.

“You're exactly like me. It’s not that you enjoy it. You need it.”

Yes, we are both sick and mad. Loki was too humiliated and bitter to react. Barton knew the truth and if he wanted to dissect Loki with his sudden epiphany, the demi-god couldn't stop him.

“So...” the archer began hesitantly. “About Manhattan...?”

It took Loki a split second to understand what he meant—but when he did, he snapped round at Barton and thought he might kill him if he didn't shut up right now. Thankfully, Barton understood and didn't say another word.

Manhattan. Loki didn't think about Manhattan.

(All forgotten)

He had control over himself, he had—

He hadn't any control over himself. He'd just proved it again. And yet, miraculously, Barton hadn't suffered for it. He looked, as always, unimpressed with the highest peaks of Loki's violence; no matter what the demi-god put him through, Barton didn't break. He just caught his breath, and then walked away, until next time. Loki had once been grateful for it, but now it was frightening him.

Because Barton couldn't possibly be a slave. He was strong, he had heart, and he was everything Loki dreamed to possess. Because if he could have Barton, then it meant he was stronger than him.

But he wasn't. He wasn't. And if Barton kept taking everything Loki threw at him, then one day Loki would throw more than a mortal body could catch, and he would kill him.

So strong. So frail. It was wearing Loki out trying to piece him together.
“You managed to lie,” he murmured bitterly, rubbing his temples. “You were this far down and you still crafted a lie—” *when I couldn’t.*

Barton shook his head and said in his sullen voice, “It worked for now, but it won't explain the brand. Tony must have seen it.”

How could he sound so *detached*—so practical? This was just another mission for him. Had Loki ever really gotten to this man's core? Had he managed to strip him of all these layers? He'd thought so at the time, but now he wasn't sure anymore. If this control he'd reveled in had been nothing but another illusion, he was even more pathetic than he'd thought.

He let out a sigh and explained wearily, “He can't see the brand. Nor could he see the chair.”

The words fell automatically out of his mouth, but he was humiliated and tired and he would have preferred silence. He knew where to find it—in his stone house, a wish away. But if he left now, he could never return, and—he didn't know. He didn't know.

Barton frowned at him. “You concealed them? With—like, a spell?”

“How careless do you think I am?” Loki snapped. He might be pathetic, but he wasn't *stupid.* And ever since Odin had stripped off his Aesir skin for the first time, concealment had always been on the demi-god's mind. “It's not a very demanding glamor anyway,” he mumbled, resuming the weary circles of his fingertips against his skull. “Much slighter than mine.”

“Yours? What are *you* hiding?”

Loki stilled again. He hadn't meant to say that. He just wanted Barton to shut up and now he'd talked too much. But—Hel, what if Loki *told* him? It would mean nothing to the Midgardian he was, anyway.

But precisely because it would mean nothing, Loki shut up. He'd stripped himself raw enough already; he wouldn't go further for someone who couldn't even understand the pain it caused him.

“Irrelevant,” he murmured.

That was what he must be to Barton. *Irrelevant.* A way like any other to fulfill his specific needs. And it made sense—enemies must use each other as tools. It was in the natural order of things.

But just as this thought crossed the demi-god's mind, Barton murmured, “I wanted to tell them the truth.”

Loki didn't look at him, but he felt his anger spike up. “Lie to them,” he said through gritted teeth. “Never lie to *me.*”

“I'm not lying,” Barton said indignantly. “I hate being like this, it's true.”

That did sound more honest.

“But when you... when you force me to love it—I wish they all knew.” He took a deep breath. “It would feel right. To tell them I'm yours.”

Loki was so surprised he turned to look at him again. Barton always managed to baffle him in the end. *Yours.* Was he sincere? He had no reason to lie, except sheer kindness.
“But, they would kill you if I did,” Barton concluded.

Loki stared at him for a very long time. No, this wasn't kindness. This was pragmatism. Barton was calculating his own statistics and Loki Laufeyson was just another variable in his equations.

But it meant they could still keep adding themselves together for a little while.

Loki smiled, wanly sarcastic. “Aren't you a very practical man.”

He sounded a lot more weary than he'd aimed for, but that was fine. He'd stay for a bit longer. He could always bail out. Nothing really mattered anyway.

He got up and said, “Well. Let us go face our judges, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Well... that was really violent. Thoughts? :)

---

---
“Told you it would be fine,” the archer said in answer to the anxious looks of the Avengers when they entered the room.

Loki had no memory of Barton ever saying that anything would be fine. Again, he wondered how the archer could have possibly gotten the Avengers to leave him alone with a frenzied god who'd supposedly just raped him. He had been so out of it he hadn't heard him and hadn't seen them. Now that his balance was restored, he could see the way they all looked at him. Anger and dread.

Thor was there, too, but it was easier not to look at him. Not to think about him at all. Simple.

Loki folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, trying to pay attention to Barton's nervous answers to his teammates' questions. Regardless of how sincere or not the archer was to Loki, he was undoubtedly lying to his friends right now. Assuring them that Doom's drug was the sole reason he'd ever bedded Loki. It seemed like they believed him.

Out of nowhere, Loki felt a pang of pity. Barton was brave, but he didn't know what it was to trap himself in a web of lies. Loki almost wished he could have done something, but he had no better lie in store, and to tell the truth was unthinkable.

“...So we all agreed it would be better not to bring Fury in,” Rogers was saying.

“Yeah—yes,” Barton squeaked.

No, Loki didn't want SHIELD to enter this game either.

“But you have to go to Sitwell,” Romanov said.

Loki frowned inwardly. Sitwell? What the hell could that man—oh. 'Help'. Of course, Barton's teammates thought him insane, or mentally ill, or whatever word they chose to use. The demi-god remembered wishing for Barton to get such help; but now the thought only filled him with contempt.

Barton obviously shared that opinion. “Fuck, Nat, you think he's going to help me? He'll just ask if—if it hurt, if I came, if I took it from behind, if I sucked cock and liked it!”

Loki felt Stark's gaze on him, watching closely his reaction to Barton's words. On any other day, the demi-god would have let a slight smirk stretch his lips just to see the billionaire clench his fists in anger. But this time, he couldn't bring himself to do it.
The others Avengers all looked embarrassed on behalf of Barton, eliciting a scoff of joyless laughter from him. “I’m sorry—am I making you uncomfortable? How would you feel about being asked this twice a day, every day? Because that was the ratio I got after Manhattan, and I am not going through this again!”

Oh, Norns. All this suffering, because of one rash, impulsive decision. You have heart.

Loki felt tired. He felt so very tired.

He startled when he heard Barton mention his name. “—besides, why would Loki have the exact same symptoms? The problem’s not with me—it’s with Doom’s serum.”

Lies, lies, lies. The world was so easily painted out with lies. Loki loved deceit, but at the same time it arose a secret, droning anger from within him, because—if a few words sufficed to change the Universe, then why bother? Wasn’t it all an immense, terrible joke?

“Maybe we could find a way out of it ourselves, but we’ll need to experiment on you,” Stark was saying to Barton—and suddenly, he was glancing at the demi-god. “And Loki, if he will.”

Loki hadn’t even registered the question, but he answered, “No,” in a flat, final tone.

He thought he’d seen Thor flinch on the edge of his gaze. He didn’t look at him. He didn’t look at anyone. He felt aloof, vacant.

“All right,” Rogers said. “But, Clint, I’m sorry—you must go into psychiatry as well.”

Loki really didn’t like the thought of that man getting his hands on Barton. The archer had gone and met him a few more times, before he was branded and a little while after. Each time he’d returned very shaken and uneasy; he’d tried his best to hide it, but Loki could feel how tense his body was under his hands. And while he was spiraling out of control, Barton had begged Sitwell in his haunted madness—begged him for mercy, for a chance to prove himself.

Nobody should have had this kind of power over him but Loki.

Still, there was nothing the demi-god could do. But once again, Barton proved that he didn’t need his help at all. “Alright, I’ll talk to someone,” he said. “Not Sitwell, though. Coulson.”

Loki was careful not to react, but he frowned inwardly. Philip Coulson?

“Clint,” Rogers said in a low, worried voice. “The agent Coulson is dead.”

“Eh...” Barton winced. “...No. He’s not really dead.”

How about that, Loki thought, feeling very slightly amused for the first time in what felt like years. He quickly glanced at the others’ reactions. Ah—obviously, Romanov knew, too. By the look on her face, Barton hadn’t been supposed to reveal it.

“I did wonder,” Banner mumbled. “On the footage, it looked like the spear pierced through the lung.”

“It was the lung,” Loki confirmed.

He was beginning to shake off his shock if he started again to indulge in such mischievous comments. The various glares he got in return made him smirk; but it didn’t last. Thor was still trying to cross his gaze.
Coulson’s resurrection distracted them for a little while, but Barton couldn’t expect it to last; and indeed, Rogers eventually silenced his team and focused on him again—then glanced at Loki, too, hesitantly. “About what you need... I mean, physically—”

“That’s something I’d rather discuss with Coulson.”

Loki wasn’t so sure; he’d observed Coulson from the Tesseract vault for a while before coming in person to Earth. The man had seemed shrewd and dangerously perceptive, not to mention difficult to read. But once again, Loki had no control over the situation at the moment; he could only let it happen and pretend not to care.

Rogers was definitely staring at him now. “Of course, if Loki needs help in any way—”

“No,” Loki said again.

For Hel’s sake, let them stop trying to help him. Loki was thinking of leaving a clone behind and retreating in his chambers when Thor spoke up.

“Brother, you ought—”

Loki **glared** at him then and snapped with fire and venom on his tongue, “*Shut. Up.*”

*How dared* he call him brother! *How dared* he pretend to care!

No; no; *no*. Loki wouldn’t allow this particular lie to be resurrected. He was done with Thor. He was done with everyone in this room and he still couldn’t understand why he wasn’t leaving.

“If we are done,” he said, cold and sharp.

No one called him back when he walked out.

* *

He leaped to his room and stood breathing in the dark for what felt like an hour. The tangled sheets still exhaled the heavy scent of Barton’s pain and pleasure; it rose into the room like a heady poison. Loki raked his fingers through his hair, then buried his face in his hands, breathing shaky and shallow.

Eventually, the lights very softly turned on. Loki let out a deeper breath, then looked up at the ceiling.

“I didn’t ask for light.”

Jarvis didn’t answer; but he didn’t turn them off, either.

* *

Loki knew he would have to face Thor eventually.
When the door clicked open late in the night, though, he didn't feel ready. He wanted to screw his eyes shut and put his hands over his ears.

So of course, he invoked a dagger in his right hand and stood his ground. When Thor came in, his shoulders sagged.

“No—I will not fight you,” he said in a low, wan voice, raising his empty hands.

Loki stood so very straight it felt like his spine might snap in half. There seemed to be no blood left in his own veins.

“No?” he repeated. “Is it not your purpose, though? Hunt the monsters and slay them all.”

Thor screwed his eyes shut. “You are not—you are not a monster.”

Loki tightened his grip on the dagger. “Yes, I am.” He sneered. “Don't tell me Barton fooled you too?”

Thor stilled. His eyes were very blue and very wide and Loki unsympathetically realized how deeply he must be suffering, too. He did not care. Horror and anger had carved him hollow.

“What do you mean?” Thor said.

“You cannot possibly be this gullible,” Loki murmured. “A drug? You thought I would allow a mortal drug to control me for all this time?”

His arm shook uncontrollably but the dagger stayed still in his hand. “You asked me if I had Barton scream and beg for my enjoyment. The answer is yes—and I did so much worse.”

Thor was shaking his head. “No,” he said. “You're lying.”

But he didn't sound horrified. Rather... weary. “You are playing me again, I know not why.”

“Finish what you started,” Loki gasped. “You have no idea how long I waited for you to do it. Fight me. Slay me.”

“No,” Thor said in a low voice.

“I will go to Barton if you don't,” Loki said in a simmering voice. “I will go to him, and I will kill him!”

“No,” Thor repeated—forbidding it or denying it, or refusing to fight him again, Loki didn't know.

He dropped the dagger and vanished.

Barton's room was dark. It smelted of soap and hot water—he'd left the door of the bathroom open. He was lying on his stomach on his bed, not yet asleep.

Loki came out of the darkness and suddenly pinned him to the mattress. Barton startled and began to struggle, but the demi-god blocked his legs and twisted his arms behind his back. He had no idea if
he'd come here to actually kill him. He just knew he wanted to be here, on top of this writhing body he could break at leisure.

“No—hey!” the archer panted. “You can't be here!”

Loki sneered. “Why not?”

“Tony's monitoring your body heat—he'll know you're here!”

The demi-god crushed his head down into the mattress and hissed in his ear; “Barton, I intend to take you and you have no objections to make.”

A full body shiver rippled through the archer. “I—” he gasped. “It doesn’t—”

No. Loki was tired of him and tired of Thor and tired of everyone. He was exhausted with the world and Barton would just have to take it. To unburden him. And if the load crushed him this time, then so be it.

“Worry not,” he whispered in his ear. “I left an imprint in my floor—enough to fool the sensors.”

Lies, lies, lies—just for the sake of being the one lying.

“What about the sensors in this floor? I—”

Loki twisted Barton's arm so hard he cried out. “Stop thinking,” he growled.

So the archer was worried about body heat. Oh, by all means, Loki would deliver. But first he wanted him helpless. He wanted him terrified and bound for the monster.

“Raise your head.”

Barton obeyed and Loki fastened a dark blindfold over his eyes. The archer instantly stopped breathing. Of course—Hawkeye. He jerked his head on the side to take it off and Loki smirked cruelly, no, I don't think so.

“Stop,” he ordered.

But Barton did it again, so Loki pinned him down harder and bit him in punishment, between the shoulder and neck. Yes—this was what he wanted. The taste of blood in his mouth. Perhaps he would kill Barton.

If he felt like it.

The archer writhed and screamed in his pillow, then went limp and trembling when Loki stopped biting down. His breath was ragged and halting, but he'd stopped fighting.

“Tonight, you are blind,” Loki said.

“Yes sir,” Barton spat through gritted teeth.

Loki produced a Midgardian ball-gag on a whim—the taste of rubber must be very uncomfortable, and Barton hadn't deserved leather. He would be blind; he would be mute. And Loki could finally be a monster without having to worry about the world watching and judging, about being acknowledged or not. He would use Barton like a slave—he would mount him like an animal claiming another. That was all he wanted to be. That was all he was.
He let his true nature seep out, enough for Barton to feel it. The archer stilled in confusion; Loki gripped his hair hard enough to make him wince and hissed, “Spread your legs.”

Barton obeyed—what else could he have done? Loki strapped his crossed wrists together, then let his fingers trail over the archer's body.

He hadn't dressed after his shower, and Loki's long, dark fingers were very blue against his tan skin. It was obscene.

Loki felt like he was sullying him just by touching him, and his basest instincts made him shiver with ugly, dirty lust. To be taken by a Jotun—even without the pain, the humiliation would have been enough for an Asgardian to kill himself. Barton shivered and came out in goosebumps.

Loki kneaded the archer's ass, then pushed two fingers inside him and sent a pulse of cold. Barton jolted and moaned behind his gag. He was obviously on the verge of panicking and this time, Loki found only pleasure in it. Yes, it was so much easier being a monster. So why not? In the end, why the Hel not?

He moved his fingers, pushed them all the way inside, scissored them, all the while pinning Barton flat to the mattress with his other hand so none of his jumps and shivers would be lost on him. Barton had no idea what was happening, but Loki knew that right now, his world had narrowed down to his torturer. He was blindfolded and gagged with a monster about to take him, and he could do nothing. Loki owned him.

His skin grew an even darker blue as he let his disguise slip further off. If he'd transformed entirely, he would have killed Barton—burned his skin until it crumpled up and fell off. As it was, it was enough to cause him dreadful pain. The archer started writhing to escape the cold fingers burning him from the inside.

*Trying to run away?* Loki thought with savagery. *Trying to escape me?*

He realized that until then, he'd thought someone—anyone—would barge in to keep him from committing this sacrilege. But he when he spread Barton's cheeks, when he lined up and penetrated him violently, nobody came to his help.

Barton arched and screamed and started struggling wildly, trying to crawl away; Loki punished him by impaling him even more fiercely, and the archer let out a frantic sob.

“Cold enough for you?” Loki hissed.

He was doing it—he was having sex while in his blue skin, and he felt utterly disgusted with himself and with the foreign sensations coursing through his body. Barton felt almost unbearably hot against his ice-cold skin. Although he was hard, Loki was unable to feel any pleasure. He thrust his hips, scowled when he felt only confusion and almost fear, because *this wasn't his body.* He had expected to reach a peak of bliss by indulging in his true nature, but the panic he'd tried to fight off ever since he'd lost control was threatening to seize him again.

He stilled.

*Seize* him.
What a fool. What an utter fool he was.

He stopped and screwed his eyes shut, breathing deep and ragged. Underneath him, Barton was trembling and begging wordlessly beneath the gag. Loki wanted to hurt him again; but he didn't, because he realized he wasn't hurting him only for his pleasure this time.

He was hurting Barton because he was a Jotun, he was a runt, a disowned son, a traitor and a monster, and this wasn't how life was supposed to be. He'd been told he'd be a prince; a king. And look at him now. Look at this beast, this sentient trash, this utter waste.

He was hurting Barton because of the dreadful unfairness which had struck him since he was born; because of the tiny part of him which had screamed in the dark ever since this split second in Jotunheim when his disguise had fallen.

But that wasn't Barton's fault.

And Loki didn't want to be unfair in turn. He didn't want to be like Odin.

He swallowed back the winter inside his core and pressed his cool fingers against the bite mark in the archer's neck. Barton flinched, but then relaxed when he understood his unjustified punishment was coming to an end. Loki angled his hips in search of Barton's pleasure spot, and he started moving slowly, as gently as he could, and Barton's moan was low and thankful, and his jaws relaxed around the gag.

No. Loki wouldn't kill him. He was worth better than that. He had to believe it, because who else would?

He pulled out; he hadn't come, but his arousal was fading away, leaving him hollow and uncomfortable. Barton deserved his pleasure, though. Loki gave a light slap on his thigh to make him startle.

“Up on your knees.”

He dressed himself, then sat back on a chair and laced his blue hands. Barton obeyed clumsily, hands still bound, gagged and blind. Loki waved his hand and the restraints fell; but the blindfold and rubber gag stayed on.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered in a low voice.

Barton stilled and Loki's grated nerves came to a snapping point—he slapped the archer hard and repeated in a hiss, “I said touch yourself!”

Barton finally obeyed and Loki relaxed. He let the archer pleasure himself for a little while. “Go on,” he muttered when it looked like he was going to stop.

The archer complied and Loki looked down. Usually, he would have reveled in the sight, in Barton's humiliation and helplessness. But right now, he felt the most helpless of them both.

“You are mine,” he said in a low tone.

He wanted to believe it, but his control had wavered more and more ever since that time Barton had
slipped away from him; not to mention Stark walking in on them the day after.

“You will do everything I say,” he said in a harsher voice, which conveyed a bit of the anger he had let wash over Barton moments ago. “Now keep going. Until you come.”

The archer drew in a sharp breath and picked up pace. He was hanging onto Loki's every word and it gave the demi-god courage. “Faster,” he hissed. “Harsher. One day, I will make you torture yourself, Barton.” Oh, he liked that thought, and a brief thrill of pleasure chased away his dark thoughts for a split second. “Today I want to see you falling apart before me.”

Yes. He needed Barton to fall apart for him. Instead of him. He needed Barton to take Loki's pain and distress and helplessness, so Loki could enjoy them, control them, instead of letting them control him. Barton's breath was growing more and more ragged with each pump of his hand.

“You have no idea how you look like, do you,” Loki said in a low voice. “This is what drives you crazy, Hawkeye. I will blindfold you every time from now on.”

Lies, lies, lies. Loki knew that blindness was almost a phobia to Barton, and he wasn't about to use it against him—he liked to play dirty but not to this extent. Truth be told, he just hadn't wanted Barton to see his blue skin. Even if it didn't matter to him.

The demi-god was not above cruelty, though, so he still went on, “Maybe I will strike you with a spell to make you blind, and have you beg to retrieve your sight.”

Barton shivered and swallowed but only stroked himself harder. He was panting through his nose and trembling with pleasure, or fear, or both. All this, thanks to mere words from Loki. But wasn't he faking it to some extent? He couldn't possibly think things would go on like before. Those times, those easy times—for there had been an easiness at some point, in the peaceful way the archer submitted, in the confidence Loki felt, in the trust they'd shared—were gone. Maybe they had been but an illusion. Could they really go on?

“There will be other times,” Loki said to himself. Then he looked up at Barton and went on louder, “You thought Stark could stop me from claiming you as my own? Sort out your own lies, but never forget that the truth is with us.”

Please never forget. Please make me believe it, too.

“If there is only pain to remind you of it, I will brand you again,” Loki murmured.

His threats sounded empty; his words, powerless.

“If you can only say my name when you are screaming,” he whispered, “then I shall make you scream.”

Barton let out a strangled noise and came all over his hand, fighting a spasm and biting into the gag. Loki didn't understand himself. He'd just overpowered Barton in the most thorough ways, and in the end, by the sheer magic of his words. And yet, he felt empty. As though the archer hadn't been listening to him all that time, as though he'd taken care of himself and actually ignored Loki's hollow words.

The demi-god rubbed his temple, then reached out to unclasp Barton's gag. He grabbed his wrist and raised the soiled hand between them. The archer parted his lips, but Loki wasn't done. He wanted some proof that he'd been acknowledged. He wanted reassurance—no—he wanted...

He didn't know what he wanted.
He let Barton go.

“That was all I wanted to say.”

He got up and said over his shoulder, “Now lick it clean. When you are finished, you can take off the blindfold.”

He left without knowing if his order had been answered.

#

Thor was waiting for him in the hallway.

Loki closed his eyes with a wince when he realized he hadn’t yet left his Jotun form. But maybe he’d done it in purpose, for how could he have forgotten such a thing?

“So, did you kill him?” Thor asked.

Loki felt so tired.

“Why are you here?” he muttered. “What do you want?”

“The truth,” Thor said.

He looked eerily pale in the darkness, almost as pale as Loki. Except Loki’s skin wasn’t pale in the slightest right now.

“Odin lied to me as well when he hid your true nature,” Thor said. “I do not hate him like you do, for he is my father. But I do resent him, for when he abandoned you, you were still his son.”

His voice was toneless.

“I was determined to love you no matter what,” he went on. “But so many people gave me proof that you were a monster, while you only encouraged them. And this imbalance almost led me to kill you.”

He paused, then said, “Loki, I cannot love a complete stranger. Give me the truth about you. It cannot possibly be worse than the lie I believed in yesterday.”

“It was not a lie,” Loki said.

“Then why did Barton assure us you had never forced him?”

“He is mind-controlled.”

“No. His eyes are grey and you no longer have your scepter anyway.”

Thor stared into Loki’s own glowing red eyes. “Tell me the truth.”

The demi-god clenched his fists. “I am sick,” he spat. “And so is he, and our sicknesses happen to match. That is all.”

“Sick,” Thor repeated under his breath.
“What would you know?” Loki snarled. “The golden prince of Asgard. So pure, so sweet, so gentle, your love for this woman you only knew for three days! It is in your very nature—and in mine is...”

He opened his blue hands and, looking at them, saw they were trembling.

“I will fight,” he muttered. “I will control it.”

He clenched his fists again and his nails pierced his skin. “But it will still be there underneath. The craving for pain. This is my enjoyment.” He furiously swallowed his welling tears and looked up. “Tell me now that you love me!”

“Brother,” Thor said.

Loki’s eyes snapped up at him. Thor shook his head. “Brother. Remember our wars. Did I seem reluctant then? Did I frown upon my own violence? I know what it is to enjoy power—though we obviously enjoy it in very different forms.”

His wise, sage tone made Loki want to vomit. He burst out laughing instead—he couldn't help it, but his laugh was savage and nasty. “Oh, joy!” he shouted. “Hark, I have been saved! I have a vague, remote, irrelevant kinship with the prince of Asgard! Watch as my reason and senses return! Watch as the blue creeps off my skin!”

He let his skin pale again, faking astonishment and wonder, then clenched his fists again and spat, “How could I be so mistaken? So wise, so selfless, so understanding, the true heir of our flawless king! All hail the son of Asgard, then, and may he beat many more monsters into normalcy!”

Loki shut up and waited, panting, shaking, for Thor to make a move.

And he did.

He sank to his knees, blond hair falling in curtains on each side of his face, as stiffly as though he'd never bent his big body in this demeaning a gesture. Loki felt like he'd been hit by lightning again—yet the lightning wielder was currently bowing at his feet.

“I implore your forgiveness,” he said.

He was staring at the floor like any slave would and there was nothing more cruel he could have done. “You are right. I do not understand you and we are not the same.”

He paused for a second, then said, “But the day I call you monster again will be the day I die.”

Loki took an actual step back. “Get up,” he breathed, eyes wide.

His face scrunched in a scowl and he covered his eyes with his hands. “Get up. You're pathetic.”

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Pathetic,” he repeated in a furious, strangled sob, and Thor must have gotten on his feet since when Loki looked again, he was gone.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and commeting! ^^

Hey, quick question, anyone here didn't read StO?
As I lay dying

No, Loki didn't want to think, because to think would have forced him to acknowledge that his entire existence was spiraling out of control—had been from the moment he was born a runt, from the moment he was found in the snow, from every moment; every second he breathed. The Norns themselves must have cursed him, since he was destined to crave the very thing he could never have. Power—every step he took towards power deprived him a bit more of it.

He didn't want to think, because he didn't know if he wanted Barton or not, he didn't know what was real or not, he didn't know the difference between a truth and a lie and maybe there was none and the thought terrified him too much.

He didn't want to think, because he would have to think of Thor and there was nothing left to be thought about Thor. Because they were both dual. Loki was a monster and a prince, Thor was a slayer and a brother, and they never seemed to be able to wear the matching personalities at the right time. Thor had tried to slay the prince and now tried to be the monster's brother. And Loki didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think at all.

So he went to Barton again the following night.

*\n
The archer was sitting on his bed, turning his back to the door. Loki slipped inside, certain he had heard him; his quiet entrance elicited no reaction, though.

The demi-god padded inside the room, then sat on the bed behind Barton, who stayed still. He didn't move when the blindfold was wrapped around his eyes. Didn't panic. Didn't flinch.

Loki should have understood then. He should have understood even without it—he'd once been so perceptive, able to read Barton like an open book, to know exactly what he needed and when.

But he had lost faith in himself, and he was expecting Barton to do all the work now; he was deluding himself with an easy, effortless dominance, when dominance was all about effort. He wasn't realizing it yet. But he soon would.

He was wearing his blue skin again, if only to reassure Barton as to the heat sensors; hence the blindfold. But of course the archer wasn't really worried about being discovered again, by then. Loki should have understood. If he had known then that Barton had spent the afternoon in session with
Philip Coulson, he might have guessed. But he would learn this later; way too late.

As it was, he wasn't thinking and he had forgotten that Barton was the one who was supposed not to think. He wanted to be only urge, as though debasing himself more could make the pain stop. He trailed his blue fingers across Barton's lips, which parted to welcome them. The burning hot tongue swirled around the digits and Loki smirked.

He got up again and walked around the bed. Barton was waiting, motionless and blind. Loki reached out to grip his hair, in an automatic gesture which didn't mean anything anymore.

But Barton reached out first and, with a blindfold over his eyes, guided only by the rustling of Loki's clothes and the faintest displacements of air, he gripped Loki's wrist.

And he said, “No.”

Loki stood on the edge of the building. The daylight ignored him; the city was clear and distant down below, like a mirage.

Barton's blood was drying on the demi-god's knuckles.

Wide-eyed, staring in space, he wondered what he should do now. He felt as though he'd been knocked out but kept moving, dazed and plunged in a numbing stupor, like the last man standing on a battlefield.

The best way to control the Universe would be to obliterate it and be the last man standing. If he was the only one left, he was the only one in power. Maybe he should kill it all. Destroy everything and then, then, he would be a God. The God. He would be all-powerful and all-peaceful in his complete loneliness.

He began to understood, then, the insanity he hadn't yet reached. He realized that what had happened to him in Odin's cells had been but a hissing fit in comparison with the chasm whose edge he wavered on now. Thanos must have fell into such a chasm before, since he craved the very thing Loki was starting to crave—the end of all things.

(Except Loki didn't think about Thanos. All forgotten)

There was a prophecy, more like a foul joke, that Loki would be the one to bring Ragnarok upon this world. Right now he felt it could come true. He felt he could become this monster. This unstoppable wave of darkness.

He had it in him.
“No?” Loki repeated.

He did not feel like his body had turned to ice. He did not feel like his blood had turned to molten lead. He felt like he had no body at all, like he was only aware intellectually of what passed off as reality.

Barton had said no before. He had moaned no, please. He had implored no, don't. He had sobbed no, I'm begging you.

But this time was different. This time was the flat refusal Loki always dreaded to hear.

“No?”

“I'm not bowing to a coward.”

Loki felt his body return, but it had morphed into black stone in the meantime. He had been called a lot of things, but never a coward.

“A coward, Barton?” he repeated.

Able only to mimic him. To repeat his words. He should have seen then that he had lost every ounce of control he'd ever claimed to possess. But at this point, he was still in denial. He was still trying not to think.


Something exploded in the distance and the blastwave made his black hair twist and beat to windward like a raven's wing. He was standing on the edge of this building and wondering whether killing the Universe and killing himself were not secretly the same thing.

He did not want to stop existing, but his own existence made no sense to him now. As though he had been locked in a dark box with absolutely nowhere to go. He existed, and what did it do? Confusedly, he was beginning to see that there was a thing called Loki which was neither a monster nor a prince—or both of them at once; it mattered not. What mattered was that he had a million names and none of them were accurate. What mattered was that there was a thing called Loki and he had no idea what it was.

The memory of everything he had said and done until then was so petty to him now. He had been pretending like a performing dog, repeating the meaningless patterns he'd been taught, as well as the ones he'd taught himself. But strip it all off and there remained that thing called Loki, and what was the truth of it, behind all those masks? Where was he supposed to go?

“A coward, Barton?” he said in a whisper.
“How else would you call a man hiding from his slave?” the archer spat.

Loki looked at him and he felt like Barton's eyes were piercing him through the blindfold.

“I am not hiding,” he said.

Childish.

“Then let me see you.”

His blue skin meant nothing to Barton, but it wasn't about Loki's skin. It was about how Barton demanded to see the entirety of him.

And this meant Loki had been mistaken from the start. The archer had been sincere all this time, in pain and in pleasure. He had known what slave meant, from the beginning.

Loki had been treating him like a child, like a foolish, ignorant mortal, only to hide from himself that he was the foolish one. He knew Barton couldn't have possibly bet his entire existence on a mere game. It hadn't been a game, for any of them. But the closer he'd gotten from what he'd always wanted, the harder he'd tried to deny it was happening. Because Loki had never been in control before. Now that he could be, it terrified him. Now that he was given the opportunity to rule, he feared he could not do it.

“Who are you to question my deeds,” he said, twisting out of Barton's grasp. “If I want you blind, blind you shall be.”

He sounded ridiculous and pathetic, and he was trying to insist this was just another scene, but of course, Barton wasn't fooled. He wouldn't let Loki delude himself anymore. It was as though he'd waited until then for the demi-god to stop being puerile, and snapped today with impatience.

“Oh sure,” he sneered, “let's pretend it's just a kink and—”

Loki punched him in the face; Barton's upper lip split against his front teeth and splattered blood all over Loki's knuckles.

Loki was astonished. Punched him. He had punched him instead of slapping him, like he would have punched an enemy instead of punishing a slave.

That was when he realized it with full force. Barton was the one in control now. Had been all along, maybe.

* *

The thing called Loki was standing on the edge of the roof; and on the edge of his mind was a question.

Why?

Since control was the issue, then why was it attractive and the loss of it, repulsive? Why was the world hungry for freedom? Why would anyone desire power, when with power came such hollowness, such loneliness, such terrible burdens?
Loki wanted control, precisely because he couldn't trust anyone to control him. Not even himself. Odin had wrecked him from the start. Thanos had used him like a mere tool.

(Too close, too close, stay back, stay numb. All forgotten)

Thor had almost killed him. And Loki himself—Loki... he was the very reason he had suffered so much, because of what he was, and simply, because he was.

To control something or someone, then, could only mean that Loki finally got to decide who endured what. He finally got to relieve himself, to transfer his burden on someone else's shoulders, and have that person carry it for him. But he had forgotten the burden remained his nonetheless; that what he had unloaded on Barton, he must take responsibility for.

He had had a brush with responsibility. He had almost managed to fix Barton after his drop. He had tried and felt he could succeed. This had been the closest he'd been from perfection.

It had scared him breathless and left him weak as a newborn child.

*  

The punch had rattled Barton, but a second later, he started laughing unpleasantly. “Hitting a blind guy. Now that's low, even for you—”

Loki grabbed his collar and tugged him forward so violently he cut off his breath, strangling the words in his mouth. They stayed face to face for a while, panting, and it was clearer and clearer to Loki that he had already lost this battle. Because even though the control was his to take, it was Barton's to give. And it seemed the archer would give it no longer.

“I saw Coulson today,” Barton choked. “Offered me help.”

“Help,” Loki repeated.

Couldn't he at least stop repeating Barton's words like a damn parrot? Surely, he hadn't always been like this, so confused and insecure. As long as he'd kept telling himself it was but a game, he'd been in control.

“Yeah,” Barton said, breath quickening, “so maybe I should tell him everything—”

– and Loki heard maybe I should force you to take your responsibilities, maybe I should force you to take me before others do, maybe I should force you to enslave me like you claimed you would—

“AVENGERS ASSEMBLE.”

They both froze. Barton was grinning, a mad grin which unveiled his bloodied teeth.

“Well, that's unfortunate,” he spat. “You gonna let me go? Or are we playing hide and seek for a bit long—”
Playing, he'd said, and Loki lifted him by his throat and slammed him against the wall, trembling with despair and wrath, because for all his violence he was utterly powerless against this man who'd gutted him open.

“Gonna kill me then,” Barton gasped. “That's another option.”

There is another option, Loki had told him, kissing him for the first time.

“It's better than whatever it is that he have, anyway,” the archer said through gritted teeth.

He wanted everything and Loki couldn't give it to him. He couldn't. He wasn't strong enough.

He forced his hand between Barton's thighs. “Impertinent mortal,” he hissed, and once again he thought he sounded like a parody of himself, and he lost faith even more.

“Gonna crush me?” the archer said in a hysterical breath, “but you won't crush me for real! You don't have the guts! You never go all the way!”

He spat those words in his face: “You lack conviction!”

Loki, the God of Lies, was powerless against the truth, powerless—and Jarvis repeated, like a reminder that he had to decide himself now,

“AVENGERS ASSEMBLE.”

If he kept Barton here, if he kept him from joining his friends in battle, then it would stop being a game for them both. Loki had left things in between for too long—telling Barton he was his slave while nothing had actually changed, except for a patch of burned skin on his back. But if he took that final step now, if he tore Barton away from his life, then Barton would be his.

Loki was terrified to do it. He'd been pursuing this for so long, and now the time had come and he still wasn't ready.

“It's you,” Barton was saying, “Coulson was right, there's still something that doesn't work and it's you. Every time, we've got to start over. Every time, you've got to make to same promises.”

Loki crushed Barton against the wall, but really, he was leaning against it to keep his balance. It was true. Even Coulson, who had only met him once, had seen the truth.

“Come on!” Barton shouted. “You've always known what I needed until now. And you're the only one who can give it to me. Or so I thought.”

Loki should have taken him, should have claimed him, and he wasn't doing anything.

“Can't do it?” Barton panted. “Won't do it? Are you not like me? Are you just playing another game?”

He was demanding it, demanding to be enslaved, and how was Loki supposed to own someone stronger than him, someone who ordered him around? How could Barton force Loki to enslave him? And why wasn't he satisfied with what he had—why did he even want to truly submit?

It made no sense, no sense, no sense at all.

“You are insane,” Loki murmured.

That was the only explanation. But Barton burst out laughing and hissed, “I'm insane? Maybe.
Maybe I am. At least I'm coming to terms with it. You..."

He pushed back and Loki released him, because he wasn't strong enough to hold this frail mortal against a wall. Barton stumbled a little in surprise, but kept going, "...you had a thousand years to cope and you still can't let me look at you!"

He talked like he knew Loki. He talked like he understood his struggles and despised him for them. And indeed he would be entitled to do so, because he was so certain about himself. Barton was all about hitting targets; Loki was a chaotic nebula exploding in every direction at once.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," the demi-god said hollowly.

Barton didn't know him, didn't know what Jotunheim was, didn't know Thanos and didn't know how deep and black the void under the Bifrost was. He didn't know what was all forgotten.

But Barton sneered again and said, "Yes I do. You think I don't recognize shame? Fear? There's something you don't want me to see. I gave you everything. Yet you won't fucking take it!"

And he was right. He was right and Loki took a step back, then two. His breath was silent but ragged and painful, and his heart was going to beat out of his chest and he was scared, so scared, more scared than he'd ever been in his life.

So he ran out of the room.

\*

The edge of the roof.

He had no idea what to do now. What to think. What to feel.

To destroy the world was easy. He just had to stand back and let it happen

(He knew it would happen. Except he didn't know. All forgotten)

and his pain would cease.

He felt himself wavering on the edge of madness, but he was conscious of it. If he fell, it would be willingly, as always.

Was it worth it?

He thought of Barton's hope. Incredibly enough, the archer wanted it. Wanted it all. It was absurd and Loki dwelt on it no further, because it was beyond his understanding. What mattered was himself. Right now, Loki wasn't strong enough to claim this man as his slave. But did he want to?

Yes.
The word burned like a bright flame inside him. Yes. Yes, he wanted to. He wanted to take him and this time, it would be no game. This time, he would take his responsibility. He would break him properly, entirely, tear him apart and piece him together in the shape he wanted.

Because he had it in him, too. He had both possibilities in him, the monster and the prince—but also a million other things. That was the reason he felt so paralyzed—not because there was no road for him to take, but because there was an infinity of them.

The Universe in his cupped hands. Because he had nothing, he could have everything. The range of possibilities scared him, but it was compelling, too. To jump? To rule? To give up? To save this world? To let it die?

The thing called Loki was undefined. He had never wondered why it was so easy for him to shape-shift. Now he saw, in this shining moment of self-awareness; his very core was made of chaos.

And what is chaos, if not order in waiting?

He took a deep breath.

He looked at the city down, so far down below. And he jumped off the edge.

But in the split second before he started falling, he wrapped himself in golden lights and threw himself across the shining stars.
Loki entered his house like a stranger.

He had dreamed for months of coming back; and now that he was finally here, he realized to what extent he'd lied to himself; not only about Barton, but about everything else. He had told himself that he was free and that he wasn't the Avengers' prisoner. But he was, without even realizing it; for he had yearned for the stillness of this place, yet kept himself bound, telling himself he was only bored, lazy. But he'd been blind. Blind to the fact that he was submitting to Barton's way of life because he was too scared of taking power.

Because Clint Barton was the first thing Loki could ever hope of controlling entirely, and to take the leap he'd dreamed about for so long had scared him away. To the demi-god's credit, he was not used to hope. Never before had a true wish of his been answered without being taken away the next second.

Now, he must find the courage to let it happen.

To be amidst the lonely coldness of polished stone was incredibly soothing, or maybe merely numbing. He hadn't realized until now how panicked and frantic he'd grown over the past few months. Here, he could think clearly, and his options were clear indeed. To take, or not to take what was being offered.

To grow stronger, or to give up.

But in order to grow stronger, he had to look back on a specific time of his life, and he had devoted so much time and efforts to erase it from his mind completely that merely acknowledging it was painful.

All forgotten...

He had to remember now.

He kept wandering aimlessly through the rooms. He'd appeared in the library, of course; he'd built it first, under the sunny fields of Asgard. He stepped through the door, felt the engraved spells throw him down Yggdrasil's trunk, and found himself in the dining room—why had he built a dining room, again? He'd been young when he'd crafted it in the great forests of Vanaheim; out of habit, surely,
after Odin had repeated him a hundred times it was the heart of a man's palace. The thick foliage outside only let out a sad, dim light through the window in the sloping ceiling.

Loki stepped through the door again and found himself suffocating with heat and moist. That was the bathroom, because Loki had found this volcanic source in Niflheim and it would have been a shame not to put it to use.

He stepped through the door again and found himself in a small, windowless room—the toilets, of course, just a small stream of water washing down a slope before disappearing into the earth. Those were built under the royal palace of Asgard. Loki had found it funny at the time.

How had he ever been so young?

He stepped through the door again, and there was the magic room. A mere cube of stone he'd carved right out of Yggdrasil's main root in Helheim. Here, the Universe listened with even more attention than anywhere else. He just had to think of something for it to appear. Well—agreed, he usually did even outside the room; but here, the magic he had inside him anticipated his wishes and sometimes surprised him, like the dream surprises the dreamer.

A little boy ran across the empty room to a beautiful woman sitting on nothing in the far corner. She smiled at the child and let him climb on her knees.

"Mother," whined little Loki. "I do not understand."

Loki scowled and made the vision vanish with a wave of his hand. But Frigga's voice lingered still.

"You simply have to trust the Universe to be listening, my son."

The real Loki sighed. He knew this scene by heart, and he couldn't help muttering his younger self's line.

"But Mother, this doesn't mean anything."

Unperturbed by her son's sudden change of voice, Frigga went on softly, "Trust it to be listening, Loki. It is here for you to take. Look."

A blue flame flared bright in her palm, then vanished.

Little Loki reappeared, eyes wide, and exclaimed in a high-pitched voice, "How did you do that? I want to know how you did that!"

The real Loki had said the same words at the same time, under his breath. Really, he couldn't help it.

"I believed I could do it," Frigga simply said.

"But Mother," repeated both Loki and little Loki, the former softly, the latter loudly, "what if I believed I could destroy the world?"

The real Loki rubbed his forehead. He'd been young, so very young. This meant nothing. Thor might have asked the same question.

"Do you believe it?" she answered calmly. "Do you even know what the world is? Can you conceive it, Loki, can you understand it in its every details, throughout the Nine Realms and beyond?"

Little Loki wrinkled his nose. "No one can," he said, echoed by his older self.
Some people could, the real Loki added sadly in his mind.

“But can you see a flame?” Frigga murmured, bringing her son closer. “Can you feel it? It's hot. It's going to burn your fingertips if you're too close. Can you feel it? The tickling heat? Look— it's there.”

They were looking in fascination at Loki's small, perfect fingers.

“It's there, Loki. There is no reason it shouldn't be. Why shouldn't there be a flame?”

Loki had closed his eyes, but still he murmured the words his younger self said hesitantly, “It has nothing to burn...”

“Of course it has. There is oxygen everywhere in this room. There is no reason the flame shouldn't exist. Make it so, Loki.”

There was a green flame dancing above the tiny palm. The child startled with excitement and looked up at his mother.

“I did it,” the real Loki said.

But his younger self's voice didn't overlap this time. He was alone between the four grey walls.

He turned away and believed there was a door—_why shouldn't there be a door?_—which he crossed to return to the more normal parts of his house. He found himself in the vault. He'd built it underground in Svartalfheim, the dead world, the most likely of all to preserve his treasures. But he never had any; the room remained empty.

There was no bedroom. Loki had never built one, because his bedroom was at the palace. Until he fell, and then his house had been out of reach. And afterwards, there had been Earth. Asgard again. Earth once more.

And now, he was back, and he had nowhere to sleep in his own house.

He winced, and decided that he would build the room, right now. And then, his time of procrastination would be over, and he would face what he didn't want to face.

All forgotten, for just a bit longer.

★

Three days later, Loki had finished building his bedroom.

It was quite small and strictly windowless. Low ceiling. A bed, not too big, with plain sheets. No other furniture.

The silence was absolute. The room was, after all, almost a mile down under the permafrost in the northern regions of Jotunheim.

Loki remembered yet again how he had flayed himself in Odin's cells. This was, in more ways than one, the same thing.
All forgotten. Maybe it was time to—

No, not now. He was tired. He was too tired. So he turned into his blue skin, lay down over the thin covers and curled up on himself. And he slept, and dreamed of nothing.

When he woke up, there was frost on the wall and floors. He didn't know for how long he'd slept. He only knew he had slept enough.

All forgotten. But now he really should—

Just one more thing. One more thing, and then he'd get to it.

He sat up and brushed off the white crust clinging to his loose clothes and weighing them down. His blue hands were almost black with how completely he'd allowed his disguise to slip. Had an Asgardian entered the room, he would have died in an hour or so. A mortal would have been killed on the spot. The walls were glistening with ice and the covers were almost glazed over in the slight hollow left by his body.

Loki got up, then opened the door and walked out of the freezing room, through the empty vault which, albeit very cold too, felt amazingly warmer. He discarded his clothes as he went, letting them fall one after another on the floor, disappearing the second they did. Eventually, he found himself naked; only then did he allow his white skin to clothe him again. He pushed the door and stepped into his bathroom.

The water was translucent and nearly boiling hot. The mirrors on the wall were steamed up, as always—but mirrors were supposed to hang on a bathroom's walls, so Loki had left them there anyway. He stepped into the water and pushed down a scream of agony when the heat assaulted his muscles. He clenched his fists, bit his lip, and waited for his body to relax. Then he knelt in the bath and went underwater.

He could hold his breath for a very long time. Almost an hour. Fifteen minutes later, it felt like he'd been sleeping in motherly warmth, like he'd just slept in the coldness of his true parentage.

When he got out of the water, he felt like his body belonged to him again. He couldn't pin-point the moment he'd felt it slip away from his grasp; but the fact was that he had always hated masturbating, and yet he had done it more and more these past few months. Now, those cravings were gone. He could order them so.

“Now,” he murmured—then stopped himself, puzzled. Talking out loud? This had never been an habit of his.

Jarvis, he realized with surprise. It certainly wasn't who he'd expected to miss, but it had been strangely freeing to discuss the truth of his actions, even with something—someone?—who openly disliked him. But now, he was alone. Truly alone, with no one to look at him.

He clothed himself and walked out of the bathroom, then picked up his train of thought. Now. Now, he needed to stop running away.

Maybe he should get something to eat first?
No. No. Now.

All forgotten—no more.

He took a deep breath, then walked into the library to sit cross-legged on the floor, between the stuffed leather chairs, with the big shelves looming over like benevolent trees. This was by far the most pleasant room of his house; probably because he'd built it at a time when he still thought he was happy. He needed every sliver of comfort he could get.

He closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. He would be fine. He would be fine.

Gods, he wished he hadn't been alone for this.

“Alright,” he murmured, as though Jarvis could hear him, again. “Alright.”

It didn't help much, but it gave him the push he needed.

All remembered...

...I could have done it, Father! For you!

No,

Loki,

and he let's go and falls

and falls

and falls and
It had been so dark.

“What do we have here.”

The voice was grating and rumbling, like an avalanche in the distance. Loki felt like his ears were being filled with a black, gooey mud.

“A Jotun runt in drag.”

Something had tugged at his white skin; horrified, he'd promptly fought back. The voice had chuckled with sinister amusement.

“The boy knows a trick or two.”

Boy? Loki had thought, outraged. He'd propped himself up—

And then Thanos had hurt him.

He hadn't hit him, or shot him, or cut him. He had simply—hurt him, simply poured pain right into Loki's brain and Loki had screamed so hard something in his throat had snapped.

Life under Yggdrasil was nothing but darkness. Loki thought he knew obscurity—he'd traveled further than anyone in Asgard, and not every world was gifted with sunlight. This place, though, resembled nothing he'd seen before; not even Hel. Darkness was akin to this place like a candle was akin to the sun, and like slumber was akin to death.

When the few seconds of absolute torture were over, Loki was left where he'd been found, as limp as a ragdoll. His absolute despair was the only thing which pushed him to his feet. If he hadn't just lost everything he cared for, he could have never stood up and faced the being which had hurt him so dreadfully.

But he cared so little about himself that he pushed on his arms and got up on wobbly legs.

Thanos had smirked at him. Loki had gathered his strength to speak—and then he'd been hurt more, so much that he'd probably gone mad for a few days since he didn't remember anything for quite some time.
He was impressed.

He had thought himself a monster, thought himself cruel, but Thanos was more of an abomination Loki could ever be. Jotnar were nothing, compared to the creature which lived in absolute darkness and plotted the death of the entire universe. Thanos loved Death, in every meaning of the word. He loved giving it and he would have loved receiving it. Loki was merely floating on black waters while Thanos was towering a mile above the surface, drinking down the entire ocean.

On Midgard, much later, Loki would imply to Thor that Thanos had showed him the depths of the Universe and taught him everything he knew. This was the truth, but not in the way Thor had understood it. Everything Thanos had taught Loki, he'd taught it in this single moment of pure cruelty, when he'd tortured a creature he'd never met before, without hatred or passion, just because it was there.

Loki didn't know why he hadn't been killed. Luck, perhaps, a terribly twisted luck.

And Thanos was dangerous to him. Not because he gave away pain and death so lightly; not because he was so powerful; but because he allowed himself to be everything Loki tried not to be. Thanos had let him live, like a feral dog kept in a corner and fed with scraps, and his influence had started weighing over Loki and deformed him forever.

On Midgard, long ago, Thor had asked him to spare innocents in New Mexico, and Loki had complied. Now, he killed everything he could kill. He once killed a lost Vanir warrior for looking at him. He decimated an entire platoon of terrified stranded Elves because they had stopped next to the rock he slept against. Loki had once been subtlety and mischief. Now he was only violence and brutality.

It was nothing compared with what Thanos did. What Thanos did, Loki could not remember today, despite his best efforts. This part of his mind had been burned black forever. He only remembered he should never remember.

He knew he had survived.

He had become something else, even more of a monster than he was born to be, and he had survived. Long enough for Thanos to start using him. It wasn't much—throwing more scraps to the beaten-up dog. But one day, Loki had found himself with a scepter in his hands and a plan in his mind. It wasn't so surprising. Thanos had never hated him specifically; in fact, there was no hatred at all inside him, only a terrible indifference towards everything surrounding him. This place had wrecked Loki in many ways, but he had never asked himself, why me? Because it wasn't about him. Never had he felt like a target. Or rather, the entire world was Thanos's target. They were all equals in his all-encompassing will to destroy.

So there was a plan to bring in the Tesseract, and Thanos talked about taking power over Midgard for Loki's own enjoyment, and the thing which pretended to be Loki had eagerly nodded; he could prove himself—show the world how strong he was; and he hadn't anything better to do anyway.
Why not rule Midgard? It wasn’t like he cared one way or another.

But underneath, the solid core of what he was complied only because it meant he was getting out of this place. Away from Thanos. Away from the absolute darkness.

He reappeared in the Tesseract vault, smelled mortals and fear, and a man tried to stop him and Loki killed him, then the next and the next, and the next and the next until he remembered that he was back in the higher branches of Yggdrasil and maybe he didn’t need to kill everything around him. He started to realize then that he’d somehow gotten away from absolute horror; but believing it would take longer than a few seconds and right now, he was still deep within darkness.

Someone tried to attack him with his bare hands. It was so absurdly brave, so laughably stupid—didn’t he know, didn’t he know that everything was blackness and despair? This man was the first selfless person Loki had met in what felt like centuries. And it was so precious, so rare, so laughably beautiful, that Loki decided to take him just to see how long it would take for him to break.

The test was disappointing; mere seconds sufficed. Loki’s scepter killed and enslaved, like Thanos did. So Loki enslaved the man there and he’d promised himself never to own a slave, but the creature he’d called himself back then was dead.

He enslaved Clint Barton, he violated his mind and forced his most intimate boundaries, and it was so much kinder than what Thanos would have done that Loki was sincerely amazed at his own generosity. Had the light made him grow so much softer already? All the soldiers he had killed should be grateful, too. A quick death—how unseasonably liberal of him. When he pinned down a man to a golden table and plucked his eye out, he felt he was almost too gentle. Just one eye! Surely people would laugh at him. He couldn’t understand why nobody thanked him for keeping things so tidy.

Eventually, though, Loki’s haunted state of mind began to change a little after Thor threw him out of a Quinjet in a stormy night.

Thor. It really was him. It was so unsettling to see him there, to talk of honor and home as though Loki was still Loki. And there was starlight—starlight, and trees!

And it was at this point that Loki started to forget.

Because the discrepancy was too big between both parts of his life; he couldn’t reconcile them, it was too much; and if he didn’t want to be quartered, he had to stuff away the darkness, like he’d stuffed away the light until then.

So although Loki knew the Universe was coming to an end, he just forgot about it.

All forgotten.

By the time he'd gotten on the Helicarrier, he was playing his own game. Persuaded that Midgard mattered, that Loki was still Loki. It was easy to pretend, so easy that he forgot he was pretending.
So he took a last run, threw everything he had left in a mad race for a sliver of power, for something which might breathe relevance into him, relevance other than being alive when he should be dead.

Oh, but he failed, of course; he lacked conviction, knowing deep inside that it was all pointless, even though he refused to acknowledge it now. And then he was brought inside Odin's cells, and everything he'd lived through ever since he'd fallen off the bridge burst through him—all this, to end up here, and the irony, the cruelty, the absurdity of it all ripped him apart and suddenly it was more than he could stand, and he screamed and shouted and flayed himself until it was finally, finally quiet again.

So quiet. So blissfully quiet. He never wanted to feel again. It was better this way. Nothing mattered anyway. All would be over soon.

And thus he'd forgotten.

He'd locked the door on this part of his life, and thrown away the key. The world was coming to an end, but there was nothing Loki could do, so he just forgot about it. He focused on himself, on rebuilding himself around the hollow core Thanos had left in his wake. And when Thor brought him back on Midgard yet again, Loki allowed himself to enjoy petty things, because everything was petty and this meaningless world would be ending soon, but he didn't want to think about it, he didn't want to let the thought even cross his mind.

This was not in his lists of beginnings every time he recalled his life to himself. This was no beginning at all. This was an ending; this was the reality of death he'd felt in his very flesh.

And he'd been too terrified, all this time, to remember.

*

Loki got up with stiff limbs, staggered out of the library and into the bathroom. He vomited over the clear stream bubbling down the slope; he threw up, horribly, endlessly, and his stomach kept heaving long after he'd emptied himself.

He managed to reach to the Jotunheim chamber afterwards, climbed on the bed, and lay there, eyes wide open amidst the still coldness, desperate for it to make him numb again.

He stayed there for an entire week.

*

Caring. He should have never started caring again.
He almost thought he wouldn't make it.

He'd lie there, take a deep breath, and plunge inside him once more. Repeating the same scenes over and over again. At some point, he felt like he was physically drowning, gasping for air, surrounded with darkness; he passed out, persuaded he was dying, and was very surprised to wake up on the stone floor hours later.

He winced, gotten up, took a bath, ate something. And then he took the plunge again. He would beat this or he would die indeed.

There were more panic attacks, lots of them; one day he blacked out, and when he woke up, he'd destroyed everything in the dining room, and there were deep bloody scratches all over his body. He plucked a splinter from a broken chair, and carefully picked out the flesh from under his nails. Then, slowly, he got up, repaired the furniture, cleaned the room, healed himself, cleaned himself. And took the plunge all over again.

He really missed Jarvis. It was stupid, but he couldn't help it. He wondered if something similar to what he felt right now had led Stark to create the AI in the first place.

Yes, he really thought he might die. But after quite some time, he realized he was beginning to manage, simply because there was nothing left to break. His body and mind could literally do nothing but adapt; he'd finally painted himself into the corner of his own horror.

He could *think* about it without having his mind torn asunder. He worked himself over for another week, just to be sure. Eventually, blissfully, even the panic attacks receded as he learned to breathe again. All in all, it had taken him almost two months. And he hadn't died.

He'd done it. He felt washed out, and colder, somehow, but he'd done it.

He would have liked to celebrate but he had no idea how, so he did nothing. There was no time anyway. Now that he was done thinking of the past, he could start thinking about the future.

And what he thought about wasn't joyous; the thing was, he was absolutely certain there was nothing he could do against Thanos and the Glove. But the Glove needed six gems to function properly, and the amethyst and the ruby were still stranded, the Tesseract still out of reach, so there was a bit of time left.

And Loki was certain now that he wanted Barton with him more than anything. This was a grossly absurd thought—after everything he'd just recalled, to crave the company of a mortal?
But Barton had saved him.

Loki realized it now. Barton had saved him, like Selvig and the Avengers and Thor and the entire realm of Midgard had saved him, by picking him up from the void. Reminding him that some places weren't made of nonsense and horror and constant death. And Barton had saved him again, by showing him that power could be different from monstrosity. By showing Loki that he could control a living soul without breaking it.

Well. He'd done it only once, really, and Stark hadn't allowed him to finish. But he knew—he hoped—he was able to do it, and he was holding onto that thought like it was a lifeline.

As long as Loki had kept a lid on the darkness he'd lived through, he had tortured himself with petty concerns—such as the Avengers' opinion; so laughable, now that he'd remembered his life in the void. Yes, everything was simpler now. Barton was the single most precious thing of this Universe, because he could take the kind of horror Thanos distilled, and turn it into something beautiful.

Such power, and he didn't even realize.

Loki needed him. If he wanted to remind himself that the world was worth saving, that not everything fell into Thanos's realm, then Loki needed a reminder. Not everything was dark, not even darkness. He needed Barton, and he needed to be Barton's true master. Or he would go mad again.

He'd spent so much time here, sleeping and thinking and refusing to remember and finally remembering, forcing himself to fall down the void again, to encounter Thanos again. He wanted to be brave now, he wanted to have heart in turn, because this might be his last chance to ever do so.

A vague plan was forming into his mind, but first, he needed Barton. He'd decided. He would finish this first and make Barton his slave by the book. And if the world was still here when he was done, well, it would still be time to save it.

Chapter End Notes

*wheezes* I... um... what did you think?
The Midgardian sun on his skin felt like an old friend, but it made Loki even more nervous.

This entire world seemed made of glass—the buildings were made of actual glass, for Hel's sake. How could Thor not grow insane, attempting to protect so frail a place, so short-lived a humanity?

He walked down the street, shifting shape as he went. He had purposefully materialized away from the Tower so he could think up a plan; and so he could walk and breathe an air which wasn't frozen by the immobility of stone. He liked his house, but he also hated it. And after so much darkness, so many doubts and so much fear and pain, and so much horror and self-torture and loneliness, it was a tremendous relief to walk under the blue skies and just breathe the warm air.

Stark Tower was just down the block. Loki shape-shifted into Fitzsimmons—no, just Simmons—holding a folder pressed against her breasts. He couldn't help smirking when he caught sight of his young, lovely face in the mirrors of the hall. He tried to remember how twenty-six years old felt like, but it was beyond his power.

Someone bumped into him, started apologizing then blinked at his youthful features. “Miss Fitzsimmons,” Bruce Banner said, startled. “Hello.”

“Oh—just Simmons, please,” Loki exclaimed, eagerly shaking his hand and beaming and being overall way too enthusiastic. “How are you doing, doctor?”

They walked inside the elevator along with another dozen persons and Loki interrupted Banner's shy attempts at saying he was doing fine by asking, “Which floor?”

“Oh—twelth, please.”

Of course Loki knew R&D was on the twelth floor, but Simmons probably didn't. It was more polite to ask anyway. He shifted his folder under his arm and twisted awkwardly to press the button, then stepped back into the corner of the small silver room, smiling shyly at Banner. “Crowded elevators,” he whispered.

“Tell me about it,” Banner said with a faint smile. “So... Miss—uh, Simmons, to what do we owe the pleasure...?”

“Oh, I'm just here to see Miss Potts, but since I've got you here—I've heard you were studying a new sort of drug and I've been confronted to similar cases in the past so I thought you might want my
expertise, that is if I'm not too—oh goodness—I'm sorry, you probably don't even need help, but this is just something I know so well and..."

“It's—” Banner said, looking a little astonished. “No, it's really appreciated, miss, but—excuse me... This was supposed to be classified information.”

The lovely Simmons gave him a sheepish little wince. “Oh—I'm so sorry, doctor. I'm sure Agent Sitwell didn't mean to spill the beans, but... well, let's just say maybe he wasn't fit to be a level Seven.”

“I see,” Banner only commented dryly.

He sighed. “As a matter of fact, I could use a bit of help. So if you've got something for me...”

Loki's folder was empty. He clutched it to his full chest, and beamed at Banner. ‘Thrilling news,” he said excitedly but still under his breath, as not to disturb the awkward quietness of the elevator. “It's some kind of... sensual... I mean,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “erotic serum, isn't it?”

If there was one thing Loki had learned about Midgard, it was that people speaking with Simmons' accent never uttered the word 'sex'. And indeed, Banner just nodded and said, “I guess you can put it like this.”

“Well, this type of drug cannot result in HPPD,” Loki said gleefully. “You just have to find a way to eliminate the serum and there will be no flashbacks!”

Damn, he sounded like quite the scientist here. He was impressed with himself. Banner's brow furrowed and he said, “Miss Simmons—what if a test subject happened to suffer from HPPD after the drug had been eliminated from his system?”

“Oh, I guess the illusion can linger for a few days, it's not unheard-of, but usually it only takes a few hours for the brain to——”

“No, I am talking in months here,” Banner said, frowning more and more.

“Months? Oh,” Loki said in that lovely accent, “no, no, this would be absolutely nonsensical. When it comes to... those things, the desire is conveyed through hormones, it's true, but the primary decision always comes from the conscious part of the brain.”

“I see,” Banner repeated.

He would run some more tests and discover what Loki had just told him was false—or true; Loki had no idea what he was talking about, although it seemed logical for a sexual fantasy to require acknowledgment from one's consciousness before it could truly take effect. But that didn't matter; he only needed to plant a grain of doubt in Banner's mind anyway.

Because Barton was lying, and it was about time he stopped.

The doors opened on the twelth floor. “Well—that's me, Miss Fitzsimmons,” the doctor said, shaking Loki's delicate hand once more. “Thanks.”

“It's just Simmons, actually, thank you,” Loki cried as the doors closed again.

He let the elevator carry him all the way up to the roof, smiling. He'd forgotten how being a beautiful young woman felt. It was too soft and too warm and too small a body for him to really enjoy the transformation in itself, but the gazes of men were priceless.
When the doors opened, he stepped out and *shifted* again—into the much less pleasant body of Jasper Sitwell. Nobody noticed him. He was not sure Sitwell had enough clearance before he'd met Banner, but the doctor had just confirmed him that Sitwell was indeed level seven. And during the Manhattan invasion, Barton had been positive level seven was the highest of them all, which meant Sitwell would be authorized to access the Helicarrier. Loki could have just teleported there, of course; but the cameras would have caught him, and today he didn't want to be caught.

Sitwell's office was too huge to be on a plane and too artfully decorated to benefit anyone's mental health.

“Come in,” he called when someone knocked on the door.

Fury walked inside with a dark eye and Sitwell instantly jumped on his feet. “Sir—it's a relief to see you. I've made some important discoveries.”

“Did you now,” Fury said, closing the door.

“Yes—you know Barton requested therapy sessions with Coulson rather than myself,” Sitwell said, walking around his desk.

“We've talked about this already, haven't we?” Fury asked calmly.

“Yes, yes, I know we did, but sir, those are not *therapy sessions*. Barton is undergoing... should we say, *mandatory discipline* at the hands of a professional sadist hired by Coulson himself.”

Fury frowned at him in alarm. “I beg your pardon?”

“This has been going for *weeks*, sir,” Sitwell said. “I've asked Coulson about those sessions already and he swore this is about curing the lingering effects from Doom's serum.”

“Doesn't sound like a cure to me,” Fury snorted.

“Yet this is what's happening, sir.”

“Sitwell, are you *sure* about this?”

“Positive, sir. But I don't believe in this serum altogether. Sir, I don't know what's going on exactly but I am almost certain this is about *Loki*. Barton might still be under his control—or Coulson himself.”

Fury frowned in space for a few seconds. Then he looked up at Sitwell. “Jasper, have you mentioned this to anyone else?”

“No, sir. Only you, sir.”

“Excellent,” Fury grinned—and he grabbed Sitwell's collar then *socked* him in the stomach with inhuman strength.

The agent opened a wide mouth and wider eyes when Nick Fury morphed into a much paler, much taller silhouette.
“Oh, Jasper,” Loki purred. “You’ve done your homework so well.”

He let go of Sitwell who fell limp on the carpet. Loki couldn't kill him—he needed him alive, and he'd rather not make a mess anyway, not this time. But hitting this man had been the most cathartic thing he'd done in quite some time.

When he looked up at the mirror behind the desk, Sitwell was smiling back at him. No, he shouldn't smile—a frown was more like him. Yes, frowning and sickly pale, as though he was constantly nauseous. With a bit of glistening sweat on his forehead—there! A perfect copy.

The real Sitwell had been kind enough to nod in the direction of Coulson's office in addition to the very valuable information he'd obligingly provided Loki. The latter adjusted his tie, swiped a hand over his bald head, then walked out the office and let the door lock itself behind him.

*\[\]

So Barton was enduring mandatory discipline. Although the words made Loki shiver with a hunger he'd forgotten for nearly two months now, the thought in itself was a lot less enticing. What if he'd made a terrible mistake by leaving this Realm? Perhaps Barton had found another man willing to give him what he wanted, without the drag of having to cope with past trauma at the hands of a possibly insane and definitely alien enemy.

Well. Only one way to find out.

“Agent Barton?” Loki asked, entering Coulson's office.

The agent didn't look up. “He's in session.”

Right now. Barton was being tortured right now, and Loki wasn't the one doing it. He swallowed back his fury and nausea and articulated, “It's an emergency,” just so Coulson would have no choice but discussing Barton with him this instant.

“It'll be over in...” The agent glanced at his watch. “...four minutes. Please, have a seat.”

Loki was indeed very pleased to have a seat. Coulson serenely flipped through a folder before putting a stamp on it. Despite his worry for Barton, Loki watched him with mild fascination. He'd seen men who'd escaped death before; they had a haunted gaze like the inhabitants of Thanos's realm had (remember, remember, he could remember now, unforgotten)—but Philip Coulson still had this same bland smile and this same calm demeanor. Oh, he was beyond Sitwell's caliber, that was for sure.

He still wasn't interesting enough for Loki to watch him for more than ten seconds. “Mandatory discipline,” he blurted, because from what he'd just heard in his office, the real Sitwell would have been quite brutal about it—and he might as well get to the heart of the matter at once.

A small sigh escaped Coulson's lips. “So you found out,” he said lightly, tapping a stack of sheets and putting it on the desk. “Good for you.”

“You've put Barton through this for weeks,” Loki said in what was only half-faked indignation. “And all under Fury's nose!”
Well, he supposed so. The real Sitwell had sounded like this should be a revelation to Fury. Too bad it hadn't really been Fury.

“That is correct,” Coulson confirmed, so Loki allowed himself more aggressiveness.

“This time, you're going down, Coulson,” he snapped.

Threats were good at the beginning; helped breaking the ice.

“I hope you haven't told the director yet,” Coulson answered composedly. “He has a lot on his mind already.”

“You bet I will tell him,” Loki barked with Sitwell's voice. “You'll never work as a handler again. I'll make sure you're stuck in—um—the Antarctic base, with—clearance level zero, for the rest of your life!”

He had no idea if there were such things as an Antarctic base or clearance level zero, but it could pass as colorful threats all the same.

“Not much sense threatening a dead man, Jasper,” Coulson smiled.

Well, this was a thicker ice to break than usual. Loki inwardly saluted his unflappability while letting Sitwell's face pale in anger and utter, “You think this is a joke?”

“No, but you obviously do,” Coulson said with a hint of coldness in his voice.

Ah.

Finally, Loki had pushed off his mask of blandness—ever so slightly; Coulson was a worthy adversary—and as it turned out, the agent was concerned about Barton's safety. About Barton's health.

Which meant... the mandatory discipline wasn't as fulfilling as it should be. But maybe this was just wishful thinking on Loki's part.

“I'm not the one playing with an agent's sanity,” he said, and Norns, how dull a man to mimic, but he had to think, What Would Sitwell Say—‘you think indulging in his—his sick games will make him better?’

Not bad; aggressive enough, plus he'd get Coulson's opinion on Barton's hunger for violence. But all he got once more was a little smile and a calm voice. “Is BDSM a sickness to you?”

Loki still didn't know what those initials meant, but he knew what they referred to in general. He just scowled at Coulson who went on calmly, “Then I won't ask you what you like in bed.” He replaced a pen on the side of his desk. “It's been two months since Loki vanished, Sitwell. Barton told me everything the very day he escaped.”

Loki didn't know what was filling his lungs, but it wasn't air.

Well—it made sense. Barton must have told Coulson, since the man had reconciled himself with the thought of a professional sadist catering to his agent's needs—but had Barton really told him everything? Everything?

“That Loki enslaved him again?” the fake Sitwell asked.

Coulson nodded minutely.
Loki began to ramble so he could hide his own very true shock. “I knew it, I was right all along, there never were any serum flashbacks, this is the reason Banner is getting nowhere—”

“Yes, very good,” Coulson said a bit dryly, and for a second Loki was under the strange impression he was being scolded for slipping out of character. Coulson’s calm radiated control and certainty, that was for sure. No wonder Barton had put himself under this man’s care after Loki left. “The point is,” Coulson was saying, “I’ve done my homework, Jasper, and I’m not sure you did.”

Loki almost snorted.

“I was a field agent for a mission in Oslo, two years before Barton joined us,” Coulson said, opening another folder. “I had to infiltrate a sex club which covered for X-genes smugglers.”

Loki had no idea what this meant so he fell back onto Sitwell’s default expression—The Repulsed Scowl. Coulson gave another warm, somehow weary smile. “Yes, it was a nasty little business. We took them down, of course; they were sick people, Jasper. But their cover wasn’t.”

What was he saying? That this violent sex club—this BDSM club—was something normal on Midgard?

“Is that really what you thought at the time?” Loki growled, hoping to learn more.

“No,” Coulson said as though he was confessing himself. “I didn’t understand much of it, to be honest. But like I said, I had to do some research lately, in order to protect Clint Barton the best I could. And I think this submission business is starting to make a little more sense.”

The corners of his lips stiffened. “Although the depth of it does frighten me.”

No, it wasn't something normal, or at least not widely recognized as normal; yet Coulson had gone through the trouble of understanding this sickness, just to protect Barton when Loki couldn’t. The demi-god was so strangely touched that he was even more aggressive as to hide his true feelings. “This is not about this BDSM crap,” he barked, and what the Hel did BDSM mean anyway? “—this is about Loki!”

Well, damn right it was about him.

He went on, “Barton was exposed to him for months—” Whoops, was Sitwell supposed to know that? Ah, well, he was enough of a snooper to have found out— “and now that he could finally break free for good, you choose to make it last? He needs to break the streak, for—” not Hel’s “—for Christ’s sake!”

Sitwell was clenching his fists in anger, but really Loki’s nails were digging in his palms with expectation. Think before you answer, Coulson. The agent wasn’t aware of it, but he was undergoing the most serious interrogation of his miraculous life.

“I am not sure you know what he needs,” Coulson said mildly.

Loki gritted his teeth as well. Coulson's talent for elusion was impressive, but right now the demi-god needed to have the agent’s clear opinion on this situation. He needed to know whether Coulson was supporting Barton’s choice or recognizing it as a sickness as well. He had to push more.

“I don’t care what he likes,” the demi-god growled, graceless but it’ll do—“I’m talking about control and how you’re not helping him recovering from deep trauma!”

There, that should bring him to—
“Look who's talking,” a dry, nasty voice said behind him.

Loki's heart stopped in his chest.

He spun round in his chair and just stayed there, staring at Clint Barton who'd just appeared in the doorframe.

Barton. Barton.

Loki hadn't realized how much he'd missed him until this moment. The archer's breathing had this deep quality Loki knew only too well from the end of their nights; he was glistening with sweat, and he was slipping a cuff of black cloth on his left wrist to hide rope marks. He'd just gotten out of a mandatory session. But his shoulders were still too stiff; his arms too taut; his eyes were of stone and his teeth gritted. It was wrong, it was all wrong. It couldn't be just from seeing Sitwell right now—no, no, he was sick to the core, had been for a long time, because something was missing.

Loki remembered he had to breathe, but it was difficult while being torn between heartbreaking empathy and voracious lust.

“How was your session?” Coulson said softly.

“As usual,” Barton said.

How harsh, how raucous he sounded, as though he'd been made to swallow shattered glass. And that look of disgust he was casting upon Loki! “I thought no one was supposed to know,” he spat. “Especially not him.”

“Jasper is surprisingly persevering when it comes to you,” Coulson said.

He is not the only one, Loki thought, still breathless and feeling as though he was being dazzled by sunlight. It was so warm, so painfully full of life after the long weeks of coldness in his house, between the reality of stone and the memory of darkness as he trained himself to look straight at his nightmares.

Barton shut the door with his foot then leaned against it, crossing his arms. He was staring at Loki who had no idea how he was still maintaining his cover at this point.

“You're not telling Fury,” Barton said calmly. “You're not telling the Avengers.”

“Barton,” Loki said, loving the sound of this name on his tongue, like a fine wine—“if you think I'll—”

“Shut the fuck up and listen,” the archer snapped.

Loki flared inside with pride and hunger. Oh, yes, he was unbroken. Sick and worn but still putting up a fight.

“You've always thought I was damaged. Nuts. And you know what, maybe you're right.”

No, Barton, not nuts, only mine, and I will be the one damaging you...

“You should piss your pants all the more, because if I suspect for one fucking second that you're
going to report on me, I'm gonna take you down.” He straightened up. “And I'm the best, Sitwell... they’ll never know what hit you.”

Loki froze completely with utter, entranced delight. So strong, so vulnerable, so cocky. He wanted to stand up and wish his disguise away and fuck Barton across this desk until he screamed for mercy.

He remembered that he was Jasper Sitwell right now, and turned to Coulson in fake indignation—what was probably his worst performance to date. “Really? Death threats? And you insist he's fine?”

“He won't go that far,” Coulson said.

Oh, I am certain he would.

“He's still in the room,” Barton pointed out.

Loki didn't look away from Coulson, but he couldn't help licking his lips. That insolence! Oh, give him two hours and a riding crop...

“You have to understand that the agent Barton does not require your help anymore,” Coulson said. “We do thank you for your work...”

“You can't dismiss me like that,” fake Sitwell spat, because Loki really didn't want to leave this office right now.

“Actually, I can,” the agent said with this hint of threat in his voice which made Loki think Coulson would have been a much bigger help for Barton than whoever he'd employed to torture him. “I am officially dead, Jasper. I answer to no one but the director himself.”

He leaned forward, and Loki leaned back because he supposed Jasper Sitwell would be intimidated—but then his back brushed Barton's body right behind him and he had to keep still not to let anything show.

“I don't think you can win against the both of us,” Coulson murmured, but Loki only felt Barton's warmth behind him and he was truly glad his nervousness could be so easily mistaken for fear. He swallowed thickly, but couldn't help shivering when Barton talked again—and said his name.

“You wanted to get me away from Loki,” he said. “And it's fucking done. Thanks a lot. I can handle the rest on my own.”

Loki turned to him and asked, “Why do you sound like you regret him?”

He waited with baited breath and instantly berated himself. He shouldn't have asked that. This wasn't in character. He should have—

“Because I do,” Barton murmured.

Loki's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that. He had dreamed many things but he hadn't dared to expect that.

“Because he marked me and I can't erase it.”

Barton knew it was him. He must know. Loki himself had forgotten he was someone else at the moment.

But then Barton took a step forward and said with true pain, “You think you can help me? You don't understand—nobody does! You think you can fix me? You don't grasp how fucked up I am, you
“You don’t get it,” Barton repeated in a desperate voice.

Loki had thought he was still keeping it together, but Barton was actually on the brink of unraveling. The demi-god’s departure had torn him to shreds. Loki was sorry but he was also so thrilled, so incredibly thrilled that Barton should need him—and him only—so damn much.

“I’m going to—” Barton said, and his voice was pleading, and hadn’t he guessed it was Loki, really? Wasn’t he in fact begging for him to come back? “I’m going to burst, Sitwell—”

“I’m not S—” Loki began under his breath.

—but then Coulson snapped, “No, you’re not.”

For a split second of shock, Loki thought Coulson had understood, but the agent was talking to Barton. “That’s enough. Now here are your orders. You don’t have permission to talk about this to anyone. You don’t have permission to harm yourself in any way. You have fourteen hours until the next session. Now go get some rest.”


Loki took a deep breath and his moment of folly was gone. He forced his mind to clear and process what he’d just heard. So Coulson was dominating Barton in a sense; he’d understood what the archer needed, probably better than anyone except for Loki. But obviously, he couldn’t carry it out; not in the way Barton needed it. And why would he order the archer not to harm himself—had he done so already? After Loki left? And—wait—only fourteen hours between each session?

Oh, Barton. How deeply I hurt you. How badly you need me.

Him. Barton needed—him. Loki hadn’t believed it before, he had had his doubts, but he couldn’t have had better proof. Slavery was what Barton needed. What Loki would give him.

And this time, it would be no game.

“Now go,” Coulson said, soft. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Sure,” Barton mumbled, and he left without another word.

Loki stared at the closed door for what felt like a very long time, gathering himself together.

He turned back to Coulson. “What was that?” he murmured.

He needed confirmation. Thankfully, the agent was shaken enough to cease being cryptic.

“Mandatory discipline keeps him sane” he said, rubbing his nose. “But sane’s not enough.”

Just what I thought. It was astounding to hear Philip Coulson phrase this out loud. Loki had never
thought someone else could understand.

Coulson looked very weary now. “Please, Sitwell, I'm trying to save my best agent here. Don't make this any harder on me.”

“I just want to help,” Loki said, and right now this was the plain, unadulterated truth.

“You can help by not telling anyone.”

No, he has to tell. This was why Loki hadn't killed the real Sitwell; so he could talk. If everyone knew, then Barton wouldn't have to be torn asunder anymore between his friends and Loki. There would be only Loki left.

Loki thought of Barton's nervous shaking, of the sickly glow of his skin; he thought of how frail this body was, and said, “You have to take him off the field at the very least. He's a liability.”

Coulson shook his head. “No. He's done an incredible work these past months, and you can't find evidence against it.”

Loki said nothing. Coulson sighed and went on, “Being on the field helps him. It's a form of self-discipline. What we must fear is idleness; because even though I know what he needs, I can't give it to him. It's beyond us all.”

Loki was suddenly absurdly, tremendously glad he hadn't killed Phil Coulson.

“It's funny,” the agent said.

Loki startled and breathed, “What is?”

“That what's the most abnormal to us isn't magic, aliens or superheroes, but misfits.” He sighed. “Stop trying to make Barton fit in your molds, Jasper. You'll break him or, what's more likely, he'll break you.”

Loki couldn't have agreed more. Barton was meant to fit in only one mold and it wasn't Sitwell's.

“This can't go on for much longer,” he pointed out.

The state Barton was in...

“I know,” Coulson simply answered.

Yes, Loki was really glad he hadn't killed him.

“I need to make a call,” the agent said.

Loki heard it as the dismissal it was, and politely got up.

* 

He shifted again into Simmons on his way out and wandered in the hallways of the ship with a dazed feeling. He was almost certain Coulson was now going to hunt him, Loki Laufeyson, and make him take his responsibilities. The Avengers would soon discover Barton's lie anyway; the true Sitwell
would wake up and accuse Fury of being Loki, plunging SHIELD into confusion for some time; Loki would just have to walk in and pick Barton up.

And Barton himself was waiting for it. Craving it, so badly.

Loki filled his new lungs and stretched his young body.

Not bad for a day of work.

Chapter End Notes

LOKI'D
Loki was so deep into his day-dreaming that he bumped into someone for the second time for the day.

“Ow,” he said in Simmons' lovely voice, embarrassed smile already on her lips. “Sorry, sir, is this...”

It was Thor.

The thunderer stared at him.

Loki stared back.

“Brother,” Thor breathed.

Loki startled with shock.

Thor grabbed his fragile, young lady's arms and said, “Norns, it is you!”

After the initial second of surprise, Loki was quick on his feet—he grabbed back Thor's arms in a strong grip with a wide, serpent smirk which should have never found its way on Simmons' innocent face; and he teleported them both away.

The most deserted place he could think of was that small town in New Mexico he had almost destroyed some time ago. Thor didn't even seem to care where they were—he clutched at Loki's arms all the more when the illusion of Simmons faded away.

“How did you know?” Loki grinned.

“I saw her a minute ago in—it doesn’t matter,” Thor said in irritation. “Loki... brother...”

Loki shook free and took a step back.

“Brother?” he repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Thor looked overwhelmed. “I... Loki, please, I do not want to fight.”

“You're in luck—neither do I,” Loki said.

They stared at each other for a minute.
“Where have you been?” Thor asked eventually.

“Away.”

Thor looked like he couldn't believe it was him. “I... Loki, I wanted to go look for you, but I knew not where to start.”

“Look for me—why?”

“To apologize.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I am tired of your apologies.”

“Loki, I have not forgotten what you told me,” Thor said. “And I still cannot understand. But it changes nothing to the fact that I falsely accused you of a dreadful crime. And it changes nothing to the fact that I will not disown you.”

He looked both eager and guarded—his expression was so strangely similar to Barton's, sometimes.

“You cannot understand?” Loki mocked. “Tell me, how hard did you actually try? There is no difficulty in it. Picture your beloved Jane tied up. Helpless. For your eyes only. Your pleasure only. Your cock only...”


Loki chuckled and said, “No? How about this then—it is you who are chained to the bed. With your legs spread; your arms shackled. The mighty Thor, powerless and bare, at the mercy of a woman's whims. Oh, she is licking her lips...”

“Enough,” Thor repeated though gritted teeth.

But he'd shivered and Loki had caught that shiver. He smiled, faintly; Thor's fists clenched convulsively, then relaxed again.

“Oh, so you truly do not wish to fight,” Loki said dreamily. “How unexpected.”

“What do you want?” Thor asked, breaking eye contact.

“I want your help.”

The thunderer looked at him again.

“It's true,” Loki said. “What I want to do must be done by the book.”

“My help—how?” Thor asked, doubtful and wary.

“Philip Coulson is going to call you in a few minutes. Tell him you will see him at once.”

Loki turned away and took a few steps in the desert. “Unless I am vastly mistaken, he will want to meet me. You can agree on my behalf and give him this.”

He produced a thin sheet of paper folded in two and gave it to the thunderer, who unfolded it and frowned at the words written in green ink.
“An excellent restaurant,” Loki smiled when Thor looked up at him. “Or so I've heard.”

Thor’s phone rang in his pocket before he could express his befuddlement. He picked up and said, “Phil.” He kept quiet for a minute, then said, “Right away, my friend,” and hung up.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “So you will help me?”

“Yes,” Thor said, albeit he looked reluctant. “I owe it to you. But... are you certain it is you he wishes to see?”

“We have more in common than you think,” Loki grinned.

He stepped forward and caught Thor's arm, then wrapped them both in golden lights to reappear in the hallway of the Helicarrier. People were running about; Sitwell must have been found unconscious in his office.

“Now give us a kiss,” Simmons said with a little girl's smile, still clutching Thor's arm.

The thunderer brushed her off, but still hurried up the hallway towards Coulson's office. She watched him go with a slight smirk; and then vanished again.

The coldness of stone felt good on Loki’s skin. He went into the Jotunheim room, let himself fall on the bed and just breathed. In and out.

In and out.

* 

He was nervous.

The feeling of such trepidation was somehow foreign to him, because every time he'd felt it before, it had been on Barton's behalf. But he guessed this night was all about Barton, in a sense; even though the archer wasn't physically here.

Loki had a weakness for Midgardian formal clothing, it was true. Those tailored suits had the elegance of ceremonial armors, but avoided their cumbersomeness. For tonight, he'd chosen a charcoal grey three-piece suit on a white shirt, with a black long coat lined with green and gold, matching the thin scarf around his neck—his sole extravagance. His polished shoes made no sound on the gleaming floor.

All in all, he reeked of money and the doorman fell for it.
“Sir,” he said, bowing low. “If I may take your coat.”

Loki elegantly shrugged it off, reminding himself not to let it vanish in golden shreds—now *that* would compromise his cover. Tonight, he was a wealthy, respectable Midgardian and he was going to have a fine business dinner to calmly discuss a man's enslavement and torture.

The mere thought made his cock jump in his perfectly fitted pants, and he smiled darkly at himself. He had to watch it.

“The reservation was for...?”

“Lawrence Northman,” Loki said, and the name wrote itself down on the register as he spoke. “And I'll be waiting for a Mr. Philip Coulson.”

“Duly noted, sir. This way, please, sir.”

Loki followed him to a discreet table for two by the window; the glistening lights of the city looked like jewels in the darkness outside. Loki deigned to order a fine wine while he waited, and sipped it distractedly, lost in thought.

“Mr. Northman.”

Loki looked up and smiled. “Agent Coulson. Hello.”

He got up to shake the man's hand, and Coulson didn't flinch—didn't even blink, although the scar on his chest must burn him with the terror of having his near-murderer so close. Loki couldn't help taking a bit of pleasure in that thought; he *was* a pervert, after all.

The agent's shake was firm and pleasantly dry. Loki sat back and Coulson did the same, bland smile plastered over his face like a piece of armor. The demi-god offered him some wine which he accepted with a polite nod; they sipped the blood-red drink, looking at each other.

“You've got a nerve,” Coulson said eventually.

“So do you, dear Philip,” Loki smiled. “You haven't told anyone about this meeting?”

“Well, your brother knows,” the agent reminded him with that affable smile.

“And he let you walk alone into the lion's den.”

“I didn't know they had lions in Asgard.”

They kept smiling at each other. It was all very civil. All very polite. And Loki kind of wondered how Coulson's blood would taste if he ripped the agent's throat out with his teeth.

He shook his head. “Let's place our orders first, shall we?”

“All in good time,” Coulson nodded.

His serenity kept delighting Loki. Coulson was an efficient man; it took him mere seconds to make his choice. Loki just picked a menu at random; he certainly wasn't here for the food.

“I must say, I wish all my enemies were like you,” Coulson said, glancing around. “I've conducted negotiations in much worse circumstances.”

“I'll take your word on that,” Loki said. “And I am thrilled to hear that you came here with a mind
open to negotiation."

The corners of Coulson's mouth stiffened ever so slightly. "Well," he said. "For once I wouldn't have minded using brutal force."

"I'll take your word on that, too," Loki murmured.

Coulson took a small breath, then adjusted his tie before smiling at him yet again.

"It is a truly miraculous recovery you achieved," the demi-god complimented him.

"Oh, it's all thanks to you. Hitting the lung when you could have so easily hit the heart. Such a blatant mistake could either be the sign of crass incompetence, or unbound generosity."

Loki gave him a sharp little smile. "Let's settle for distraction."

Coulson was too amusing to be killed again; but still, the three gleaming knives next to his plate kept catching the demi-god's eye. He looked away with a deep, slow breath. Pleasure and blood really were a bit too closely linked in his mind.

The convenient appearance of the waiter distracted them from the growing tension. They ate in silence for a little while; then Loki sipped a bit more wine and said, "So let's talk business."

"What are we negotiating?" Coulson smiled.

"Barton's sanity."

The room suddenly grew significantly colder. Somehow, while Coulson was still smiling, he wasn't smiling at all anymore.

"Well," he said under his breath. "I assume you already know everything?"

"If you're talking about the hopeless inefficiency of your mandatory sessions, yes. I have been made aware."

"Does this, by any chance, have anything to do with Sitwell swearing that our director attacked him the other day?"

"Such suspicions pain me," Loki said lightly.

Coulson seemed to pale a little, and the demi-god wondered if he'd just realized now that it hadn't been Jasper Sitwell at all on the other side of his desk.

"Alright," Coulson said a bit briskly. "I'm going to assume you can make Barton healthy and sane again."

"It is within my power," Loki nodded.

"And what do you want in exchange?"

"Barton."

Coulson startled a little for the first time of the night. Loki could have smiled, but he didn't.

"Philip," he said in a low, elegant voice as he sliced a piece of foie gras. "There is no Gordian knot to be cut; this isn't a deal with the devil. The only way to make Barton healthy again is in fact to
place him under my responsibility."

“I don't see why I would trust you on that,” the agent said brutally.

“Ah—I'd presumed as much,” Loki said. “But don't you trust Barton himself?”

Coulson stared at Loki with perfectly bland features. “He needs me,” the demi-god said. “You must be aware of that, or you're not as intelligent as I thought.”

“Clint Barton has always been one to make rash decisions which usually turn out to be right,” Coulson admitted. “But I hope you'll forgive me for having to try a bit harder with this one.”

“I can see how my interest might seem confusing—”

Coulson actually laughed out loud. “You? Oh, no—you're as clear as day, Mr. Northman.”

Loki blinked. He'd been called many things, but never that. “Why, enlighten me then.”

“Well, obviously, you're a Dominant and a sadist with a superiority complex, an inferiority complex, and quite considerable daddy issues,” Coulson summed up.

Loki considered stabbing him through his right auditory canal, then decided against it—but only barely. He realized he'd glanced at his knife again only when he saw that Coulson had caught him doing it.

The agent smiled and said, “The funny thing is, I don't think you're lying when you say you like me.”

“Like is a bit of an exaggeration.”

“But you haven't killed me,” Coulson pointed out. “Not this time, even though I can tell how much you want to.”

Loki let out a pressured breath and slicked his hair back with both hands, before giving him a razor-sharp smile. “Well, you caught me there.”

Coulson wasn't flustered in the slightest. “You need my help,” he said. “And you respect me enough for asking nicely.”

Loki stared at him, unmoving.

“You want Barton, obviously,” Coulson said. “But asking me? You want—my permission? You're trying to convince me; why? Why not just walk in and take him, like you could have done the other day—because it was you the other day, wasn't it?”

“You should know,” Loki said, not bothering to answer that last question, “that I intend to take him however this conversation ends.” He took a deep breath. “But indeed, I could use your approval; it'd ease the transfer greatly on Barton's part.”

“He's not mine to give.”

It was Loki's turn to laugh. “Of course he is. I'm willing to admit I was generalizing in Stuttgart; not all Midgardians are made to kneel. But you're equally wrong in believing the opposite. Whether you like it or not, freedom is not in Barton's nature. He is made to be ruled. To be owned like a dog. And right now, you are his master.”
Coulson pinched his lips, but didn't say anything.

“You're clever,” Loki approved. “It is a good thing that I left him in your custody, but you're not ready to go all the way, which is understandable enough. But for the sake of his sanity, Barton must accept his own nature. He's on the brink of resignation already; all he needs is a good push and a tight leash. And I happen to know my way around slave training.”

“Stop,” Coulson hissed through gritted teeth.

He was the one clutching at his knife now.

“Stop talking about him like that.”

“Well, Agent Coulson,” Loki said lightly. “Not talking about it won't make it go away.”

The agent appeared to realize he'd just unwillingly displayed an emotion; he swallowed back his anger and started eating again. After a little while, they were done with the *entrées* and the waiter carried away the empty plates.

Coulson exhaled deeply. Loki raised an eyebrow, waiting.

“Look,” the agent said eventually. “I'm willing to admit there's truth in what you're saying. He does need something I'm not able to give. But Clint Barton is not an animal to be sold into taming.”

“He'd disagree.”

“Is that really what you think of him?” Coulson challenged.

Loki would have liked to say yes; it would have been easier for him, actually, if he'd been able to regard Barton as nothing more but a pleasant pet.

“No,” he admitted. “He's a lot more.”

Coulson appeared to calm down a little with those words. There was another pause during which the main course was brought on the table. Loki had no idea what it was; it smelled delicious.

“You don't just want him,” Coulson said. “You need him. Maybe more than he needs you.”

If Loki didn't kill him right now for voicing *this* truth, he could never decently hurt this man ever again. He took a deep breath, grabbed his knife.

And sliced his meat without a word.

The strain in Coulson's voice made Loki think he actually knew how great a risk he'd just taken.

“We can find common ground then,” the agent said. “If I paint you as an oversized, capricious child, I can talk Fury into sending Barton on a life-time mission to satisfy you, so you won't destroy half a city with every other hissy fit.”

Loki smirked in the corner of his mouth. “What a pleasant way to phrase it.” He took a small bite. “It might work indeed.”

“But you don't have my blessing,” Coulson said. “Not until Barton confirms me that this is what he wants.”

“And when he does?” Loki said under his breath.
There was a silence.

“There then I guess he’ll be legally yours.”

Heat flared between Loki’s legs again.

He licked his lips, then looked up from his plate and smiled. “Well. It seems like we’ve reached an agreement.”

“The Avengers will put up a fight.”

“Oh.”

Coulson looked hesitant; and of course, he still couldn’t trust the man facing him. Loki’s smile widened. “Trust my cravings, Agent Coulson. Trust their intensity.”

He put his knife down; he was done eating.

“And mostly, trust Barton’s.”

* *

Loki was walking down the banks of Harlem River; somehow, running water helped him work on his patience, and this was the best he’d found here and now. Coulson had gone back to meet Nick Fury and expose his and Loki’s plans.

Or maybe he’d gone back to betray Loki and take Barton away in a place where the demi-god couldn’t possibly reach him. It mattered not; the demi-god would end up having his way even if Coulson didn’t seize the chance to do this right. Loki had waited for two months; he could be patient for a bit longer, especially near the large river which flowed down like a blade of silence cutting through the neverending roars of cars and buses. He’d stayed in his elegant coat; for some reason, it amused him to wear it out of context, along the muddy banks of the dark river running through the city.

Strangely enough, he was convinced he could trust Coulson. He couldn’t be absolutely certain of it—because, let’s be honest, he could have sounded a bit less murderous at dinner. But on the other hand, he hadn’t wanted to hide his will to enslave Barton, with the amounts of pain and humiliation it implied. He’d been sincere with Coulson; and no matter his level of horror right now, the agent couldn’t deny that Barton needed something, and that this something was very likely to be Loki Laufeyson.

So the demi-god was waiting, toying with the silver phone he’d bought especially for the occasion. He didn’t mind waiting; he wasn’t torturing himself anymore with raging thoughts of helplessness this time. He did not depend on Coulson, but he was willing to wait, if it meant he got to do this right. To be officially sold into slavery would help Barton greatly into knocking his own mind into shape. He’d been willing to do this; he’d put an end to his thoughts of helplessness. He didn’t need it; being taken away would upset him. He would fight and rebel and panic. Loki would have to break him then, harder than ever before. To be implacable as to show him the way—the only way.

The thought made him breathless with both excitement and trepidation. Could he really do this right? He’d done a lot of progress in the past two months; he had erased his own doubts and faced his own
fears. But still... he was so desperate for this to work.

And how could such an oxymoron as willing enslavement could ever work? The mere thought of it was ridiculous.

Loki sighed when his phone rang in his pocket; he picked up, gazing at the darkened river.

“Hello.”

“I've talked to Fury,” Coulson's voice said, bland and dry.

Loki didn't doubt for a second that he was being recorded.

“And?” he said.

“He said it might work.”

Loki chuckled. “You're amazing, Philip.”

He could feel Coulson's unease at such display of familiarity for all of SHIELD to hear. “...You're being too kind.”

“No,” the demi-god said lightly. “If truly you managed to talk your director into enslaving his best agent and selling him to his arch enemy, amazing is not too kind of a word.”

“Okay, let's cut the crap,” a much different voice said.

Loki grinned in the dark. “Director, hello. How are the kids?”

“What do you want with Barton?” Fury asked.

Oh, he hadn't Coulson's elegance, that was for sure.

“I want nothing with him,” Loki said. “I want him. And the mere fact that I am telling this to you, instead of kidnapping him without a word, should be telling enough of my goodwill.”

“You call that goodwill? All this time, you pretended to be our prisoner just because you had an affair with him?”

“I couldn't have put it better myself.”

“And what happens when you get tired of him? I'm not sending Barton to the slaughterhouse just because you think he's a good fuck.”

“Director,” Loki said, in such a manner that the threat in his voice couldn't be ignored. “I will take Barton with me whatever happens. I am offering you a chance to get something in return.”

There was a silence.

“And what would that be exactly?”

Loki sighed. “You haven't listened to Coulson at all, have you. Director, I'm offering you peace.”

Another silence, much heavier.

“Peace,” Fury repeated.
“It's simple,” Loki said. “Clint Barton is the best thing this planet has to offer. Give him to me and I'll leave you alone.”

“He's not that good-looking.”

“Oh, Nick,” Loki sighed dreamily. “The things you don't know.”

There was yet another pause.

“And what's in it for Barton?”

That was easy. “Everything he ever wanted.”

Silence, again. Loki started tapping his fingers against the phone.

“This isn't a call I can decently make,” Fury said eventually.

“Then let Barton make it. The Avengers have probably discovered his lie about the drug by now; they'll cast him out. I will be here to catch him. Ask him the question yourself then.”

“That's not the point. We don't do slavery here, Mister Laufeyson.”

“Then why shouldn't you let him decide for himself?”

He waited again, but there was a shuffling noise at the other end and then Coulson's calm, clear voice again.

“Are you still there?”

Loki smiled. “Definitely.”

“Please meet me on the roof of Stark Tower in five minutes. One way or the other, it's time to end this.”

“Oh,” the demi-god said softly, “I couldn't agree more.”

He hung up and stared at his phone for a few minutes, smirking a little. Then he straightened up and casually tossed it into the dark water.

It was time indeed.
What didja think? :D
“Hello again,” Coulson said blandly as he got off the Quinjet. “I see you've changed clothes.”

Loki's suit had morphed into full armor; the spear in his hand wasn't glowing blue, but its blade was glinting with sharpness.

“It seemed more fitting, somehow,” he said.

“But maybe that's something you actually need,” Coulson noticed like it was nothing.

Anger coiled in Loki's stomach and his fingers tightened around the spear. “What are you implying, Philip?” he said lightly.

Coulson was a brave man, but also a smart man. “Only that the Avengers might put up a fight,” he quickly said. “Better be prepared.” He readjusted his tie—well, there: Loki wasn't the only one relying on appearances. Coulson was one to talk.

“Alright, we should probably go,” the agent said.

The demi-god raised an eyebrow as they turned away to walk towards the doors. “I was expecting your beloved director to utter a few last threats.”

“Oh, he's here with us,” Coulson said, tapping his ear.

Loki just grinned as the doors opened. “The more the merrier.”

“Hello, Jarvis,” Coulson said as they walked inside. “Code 42A17; I'm here with a friend.”

“Missed me, voice?” Loki called.

There was a pause, then: “Yes,” Jarvis said. “You've been missed.”
For all the blandness of his voice, Loki was surprised to find that the AI's words sounded much more sincere than Coulson's mock designation of “friend.” Of course, Coulson would only hear it as further evidence that Barton had been wilting in Loki's absence, which was good. But Jarvis being so vague again...? No, this was him telling Loki he'd missed him. Somehow. Which also meant he was definitely a lot more intelligent than even his creator gave him credit for.

And Loki was the only one he'd trusted with that fact?

“I missed you too,” the demi-god smiled, and for all his perspicacity, Coulson probably didn't realize he wasn't being ironic either.

“Jarvis, would you mind assembling the Avengers?” the agent asked.

“Already done, sir. They're currently in the R&D level.” Once again, Loki was convinced he was the only one to hear the underlying strain in the AI's voice when he added placidly, “Hurrying down might be a good idea.”

“Well,” Coulson said, slightly frowning. “Let's do that.”

Loki remembered what he knew; R&D was on the twelth floor, and they were currently seventy stories up. An elevator ride would take several minutes.

Several seconds would have been too long already.

“Agent Coulson,” Loki warned him politely—then he wrapped an arm around the man's waist and shrouded them both in scintillating lights.

* 

They reappeared in an empty, secondary lab and Loki let go of Coulson, who stumbled away from him with a somehow unsteady gait. He wasn't panting or displaying any evidence of fear, but his eyes were just a bit too wide and Loki knew it wasn't because of the dark.

“My apologies,” he said.

Coulson sucked in a sharp breath. So he was still afraid of Loki; just extremely good at hiding it. The demi-god wasn't sure whether he wanted to push it or back off, but then a voice was heard through the ajar door and they completely lost interest in each other.

Barton.

“Guys, I didn't mean—”

“To lie?” a woman cut in, cold and angry.

Oh, the Widow. So they had found out; Loki's seeds had bloomed into flowers of doubt in Banner's mind.

“If you don't have serum flashbacks, then why the mandatory sessions?” she went on.

Loki quirked his eyebrows in approval. “You could have done a better job at hiding it,” he whispered in the dark to Coulson.
“Between the two of us, I'm hardly the one who screwed up the most,” the agent replied flatly.

Loki just sort of gaped at him in such astonishment that he forgot even to be offended.

Barton's voice changed, as though he was turning away and leaving.

“If you think I'm going to stay around for this bullshit—”

“You're not going anywhere, Clint.”

Now that was the Captain. They all sounded fairly mad at him.

Good.

“So I've stopped being a poor little rape victim now?” Barton was saying. “I've turned into Loki McDoom?”

“Speaking of Loki,” someone else said—Stark, this time. “What did I see this day? It wasn't rape.”

Coulson glanced at Loki. “Stark's the one who walked in on you?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Loki answered in a soft voice, peering through the slit even though there wasn't much to see.

“And he didn't kill you?”

“He tried.”

Coulson didn't add anything else.

Stark was still talking. “It wasn't a drug either,” he said. “So what was it?”

“You want to know what it was?” Barton growled.


Loki expected many answers, not all of them disappointing. He didn't expect Barton to flat-out say: “It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Only the keen awareness of Coulson next to him kept Loki's features from expressing what he felt.

Instead, he glanced at the agent and gave him his nastiest, sharpest grin. “How's that for proof?”

Coulson pinched his lips and didn't answer, staring intently through the crack.

“The best thing,” the Captain was saying. “Clint, could I see your eyes?”

And then Barton exploded.

“They're fucking grey!” he shouted. “And do you want to know the truth? They've always *stayed* grey underneath! People think I don't remember what happened during the mind-control, but I do. I told Tasha when I woke up. Maybe you didn't pay *attention*, but I told you. You asked me if I knew what his plan was, and I didn't tell you I couldn't remember, I told you *I didn't ask!* You wanna know why I didn't? *Because I didn't care.* Because I didn't want to ask. Sitwell was right this whole
fucking time.”

“Now, this plays against you,” Coulson muttered.

“Oh, Philip, please,” Loki smirked. “Now you're just being a sore loser.”

“I never got over Manhattan,” Barton spat. “I never got over how right it felt.”

Loki closed his eyes. Now this—this was probably a blow to the heart for Coulson and all the Avengers. But to Loki, it was like the sweetest of all balms. If Barton could rationalize Manhattan—analyze it and discover the truth about his deepest feelings, beneath the horrific memory of his violation...

...then he was even stronger than the demi-god had thought. He took a deep breath and reopened his eyes.

“Did it feel right trying to kill me?” the Widow asked.

Oh. Now that was an episode Loki hadn't heard about. He felt both amazed and slightly appalled.

“No,” Barton was saying, in a desperate voice, like his world was falling apart and Loki wanted to jump out in the light and catch him—“no, no, no, Nat, I love you. You're my oldest friend. But it felt right—not to think. Not to think.”

Loki was the only one who knew what he meant. Barton wasn't speaking of mindless stupidity; but of quietness. Of unburdening, only if for a short time.

“You're worth better than that,” Stark spat, and of course they didn't understand. The crowd in Stuttgart hadn't understood, either. It was such a subtle, rare thing.

“What if I don't want to be better than that,” Barton muttered. “Look... we fought him. We stopped him from enslaving Earth, and it was the right thing to do.”

He audibly swallowed. “But what if I don't want to be free? What if I want to let him win over me—only me?”

Oh, he was perfect. Oh, yes, he was absolutely perfect. He was willing; but he still wanted Loki to win over him.

Loki could win. This time he could win. He was burning to do it now, to step out in the light and reach out to take him. Bring him down. Hurt him. Humiliate him. Until he submitted and thanked him for it.

“Clint, listen to yourself,” the Captain said, and he didn't understand, but Loki did, he was the only one—

“Are you listening?” Barton exclaimed, so despaired, like a trapped animal, because they just wouldn't listen, “are you even trying? I'm telling you it's my decision! I thought about it. Is it so unnatural, wanting to let go?”

Loki thought of himself. I could have done it, Father. Dangling over the abyss and ready to let go.

Unnatural, no.

And suddenly Loki couldn't stand waiting in the dark any longer. He'd been civil enough; Fury had more than his proof. The days of pretending for SHIELD’s sake were over. He wasn't playing
He was polite enough to mumble a warning. “Coulson—”

“Just a second,” the agent said. “Please. Let them finish this.”

“So let me get this straight,” Stark growled, full of righteous, ridiculous indignation, *poor fool, you don't get a thing*—“you're just tired of your responsibilities? You want someone else to take charge? But you're a fucking hero, Barton! That's what we do—killing ourselves for everyone else! You don't get to be lazy! You don't get to take the easy road!”

Loki pushed Coulson aside and shoved the door open to stride out in the main lab. *Lazy. The easy road.* No, he would not let such insults stand. The room was only dimly lit and nobody saw him, focused as they were on Barton who was clenching his fists and yelling, “The easy road? The easy road, Tony, was telling myself that I was stronger than that! That I was *normal!* But truth is, I've always wanted to kneel.”

Loki came to a brutal halt. *Always.* The scales had fallen off Barton's eyes. He was ready to be taken. And oh, how Loki was, too. He took a deep breath which made his nostrils flutter, then started walking again, silently, slowly, as though in a dream. Barton still wasn't seeing him. No one was. It was like taking his last few steps before entering the stage.

“And I don't think admitting it to myself—to you—qualifies in any way as the fucking *easy road!*” Clint shouted, body taut, fists clenched, standing in a circle of light.

Loki entered that circle like an apparition.

“Excellent,” he called.

Barton stiffened and spun round.

It took everything Loki had not to look at him. If he did look, he would just rip off Barton's clothes and fuck him on the spot until he was screaming and sobbing. He could have—just to see the look on the Avengers' faces—but he didn't. Barton didn't deserve such an humiliation. He'd tried so hard. He'd struggled for so long.

So Loki just grinned, and suddenly it felt like Stuttgart all over again. He wasn't himself; he was in character, and this character he loved to play. “Avengers,” he saluted them. “Did you miss me?”

“Fuck you,” Stark spat. Oh, he wasn't Jarvis. How disappointing all fathers turned out to be. “Get away from him!”

Loki almost laughed. Get *away* from Barton? No, it was too funny.

“You won't fool us with any serum bullshit this time!”

Even more amusing. Of all lies Stark could have picked, he'd just chosen the only one which precisely *wasn't* Loki's.

“It did take you a very long time to understand,” he smirked, thoroughly enjoying himself. “I was growing bored.”

He noticed that although he must have been the first to actually understand, Banner wasn't among them. That was probably for the best.
“You were—you were waiting for them to figure it out? But why?” Barton breathed.

“I am talking,” the demi-god said sharply. “Know your place, Barton.”

The archer didn't say anything but in the corner of his eye, Loki saw him shiver, and he heard his sharp intake of breath. He had to fight away a nasty little smirk. Oh, yes. You know I will shatter you and you can't wait for me to start.

“He's not your slave,” the Captain growled, ever so righteous.

Loki could have kissed him. “Actually, he is,” he said with the darkest joy. “Want me to prove it?”

Everyone froze during a heartbeat. Loki kept staring right at Stark and ordered, “Barton—on your knees.”

And then it was his turn to hold his breath.

Would Barton do it? It didn't matter, Loki told himself—it didn't matter, even if he didn't, Loki would take him and break him all the same, but still—still, this would be the ultimate proof for Coulson—but Loki didn't care about Coulson, he just wanted to know, this was Barton's choice, in front of all his friends, would he kneel, would he choose Loki over his old life, after all the things he'd just said, what would he—

There was a flutter of clothes; Loki stayed still, barely breathing, and then he couldn't help it—he glanced down and Barton was kneeling.

Openly. Publicly.

Loki looked up again and bit the inside of his cheek until he pierced it. Coppery blood overflowed his mouth but it was a small price to pay to stay in control of himself.

With a tremendous effort, he forced his gaze to focus again and oh, the Avengers' faces were to die for.

“Clint,” Rogers said, lost and confused.

His pain and shock were the most delightful thing Loki had ever tasted—he could have fed upon it for the next century. He is mine. For all to see.

“You Midgardians have such misplaced concerns,” he smirked, barely containing what would have been quite unsettling peals of laughter.

He gripped Barton's hair and twisted it hard enough for the tension in his own fingers to ease down a little bit. The archer almost moaned; Loki felt himself throb hard. It felt so good just to touch him again. He wanted it. They both wanted it so badly.

“Barton, for example,” Loki went on, marveling at his own apparent nonchalance, “kept clinging to the illusion that he had something to protect in this world. That he owed it to you. Even after I left, he struggled against himself in the sole purpose of serving his beloved team.”

He looked at them, one by one, and his features morphed into mock surprise. “Now—why could he not he serve me instead? Is it such an illogical thought?”

“We're not slave masters,” Natasha spat.

“And that is your mistake,” Loki grinned. “You should have embraced it.”
Barton shivered in Loki's unyielding grip and the demi-god felt his own smirk grow even more feral. *That's right, Barton. You're just aching to be put in your place. How wonderful that you should see it.*

“Why are you even here?” Stark growled.

Loki openly laughed at him. “To see the look on your face, mainly.” Ooh, *let's scare them.* “I never did repay you for that blast in the eye...”

He jerked Barton's head back so hard his neck cracked and they all jolted in the same panicked way. “*Don't—*”

Those idiots. What did they think? Loki knew every single crack of Barton's body from top to bottom. If he hadn't injured him, it meant he wouldn't.

“Why not?” he asked, because he could. “What use do you have for him anyway? You will not let him on your team anymore; not after his confession.”

This was something *Barton* needed to hear, mostly. He had to understand that his life was over. Slavery wasn't just a word. He would suffer; he would regret; maybe he would implore to be freed, claim he'd changed his mind. But this time, Loki wasn't letting him go.

“He's our friend,” the Widow protested.

She sounded so childishly lost (*love is for children*) that Loki felt for her—just for a split second, but it was worth mentioning.

“A slave has no friends,” he said. *Do you hear, Barton?* “Only a master.”

The demi-god brutally let him go and looked down at him. He'd taken out enough of his excitement on the Avengers to stare right at him now. *Now confirm me that you heard what I just said.* “Is it not better this way, *Hawkeye*? Truly, you are unfit for the art of lying. To hide yourself tore you apart. But today I offer you the truth. Should you not be thanking me?”

Barton swallowed and just nodded. Well—at least he'd paid attention, but oh, he'd grown untamed in Loki's absence. He was in for a long, painful reminder when this conversation was over.

In the meantime, Loki simply set his spear under his chin and reminded him elegantly, “*The rules, Barton.*”

The archer shuddered, swallowed, uttered, “Thank you.”

It was *so fantastic* to humiliate him like this, in front of an audience—and not just any audience—so fantastic, that Loki almost didn't notice Stark shooting at him. This time, though, he wasn't in shock and he managed to deflect the blast at the last second. Itexploded behind him and he felt the heat of it on his back through the leather of his armor.

He let out a cheerful laugh and grinned, “You shall find it more difficult to harm me when I actually fight back.”

“We're taking you down, asshole,” Stark spat, and the monster inside Loki growled, “*Are you?”* and things could had taken a dreadful turn then if it hadn't been for...

“Please, don't.”
That bland voice.

Loki had completely forgotten Coulson was still hiding in the other room.

“Jesus fuck!” Stark choked.

Oh—right, they hadn't even seen him alive until then! Talk about an effective distraction. This man really had a perfect sense of timing.

“Hi,” he said with a mild smile, as though the room wasn't full of supernatural people ready and willing to violently murder each other. “Long time no see.”

He took a step forward. “I wished we could have discussed this around a cup of coffee” he said. “But we never seem to get a break, don't we? Not even in death.”

He smiled at Barton, and Loki shouldn't have allowed the archer to look up; but to be fair, he hadn't technically claimed Barton yet. So perhaps he could leave it for this time; after all, it was better to give Barton closure, and closure was something Coulson was exceptionally skilled at.

“Phil,” the archer panted, absolutely thunderstruck. “What the—”

“Oh, Loki and I have an agreement,” Coulson said blandly.

“Well, sure, Loki guessed their alliance wasn't indeed all that likely considering past history.

“Yes,” Coulson said. “I sold you to him.”

Even Loki's breath was taken away. The next second, he grinned and mouthed, nicely put.

Coulson gave no visible sign he'd noticed or understood that. But his hands trembled for a second, and the demi-god wondered at the Avengers’ inability to realize just how torn, how panicked, how desperately anxious Coulson was.

“Phil,” the Widow uttered.

They all turned to her for some reason. “Phil, what the fuck.”

Coulson smiled, and he looked weary; and if Loki hadn't been crazy with desire and monstrous urges, he might have felt a tingle of regret for what he was about to do—abduct Barton and hold him in captivity to torture and brainwash him until he was shaped into an obedient slave. The idea of it made him breathless with lust. Oh, he would have to be thorough and precise in this uprooting; work Barton over until he was bent to fit Loki’s exact desires.

“If we can all stop to try killing each other for a few seconds,” the agent said, “maybe I can explain.”

“Sure, as soon as Clint gets his ass over here,” Stark hissed.

Loki rolled his eyes and took a step forward so the archer would be kneeling right at his feet. “Barton stays where he is.” And how.

“Tony, shut it,” Rogers snapped. “Coulson, explain.”

Ah, nothing like a leader's efficiency.
“It’s very simple” Phil said calmly. “While Barton here apparently qualifies as what is called in certain circles a *sub* or submissive, Loki Laufeyson possesses a pathological need for control.”

**Pathological?** Loki thought, but he liked Coulson enough by now to let it slip.

“I’ll explain to you how we’ve come to this conclusion, but I took this case to the director himself and we both agreed that Clint Barton should be handed over to Loki in exchange for definitive peace.”

Loki himself had to admit this made no apparent sense, so he wasn’t surprised when Stark breathed, “This isn’t Coulson. It’s one of Loki’s tricks.”

Loki let the agent try and convince them all that he was himself; this wasn’t his business. He looked down at Barton and wondered if he shouldn’t just grab him and go, because no matter what fondness he’d developed for Coulson, he would only indulge him so much—especially since his entire self was pulsing and throbbing with desire.

And then Coulson turned away from Stark and spoke directly to Barton again.

“Clint? Can you speak?”

The archer should have looked at Loki for authorization; he didn’t. Another flaw his training would iron out. “...Yeah,” he muttered.

“Can you give your consent?” Coulson asked gently. “To me? I know this isn’t how it works for you. But I’m not your Dom. I just want a reassurance that I’m not sending you to hell.”

He looked so pained. “Do it for them, too,” he said softly. “Do it for all of us.”

Loki was curious; but Barton decidedly wouldn’t let him down on that particular matter. “Yeah. I want this.” And then, without prompting, without any reason, he said, “I’m Loki’s.”

*Norns, give me strength.* Loki leveled a lustful, burning stare at Coulson who instantly understood he had to wrap it up.

“We thank you for your years of service,” he told Barton hurriedly. “We thank you for completing this ultimate mission.”

Barton looked up at him and Loki let him, because this was the last glance the archer would ever cast upon his own world.

“Don’t worry,” Coulson murmured. “I’ll explain everything to them. Or I’ll try.”

And Loki realized, belatedly, that Phil Coulson loved Barton.

Perhaps not like a man loves a woman, but deeply and sincerely all the same. What he was doing was so harsh and painful and risky a decision; yet he was doing it for the sake of this man, because he cared about his well-being and happiness above all. They all did, actually; these people were his friends. His teammates. They cared about him. They loved him dearly. And Loki was going to cause them a tremendous pain by ripping Barton away from them forever—violently, unfairly, slicing though their hearts a gash that might never heal.

He couldn’t wait.

This was it—those were the limits of his patience. He grabbed Barton’s hair again, violently, cruelly. “Say goodbye,” he ordered, because he was *merciful*, he would give them all *closure.*
“G-Goodbye,” Barton stammered.

Loki looked up and grinned at them.

“And farewell,” he breathed, pupils blown.

And the darkness opened to swallow them away.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus: can we just appreciate Loki's face in this gif?

If that is not the face of a man getting something he always wanted and being all incredulous about it I don't know what it is

My fic is hereby canon, goodbye
When Loki reappeared in his house, he saw the stone wall and simultaneously felt Barton's hair still in his grip; and he had dreamed of this moment for so long that now that it was happening at last, something in his mind cracked and broke.

His first thought was that, for some reason, this had all been a trap—Loki had been manipulated into revealing this place he'd never so much as mentioned to anyone other than himself. But then he realized it couldn't be; he realized he had simply succeeded in having his way, for the first time of his long life. And he couldn't believe it. He was physically unable to believe it.

Which is why all of a sudden, Loki, absurdly, stupidly, wished Barton wasn't here.

Because this was new, this was the newest thing he'd done in a thousand years—just when he thought he was done with his first times—and he didn't know what would come next. This was the least in control he could feel at the moment. He'd dreamed of this moment, thought of how perfect it would be, again and again and again; and Barton hadn't said a word yet and already, everything was ruined. Because he was here, and suddenly reality was crashing down on Loki's shoulders, so heavily that his heart was turned upside down in a split second. All of sudden, he was horrified. He didn't want this. He couldn't do it.

He turned away and discarded his coat to avoid exposing his pallor to the archer.

“Where—where are we?” Barton mumbled shyly.

Loki felt a spike of desperate frustration. Norns, why had he done that? Living with someone? He'd always been on his own, because he liked being alone. He would have to take care of Barton all the time. The archer knew nothing; couldn't do much; and he was mortal, for Hel's sake. Suddenly, Loki couldn't understand himself; couldn't understand why he'd wanted this, and why he'd been so aroused the second before.

He'd obtained what he'd thought he'd always dreamed of and now, so what? This was just a mortal. A terrified, dumb mortal, who probably already regretted his recklessness. Why had Loki thought this would magically make things better? Why had he thought this might instantly work? What had
he been thinking—had he been thinking at all?

“Asgard,” he muttered in answer to Barton’s question, because he couldn't bring himself to explain everything about the house. So many things he would have to explain! So much work ahead of him!

“I—I thought you were banished?”

Loki closed his eyes and realized that his two months of preparation meant nothing at all. What a fool—he'd never been so ashamed, even after his fits of cruelty. He felt like the clumsy child everyone mocks.

Because Barton knew nothing of him.

Loki carried on with his half-lie since he really couldn't muster the strength to explain. “It is all part of the agreement. I was carrying out my punishment on Midgard, but Midgard absolved me in exchange for a promise. Hence as long as I do not commit new crimes, I can live again in the land of my choosing. Asgard was the most practical.”

Lies, lies, lies. But all Barton heard was the truth. “You don't seem very happy about it.”

To be called out on not being happy, when he should have been, triggered disproportionate anger inside Loki. “Get up, Barton,” he snapped.

Barton obeyed hesitantly, and Loki should have been relishing his anxiety, but all he felt was blinding anger. No, Barton knew nothing of this place, of his own state, of Loki himself. He’d ended up here almost by mistake, actually! Maybe he’d figured out he was born to be a slave, but Loki's slave? He’d just thrown himself in the monster's arms without thinking for a second about the consequences. Without even knowing about them! He'd made a fool out of them both.

“So,” Loki said coldly. “What do you know about Jotunheim?”

Barton blinked at him, then let out a dumb, dull, “What?”

Loki stared at him for a second, breathless with a blind fury. And he backhanded Barton across the face, so violently that the archer was knocked down on the floor.

Barton coughed up blood; he must have bitten his lip; Loki scowled and brutally planted his boot in the middle of his back.

“You know nothing,” he spat, tears of despair and anger and shame welling in his eyes. “Just another dumb ape looking up to the stars and hiding in fear when they finally approach him!”

He slammed Barton down with unprecedented violence and sneered. “Having second thoughts already? Regretting your muddy home, far away from the monster?”

He expected Barton to break down in terror, to cry, maybe, to panic at the very least, to beg for indulgence, for mercy. To act as the ridiculous, feeble parody of a being that he was. But to his great surprise, the archer's fists clenched in obvious anger and he jerked against the boot pinning him down.

“I'm not afraid of you!” he growled. “And I know what Jotunheim is!”
Loki sneered, but his murderous despair had been temporarily halted. “Do you,” he snarled. “Impress me then.”

He expected anything, but not what followed. “One of the Nine Realms. Land of the Jotnar—the Frost Giants,” Barton said. “At war with Asgard most of the time until a thousand years ago.”

A ton of bricks would have been gentler on Loki’s shoulders.

What. What? What? How could it be? All this time—even now—he'd thought Barton didn't know, couldn’t even conceive such a thought—but he knew? He knew?

He'd come with full knowledge?

Barton struggled against Loki’s foot again. “I was on the field when your big brother first fell down on Earth,” he panted. “I did my homework—and Thor filled in the gaps himself after your little Chitauri stunt.”

Loki blinked and swallowed painfully. Yes, it—it did make sense.

But no. No. Barton knew nothing of the tales in the dark, of the big bad wolf, of the spring thieves and stormbringers. He knew not the terror, the nauseating disgust. The contempt. Or he wouldn't have been so relaxed around Loki.

Wait—maybe he just didn’t see the connection yet.

“I see,” Loki breathed. “But what did Thor tell you about me, then?”

Barton frowned—as far as Loki could tell, since the archer was still face-down on the floor. “Not much. What, you think you're so interesting? He told us you were adopted. Told us you lied to seize the throne and failed miserably.”

Obviously, he was trying to provoke him, but he was a mile away from the actual issue.

“Did he not tell you why I rebelled?” Loki whispered.

The answer was obvious. No, Barton didn't know. But his rebellion had allowed Loki to start realizing he was panicking once again. Once again, blaming Barton for something he couldn't control. Because control was all about Loki now, wasn’t it? Would he run away from it again? Would he fail again, poison himself again, ruin his own hopes again, out of terror and cowardice?

No. No. Not this time. Not again. He’d learned, and he knew better.

Only then did he realize that Barton’s training would be very likely to change him, as well. And that he must allow it to happen. To be in control, he first had to give in.

So he took a deep breath and let his Asgardian disguise fade away. He felt his own skin grow colder and colder and caught the moment Barton felt it too—he stilled under Loki's boot and stopped breathing.
Loki let the blue frost blossom on his face and limbs. Not too much—he might kill Barton if he let it all out. But he wanted him to see. He was tired of hiding. He was so tired of being afraid.

He walked around the archer, then said, “On your knees.”

Barton obeyed slowly, staring at the ground; Loki was about to order him to look up, when he did.

It took all of Loki’s strength not to vanish at once, or change back, or run away. He stood and endured the grey gaze upon him.

*Norns,* this was difficult. Breathtakingly so. This was torture. He knew, oh, he *knew* how those red eyes looked in the dark; and how dreadful the unnatural carvings defacing his skin must look, how gloomy the deep blue skin, like a rotten corpse.

“You wanted to see,” he murmured, and damn it, he even *sounded* different, but maybe it was just because his voice was so distorted with strain and anguish.

Barton looked. He just looked, and Loki had to say something or he would start screaming. “Thus behold,” he murmured. He suddenly sneered, and he knew how shocking his teeth were, sharp whiteness splitting up the darkness. “The *beast* you have been handed over to—with full knowledge.”

*Norns,* that was true. “Make no mistake, my brother knew what I was.” Thor had *done* this? He had let this happen? “He still let your precious Coulson unfold his little plan. They abandoned you to be this monster's plaything.”

Barton was still *staring* and Loki wanted him to yell in fear, to recoil in horror, to throw up, *something.* Something else than this void.

The archer raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “I'll scream when you make me scream.” He looked at Loki again, from head to toe, vaguely uninterested. “And if that's all you've got, we won't go very far.”

Loki heard words but those words made no sense. He didn't understand. He just plainly *didn't understand.* He'd shown himself; and Barton knew. Knew everything now. So why wouldn't he react?

Barton sighed and actually got up on his feet, as though Loki's stupidity was too overwhelming for him to keep kneeling. “Seriously,” he said. “Do you *remember* what you did to me?”

Loki could only stare at him. Barton actually scoffed. “Do you think I liked you before? Well, news flash, I didn't wait for you to turn blue to call you a monster.”

Those words should have been harsh and cruel. Why did Loki hear them as a reassurance? Why was he *convinced* Barton did mean them as a reassurance?

Barton glanced at him up and down yet again. “I can see you're doing your best to blame it on your race—nice try, but you're not fooling me. I know you, and I can tell you that you're an asshole, regardless of the color of your makeup.”

No insult had ever been sweeter to Loki's ears.

Something rippled within his stomach and spread throughout his limbs. Barton was so clever and Loki was so *stupid.* Because the archer had seen right through the demi-god's second thoughts. He'd...
seen his terror. It was just like his saying “no” two months ago—he was the one bettering Loki; calming him down, but still making it sound like an insult so Loki wouldn’t feel humiliated at being soothed like a lost child.

The demi-god was frustrated at his own hopelessness—but Barton had hope. Maybe enough hope for them both to move forward.

“You already know that,” the archer reminded him, and yes, he was sort of scolding Loki for being so dumb. “I said it all the day I chose to be yours. And I thought this was something you would carry out instead of mistaking me for one of your racist little friends.”

Loki was so overwhelmed it took him a long time to speak, and even then he could only uttered, “You.”

He swallowed. “You are willing... to be a Jotun's slave.”

Barton did not understand. Jotnar simply had no slaves. They were lower than slaves to an Asgardian's eyes.

The archer scowled, but it wasn’t a disgusted scowl—more like a what-am-I-going-to-do-with-him scowl. “No,” he said, like it should have been obvious. “I'm willing to be your slave, and that's fucking crazy enough for me.”

Oh, Loki was stupid, stupid, completely stupid. And a coward, too. But he had a slave and luckily for him, this slave, despite his roughness, had exactly what it took to compensate Loki's flaws.

Loki moved forward—stopped—he couldn't touch him—but no, he could touch him, what had Barton just said, so he grabbed the archer's arm and instantly stared at his face. There was no disgust in his eyes. Loki pulled him close, close enough to make it obvious that he was about to get even closer. And he was still waiting for this spark of refusal, this hint of nausea, behind Barton's mask.

But it wasn’t a mask. Loki closed in and crushed their lips together. The kiss was violent and pressing and rough but it was still a kiss, and it confused him greatly to be wearing his blue skin and feel no disgust from his lover.

Then he pressed closer, and felt it. Barton was hard. Hard for him. For the beast. And Norns help him, Loki felt his own cock fill and weigh between his legs.

“Kissing me,” he breathed against Barton's skin, just in case the archer hadn't realized, a mortal kissing a Jotun, what—how?

Loki chuckled, high on relief and glee. He took Barton's hand, raised it to his chin. The archer caressed it, shyly, suddenly a bit hesitant.

“Touching me,” Loki exhaled, closing his eyes, and he felt like he'd never been touched before. He felt like he'd been waiting his whole life for something to touch him in this way, in this moment, in this place; he felt like his existence would have been meaningless if this slight touch hadn't happened exactly like this. But it had happened. He felt...

He felt like he was saved. Like he really could be saved.

So of course, the monster awoke inside him and reminded him that monstrosity couldn't be shaken off with a brush of warm fingertips. Loki remembered why Barton was here. The reason he wanted
him here, and the reason he would always want him.

This was not a pretty reason.

So Barton didn't know—he hadn't been taught that Jotnar were simply wrong; and this meant that Loki really couldn't have picked a better slave, could he? A complete blank slate for him to write on. But first he had to erase the previous writings. He thought of every little mistake Barton had made during the past hour, all the flaws he'd promised himself to iron out, and he grinned sharp and wide.

He said, “You are so blessedly ignorant.”

He kicked Barton's legs and made him fall on the floor. He thought of shifting back into his white skin, but realized he had no reason to. Besides, it might help him to wear the clothes of a monster. Because at the moment, Barton must realize that he'd been stripped bare of his own humanity; that he'd been sold as property and that nothing would ever be the same again. And Loki would have to go even harder on him to compensate his failures just now.

“Strip,” he snapped.

Barton looked up, and ah—there was the fear Loki had been expecting earlier. But this anxiety had nothing to do about things Loki couldn't control. This anxiety was not the monster's, and not the prince's either; it was all Loki's. And Barton's. This anxiety was the beginning of their link.

Barton unclothed himself with stiff movements, suddenly back to his uncertainty after his brief fit of justified anger. Loki had no intention to punish him for that; he might be merciless, cruel, wicked and perverted, but he would not be unfair. No, he would torture Barton because he wanted to. Simple as that.

But first, there was a ritual Loki had to accomplish. He'd had his doubts, he'd thought maybe he would save it for another day—maybe this would be too much of a shock for a slave on the first day of his training. But Barton had no qualms about his master's nature, so there was no reason to wait. And he needed a shock.

Thus Loki created a neural link in his palm.

It was simple, really; Stark would have probably talked about wireless connection. Loki was about to connect his nerves to Barton's, by grafting a small piece of himself inside the archer's body. That way, he could see through Barton's eyes—optic nerves—or talk in his ear from miles away—acoustic nerves—or even feel what he felt—all nerves, really. This was the most utter violation of privacy one could force on a slave.

And the safest way to hurt Barton while avoiding serious injuries.

Loki grabbed the hair of the naked man and jerked his head back before pressing the small blue neural link to his lips.

“What is it?” Barton squeaked.

Loki frowned—disgusted by Jotun flesh after all?—but then quickly realized that what frightened Barton was his own ignorance. And his distrust of magic.

To know that he didn't want to be grafted made Loki's cock even harder. Oh, he dearly loved to force.

“Swallow it,” he ordered.
“Tell me what it is first.”

Loki chuckled. Bargaining! Oh, soon Barton would learn not to make that kind of mistakes again.

Because he would be trained. Loki took a deep breath. Yes, Barton was his slave; yes, it was new. But he would get used to it; he had to, since everything was now his responsibility. He could do this; he wanted to. And he wouldn't let himself forget it again this time; he swore to himself that earlier had been his last failure as a master. From now on, only progress.

“Do you recall what I told you about slave training in Asgard?” he smiled at Barton.

The archer thought about it, then his wild eyes widened when he did recall.

“I left you for two months” Loki murmured, soft and sweet as though he wasn't about to torture him into near madness. “I shall keep you for two months. Until every last drop of dignity leaves your shattered body. Until you are truly the Jotun's slave, begging to please the monster, desperate to humiliate yourself.”

He shivered in want at the thought. Yes. To own a slave was all about molding it to the master's wishes, after all. Loki would make Barton better, shape him, bend him until he fitted his wishes. The Universe hadn't given him what he wanted; thus he would create it himself.

He invoked a speculum in his right hand and brutally forced it in Barton's mouth. The archer startled and struggled, moaning in protest as his jaws were forced apart. Almost throwing a tantrum, for so small an abuse. Really.

“You grew feral,” Loki said in amusement.

All the funnier. He took the neural link, stuffed it down Barton's throat—the magic device would find its way to the nerves by itself—and removed the speculum to block the archer's mouth shut. He massaged his throat, like he would have done to a reluctant dog fed its medicine. Barton struggled and protested and choked, but in the end he swallowed it down, and that was it.

That was it. His body was entirely open to Loki's access.

“What,” Barton gasped, “was that?”

Loki only smirked and didn't answer. The archer would find out soon enough.

The demi-god gripped Barton's wrists, cuffed him in black leather and collared him, tightening buckles and straps with delight. Hooking a finger in the ring of his collar, he forced Barton to his feet. His erection had faded a little; Loki cupped the archer's balls, and pushed a few fingers between his ass cheeks. Barton stiffened; he obviously didn't know how to react to his kind of humiliation anymore. Coulson, Coulson, Coulson, Loki thought. You've let him go astray.

“Uneasy?” he grinned.

He twirled his fingers and cuffs snapped around Barton's ankles as well. Loki remembered gear coming out of the walls in Stark's gym, and let chains fall from the ceiling and snake up from the floor, fastening themselves to the wrist and ankle cuffs.

Then they began to shrink and pull. Loki released Barton and took a step back to enjoy the show. Barton found himself slowly spread-eagled, more and more, until his limbs were fully extended; but Loki didn't stop, kept the chains going, until Barton turned white and yelled, “Please!”
Loki smirked, but allowed the quartering to stop. Barton looked panicked, glancing all over the room. Was he looking for a way out? He'd said he hated Loki—did he hate him enough to have second thoughts?

“Regretting your friends?” Loki asked in a honeyed voice.

If the answer was yes, it would be too bad, because while the demi-god didn't consider himself a rapist, he still didn't think he could ever let this man go. Not anymore.

He grabbed the collar and reminded him, “Yet they put you here.”

“No,” the archer spat.

Loki raised an eyebrow. Oh?

“I put myself here.”

The demi-god chuckled. He didn't know if this was faithfulness and friendship or merely defiance and decision behind Barton's words, but he liked the answer all the same.

“Did you,” he said.

Well, then he'd have no qualms about giving Barton what he'd bargained for. He gestured in the air and plucked a long whip—his personal favorite—from empty space. Barton saw it; he closed his eyes.

“Oh, yes,” Loki grinned, lust boiling inside him. “You will suffer. You will scream.”

He cupped the tan cheek and wasn't even shocked to realize his own fingers were still blue. “And in the end, you will be little more than an obedient pet molded to my will.”

“Promises,” Barton muttered.

Loki blinked—and then oh, this was too perfect for him not to laugh.

“Very well then,” he said, increasingly playful and increasingly hungry for pain. He made the whip crack and outright sniggered at Barton's anxious jolt.

“Oh, no, no, no, you cannot be afraid, not after all your bravado.”

A sudden whim made him say, “In fact—you will be the one asking for it.”

Now that was efficient enslavement. He pressed the folded leather lash against Barton's balls, noticing that his cock was starting to get a definite interest again. Loki's treatment would calm that down.

“Beg me,” he murmured, “to whip you bloody.”

His spread-eagled victim didn't look all that thrilled with the program. As a matter of fact, Barton grew several shades paler and gritted his teeth.

“I am waiting,” Loki taunted.

Nothing. The demi-god smiled; exactly what he'd expected.

Well, time to test the neural link.
He activated it and felt about with his mind. Barton shivered, stiffening; Loki wondered how it felt from the inside, his essence seeping into the archer's body. He wasn't sure but, being a Jotun, he expected it to be painful for a Midgardian, at least mildly so.

Barton sucked in a breath and yes, yes, obviously, it hurt. Or maybe it was just the shock of feeling something invading him from the inside; more invasive than penetrative sex, than an open wound, than *anything*.

“I am waiting,” Loki repeated—and hooked himself to Barton's nerves.

Sensations overflowed him and *ooh*, yes, it was definitely hurting him—but to Loki, the pain felt unreal; he only felt it intellectually, as though somebody had given him a verbal account of Barton's suffering, only more precise than any language could hope to achieve.

“Stop!” Barton gasped. “Make it stop!”

Loki went even deeper inside, felt the shivers, the muscles clenching, the limbs spread. He'd calculated just right; Barton's arms felt as though they were extended enough for the tendons to snap, but the tendons hadn't in fact snapped. Good; it meant Loki knew Barton's body enough not to use the neural link at all times. But right now, it was tremendous fun to anchor himself deeper and deeper and feel the panic of Barton who knew *something* was happening even though he couldn't pin-point what exactly.

“You wanted to know what it was,” Loki smirked, walking in circles around him to enjoy the view. “It is a fragment of my essence. As long as you carry it, I will know where you are, whether you are alive, and whether you are in pain.”

Most wizard's slaves were usually grafted with a neural link. Barton shook his chains and threw his head back. Loki liked mystery and imagination, and he'd rather fantasize about the pain he was causing to Barton rather than experiencing it firsthand; but right now, it was still very enjoyable, to hurt him in this way, this unbearably intimate, violating way.

“Make it stop—please—it's killing me!”

*Please.* Well, his manners were coming back, weren't they?

“Is it? How unfortunate,” Loki grinned, and embedded himself even deeper.

Barton jumped and yelled, “Whip me!”

_Ah._ Loki's pupils dilated.

“Do whatever you want, just—*stop it!*”

Loki gave a small mock sigh, then whipped the air with a loud crack. “I said *beg.*”

He could feel the archer's muscles clenching, beads of sweat budding on his skin, the strain of his limbs, the stress coiling in his stomach, the tightness of his choking lungs.

“Please! Please, whip me bloody, I'm begging for it, I'm *aching* for it, I'll do anything—whip me, whip me raw, please, please, *please!*”

Now such enthusiasm deserved to be answered. Loki grinned, then finally retreated from the connection. This first experiment was a success; but really the neural link was more of a safety net. It was so much more enjoyable to listen to Barton's loud gasps and look at his violent shudders.
Loki was still walking around him; he stopped right behind him and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “You asked for it.”

He took a step back; Barton shuddered when he heard the hiss, then buckled at the first strike of the whip. Loki was really too kind, since he wasn't drawing blood yet—Barton's near immaculate skin meant nobody had disciplined him properly in at least a month. Really, Coulson, really.

Loki warmed him up with a few strikes on his shoulders, back, thighs. When the first lashes bloomed on the skin, it was as though he'd repaired something instead of hurting it—Barton's body was definitely meant to be whipped. And as Loki's arousal increased, he couldn't wait anymore—he raised his arm, let the whip rear up and hiss down and cut across the lower back—slicing Barton's most sensitive spot first was entirely unnecessary, but what could Loki say? He was a sadist.

And Barton screamed.

Loki closed his eyes and just listened to this insane shout which sounded in the vault—the empty vault he'd turned it into torture rooms just the day before going back to Midgard for Barton. The room was wide, nearly empty, with only a big bed and a thick table; Barton's voice echoed beautifully as he screamed his agony.

Then he fell silent and weighed down in his chains; when Loki reopened his eyes, he saw red blood trickling down the curve of the archer's lower back. He was shivering; but his muscles, after a second of insane tension, were relaxing completely.

Loki wondered for a second if he wasn't just drunk on dominance and imagining things—but then the archer straightened a little, breathing out deeply, and murmured, “Fuck,” in a very low voice, as though realizing something.

“Ah,” Loki said. He pressed the whip against the cut, making the strong muscles tighten again.

“What do you say, Barton?”

“Please,” the archer panted. “More.”

Loki's breath was taken away. Yes. They could do this. They would. He could have it.

He gave a genuine, sincere smile Clint couldn't see. “It will be my pleasure.”

And so there was more. Barton took it magnificently; oh, he was screaming, but he was struggling to keep his breathing even, the best he could; trying to get into the rhythm, to embrace the pain, to accept his punishment, even when Loki's sadism flared bright again and he cut open another gash across Barton's back or thighs. His victim was starting to sweat, breath hitching, shuddering; this must be a little hard on him, such a merciless ordeal after nearly two months of relative peace. But his training wouldn't be easy, and if he could come to terms with it now, all the better.

Loki whipped him for quite some time, drawing artful lashes all over Barton's back. The cuts were deep, but fairly thin; most of them wouldn't scar at all. After nearly ten minutes, the archer was gasping and squirming with pain, drenched in sweat, on the verge of passing out. Loki hit him one last time, eliciting a short, raw scream; then let the whip fall on the floor and rolled up the sleeves of his tunic, up to his elbows. What he was about to do now was likely to stain his clothes, and even though he could just wish them to be clean, it was a matter of principles.

The cat-o-nine tails felt good in his hand. He debated the merits of adding beads of steel at the end of the dozen lashes, then went along with it, because why the hell not?

Barton hadn't yet figured out the torture was far from being over. Loki flipped the shorter lashes
between his fingers, then made them hiss across the air and hit Barton's bleeding back. The multiple lashes deepened the cuts and the beads of metal ploughed the raw flesh.

Caught by surprise, Barton screamed and struggled against his chains. Loki decided to get him better acquainted with the newest implement, and brushed it slowly against the archer's back. Barton let out a sob and tried to inch away when he felt the cold pearls of steel.

“More?” Loki smiled.

“Please,” Barton sobbed in panic, please yes or please no? “Please—”

_Both_, Loki guessed, and the flogger came down on Barton's raw wounds again. Back, ass, thighs, back again, shoulders of course, thighs, and the archer was screaming like he'd forgotten entirely he'd once been able to speak, he was reduced to an animal feeling only pain, and Loki was so _hard_ he could have come untouched; but what really pleased him was the feeling of control blooming in purple and black inside him. The sincerity of it. Nobody could come to Barton's help now; Jarvis wasn't listening; the Avengers were worlds away. Not even Heimdall could see what was going on in these rooms. There was only Loki and his slave; and in this tiny world, Loki owned everything and was everything.

In this world, he was God.

Barton looked like he'd understood it, hanging limp in his chains and choking on a sob with each breath out. He was completely ruined, falling apart, shivering with agony and fear. He'd asked for slavery; now he was getting his first real taste of it.

Loki walked around the archer and pushed the handle of the flogger under his chin. The archer's cheeks were red with heat and tears; he was shaking uncontrollably. Nothing better than a bit of raw brutality to break even the most hardened spirits. Oh, Barton was a piece of work; but the first step was taken.

“Did I beat a little of that arrogance out of you?” Loki asked coolly.

“Yes,” the archer panted, nearly sobbing again. “Yes.”

Good; then the flogging could stop. Loki liked it, too, the simplicity of the _reward and punishment_ system. It was indeed very likely to strip Barton bare of everything that wasn't necessary. Loki could make a slave out of him. He just needed time, attention, and a lot of pain.

“Show me,” he said elegantly.

The shackles opened and Barton fell down hard. Loki didn't help; didn't move; only waited. Barton crawled painfully to Loki's feet, then got on his knees and bowed his head.

Loki was still very hard and this was the perfect opportunity to feed Barton his cock, but he didn't do it; it would have felt inelegant somehow. Slavery went so much further beyond sex.

Loki carded a hand through the sweat-damp hair, then pushed to bring Barton lower down. His slave sank in the submission pose he'd been taught; Loki put a foot on his neck and made him bow as low as he could.

Barton, kneeling, whipped bloody, bowing under the weight of a god's boot. It was the most perfect thing this Universe had ever brought forth.

“Say my name,” Loki said, calmly.
“Loki,” Barton whispered.

He shuddered violently. He was obviously on the verge of absolute submission, but the too intense pain kept him from relaxing. There was no need to make him suffer more; he'd wouldn't break any further today.

Loki leaned down to grab the leather collar, then forced the archer to his feet without kindness. He dragged him towards the table and made him lie down on his stomach, arms and legs splayed out.

He invoked herbal salve; he did not want to heal Barton with magic, or the archer would come to treat his pain as an annoying fly which would eventually go away. No, the wounds should have the time to engrave themselves in Barton's flesh and leave their mark, each of them a lesson. When Loki first touched a cut with his slick fingers, though, Barton shook violently. Loki put a hand behind his neck and slammed his face against the wood in immediate retaliation.

“Do that again and I will strap you there for the night.”

The archer shivered again and said in a small, shaky voice, “Yes, sir.”

He was good afterwards; grabbing the edges of the table and fighting his impulse to writhe and scream as Loki's fingers dug into his cuts. Loki could pin-point the moment the herbal salve's soothing power came into action; Barton's strangled cries of agony turned into deep, deep breaths, and abruptly, he went completely mellow.

And Loki felt a shock as though someone had knocked him down.

He braced on the table with his free hand, not understanding what was happening. Everything was spinning around him. It felt as though he'd just snapped out of some freezing haze, or caught his breath after holding it for an hour. He blinked, looked around, panting. He went over his very recent memories of Barton's whipping and was almost frightened at his own state of mind.

Had this been him? Had this cold, sadistic creature really been him for almost half an hour?

Barton was a true slave; and Loki realized he had been crowned true Master at the same time.

He kept rubbing salve mechanically on the archer's wounds, feeling increasingly dizzy, almost frightened. Was this what he wanted? It was so powerful. He'd enjoyed it—he'd felt... like a king. Like a God. A tremendous rush which had propelled him into the stars of a Universe which revolved exclusively around Him.

But he was also glad it was over now. He could feel himself trembling a little.

Yes, he thought, a bit reassured. He was cruel, but he didn't have to be at all times. Right now, Barton was feeling good under his hands; and Loki must remember that slavery didn't mean constant pain. That he didn't always have to give in to the hunger.

Or he'd lose himself. He recalled the void and the senseless, emotionless horror of the darkness. Loki didn't want to be like Thanos. Or like Odin. Or like anyone, for that matter. He would be a Master according to his own heart.

He oiled Barton's entire body, until the last of the archer's tremors had subsided. Loki was still a bit
horrified—if fascinated—at the evidence of what he'd done. So many bloody lashes; he could have killed him, but he hadn't, because he'd been absolutely, completely in control.

“God,” Barton sighed.

His eyes were completely unfocused. “I missed you,” he said, no filters left between his brain and mouth.

Loki was still staring in shock at Barton's raw back; he laughed a little, a hollow, disbelieving laugh. “I nearly flayed you alive, Barton.”

“I missed you so much,” the archer sighed.

This time, Loki heard what he was saying, and his throat tightened.

He stared at Barton, then gently helped him up until he could sit on the edge of the table. He was shivering again; Loki briefly tapped into the neural link to check—and yes, it wasn't pain, just cold and aftershock. So he invoked a black blanket and put it around Barton's abused shoulders; his skin was so slick now, and the cloth so soft, that it wasn't hurting him. The archer sighed, then looked up with gratitude, tightening the blanket around his body.

Only then did Loki realize he was still in his Jotun skin. He had never stayed in it for so long. He couldn't help searching Barton's eyes for a hint of fear, of disgust; pursed lips, squinting eyes, something. But the grey gaze was clear and honest.

Loki wrapped his arms around him and held him close, exhaling a shaky breath. Gods, but this first session had been almost too intense for him, too.

“Will you not long for Midgard?” he murmured.

He had to ask. He knew he wasn't supposed to, he knew he was supposed to abide by precise rules, he knew he should be treating Barton like a piece of furniture at all times, but he wasn't from Asgard and he would train his personal slave the way he damn well wanted it.

Barton pressed his face against his blood-splattered tunic. “Don't worry about me, sir.”

_of course I worry about you, you fool. Who will worry about the slave if not his master?_

“I'll just...” Barton murmured.

Loki stilled. “What?”

Barton was shrinking down already, but Loki had too much power over him at the moment. “Speak,” he ordered sternly.

“My bow,” Barton said in a small voice. “Please don't break it. It's... It's like a part of me.”

Loki frowned. His bow? He looked around the room and there it was—on the floor, discarded with the archer's clothes. Loki would burn those, but the bow—he hadn't even considered the problem until now. But it was no problem; of course Hawkeye would get to keep his weapon. In due time.

Loki realized then, with full force, that for all his cruel words, for all he'd thought during that strange state of mind he'd fallen in during the whipping, he didn't want Barton to stop fighting. Because what he wanted was Barton; and if by making him his, Loki denatured him, it wouldn't be worth it. Yes, this was something he'd thought before; that Barton was strong, and that it would be all the more
satisfying to overpower him.

He laughed a little.

“Tell me,” he said, mostly talking to himself. “Where would be the fun in enslaving a slave?”

He remembered Barton's insolence, his smirks, his taunts, his insults, even—everything which made his submission worthwhile in the end.

“You will never cease to fight, Barton,” he said, like a prophecy, or an order.

He buried his face in the archer's hair and breathed in.

“This is what you were born for.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Thank you for reading and commenting. ^^
Barton was falling asleep. Loki lifted him up in his arms and carried him to the bed; the archer let himself be transported, limp and happy. Loki lay him on his stomach, mindful of the welts. Then he secured Barton to the bed for his first night; tied him with restraints long enough for him to shift his limbs in a comfortable position, but short enough to keep him from so much as sitting up.

He took a step back and looked at Barton's naked body; the pleasant curve of his ass, the hard muscles in his back and thighs, and the dark red lashes all over his body. He'd suffered so much—and to see the evidence of that torture, those marks, was starting to make Loki hard again. But he hated taking care of himself, and Barton was in no state to be taken one way or the other.

So Loki drew the covers over him—he was already asleep—and walked out of the torture rooms.

He still felt a little anxious, but this time it was controlled; in the end, it only felt more thrilling. Heat was what he needed; he went to bathe himself in the warm pool of his bathroom, which instantly relaxed his knotted muscles and allowed him to think a bit more clearly. He exhaled a long, long breath, and plunged himself in thought.

Trouble was, slavery was a complicated concept. And Loki had always done his best to keep away from this world which frightened him with the intensity of its appeal.

He knew slaves were meant to be property, but he couldn't reconcile himself with these thoughts. The powerful and the rich all had slaves in Asgard; and they treated them like furniture indeed—this did not mean cruelty, but indifference, and a general disregard for the fact that they were actually sentient beings. Killing your slave was in very bad taste—just like killing your own horse or breaking your own sword. Slaves were meant to be silent, obedient, tidy, invisible. When they were not, they were punished; when they committed a crime, they were tortured or killed with more leisure than free men. They were not here to suffer, though, but to work.

But then there were sex slaves. Loki had sometimes been called argr for bedding indifferently men and women; he did not know if his varied tastes had always been present inside him, or if they were a side-effect of his magic—after he'd started shape-shifting, the lines between gender, bodies, and even species did not make as much sense as they did before. Not that he'd ever bedded a horse—he
had Fandral to thank for this filthy rumor. All the same, free men were despised for laying with free men; but slaves were not men or women; they were a complex way to masturbate. And whether the slave was meant for bed or not, he or she had to be trained.

A Vanir noblewoman had spent a lot of time and effort on the writing of a thick book regarding slave training. Loki still had it in his library but, truth be told, he had read it with the guilty pleasure of a teenager, many decades ago, before he met his third lover; and he hadn't opened it ever since. There were a lot of rituals which pleased him, if only because of the thrill they'd caused him upon first reading; but a large part of the book now seemed like complete foolishness to him. He didn't want Barton to end up with dull eyes and a duller mind. If he'd wanted furniture, he would have crafted it himself, thank you. No—Barton was no ordinary slave; Loki wanted him to be free inside the cage he'd built for him. If that made any sense.

A true slave master was, in the end, no better than Thanos himself. Loki wanted to make Barton—Barton, and not some hapless, destroyed version of him—completely dependent; completely submissive, but not inferior. He wanted to own something strong and beautiful; something worth owning. This was a very subtle line to walk but he wouldn't have it any other way.

So he would do what he wanted as always. But something kept bothering him, and it was the book's last chapter.

The ritual of the Mad Hours.

He let himself sink under the surface of the hot water. Not all slave masters accomplished this ceremony. The author of the book described it as a day of intense, absolute focus and utter severity; a day for the master to be at his worst and for the slave to realize that it must serve the master, should all its days be as this day. Be unfair, be selfish, be careless, be unbearable; if your slave endures it all with grace and obedience, the training is complete.

She didn't mean torture, but Loki knew he did, and the thought worried him. It is just a stupid book. Forget about it.

But how could he pretend to be Barton's master if Barton didn't know him? Most masters didn't mind, satisfied themselves with obedience without delving into its origins, but Loki knew—he'd just learned—that he needed, desperately, for Barton to know him, and to bow all the same.

Well, it would still be time to think about it later. Two months was a long time.

Loki sighed, then got out of the water and dried himself. He pulled on the neural link; the blurred sensations he received indicated that Barton was still sleeping. He probably would sleep for a long time, what with the mental exhaustion of being uprooted from his home world, and the ruthless torture Loki had put him through. The demi-god winced a little; he definitely couldn't reconcile himself at all anymore with the person he'd become then. He had literally slipped into a different mindset; he felt like this was something he'd brushed already once or twice, that time when Barton had licked his boot, for instance—but this time he'd fully immersed himself into it, and it had been both exhilarating and terrifying. Intoxicating.

He realized he was walking to his library, but he didn't think himself able to read right now. So instead, he let the door lead him outside, into the sunny fields of Asgard.

The warm air felt good in and out his lungs. He walked away from the little wooden shack under the glorious sun. Bilgesnipes were lowing in the distance; the tall grass whipped his knees and brushed his thighs as he walked. He felt a little dazed, but overall excited, and almost happy. He knew dark times lay ahead; but for the first time in years, he was doing what he really wanted to do, without any
compromises or regrets.

Of course, the moment just had to be ruined.

Loki rolled his eyes when a column of multicolored fire tore through the skies to hit the ground behind him, mere yards away from the wooden shack. A flock of birds flew away in panic.

Thor. Of course.

Loki turned to him just as the dazzling colors vanished and left Thor standing alone, cape billowing behind him. Loki stared into his eyes, and suddenly realized that he wasn't feeling anything. He'd been angry at Thor, he'd felt desperate, he'd felt terrified. He'd loved him. He'd hated him.

Now he felt... empty. Not even in a painful way. Just hollow, vaguely annoyed.

“Loki,” Thor said, a little breathless. “The All-Father wants to see you.”

Loki nodded. “Very well,” he said calmly. “My right knee itches a little.”

The thunderer frowned. “What?”

“Oh, I'm sorry—are we not exchanging pointless pieces of information?”

Thor sighed. “Loki, this is about Barton.”

Loki’s features remained blank. “What about him?”

“Odin will not let you enslave him.”

“I don’t see why not,” Loki said, checking his nails. “His homeworld sold him to me. I marked him; I broke him. He is mine.”

“Loki—”

“When?” Loki cut off.

Thor blinked at his about-face.

“When? I... right now.” He was really breathless. “The second you find him were his exact words.”

“Understood. Tell him I will be on the Bifrost.”

“You... I—very well,” Thor said, a bit baffled.

Loki kept looking at him, without any specific emotion. “Was there anything else?”

“...No.”

So, this was what shook Thor the most, Loki noted distantly. Not hatred; not horror; but genuine indifference. He wasn't used to it, poor little prince. Loki was not even trying to hurt him; and by doing so, he was hurting him more than ever before.

“Goodbye then,” he said, turning away.
“Loki,” Thor called, with that voice full with regrets, anger, fondness and despair all in one.

Loki turned to him and said, flatly, simply,

“No.”

And he vanished from the golden fields.

* *

Barton was where Loki had left him, strapped down to the bed, breathing deep and regular. There was something unsettling about the contrast between his peaceful expression and the red stripes all over his back, ass, and thighs. Even now, Loki couldn't help feeling guilty at this evidence of his tortures, because he had been taught all his life that enjoying a man's pain was wrong. And rationally, he knew it was.

But Barton looked so serene. Loki remembered his pallor and the strain in his shoulders when he'd entered Coulson's office. His shaky, wan voice. I'm going to burst.

Loki had torn him away from his home world; from everyone he had ever loved; from his very freedom. Barton was tied down to this bed, he'd been ruthlessly tortured, and he was likely to be tortured every day or so for the rest of his life. Yet he looked like he had passed out not from exhaustion, but relief.

Loki sighed a little. It was not hard to guess why Odin was unhappy with Barton's enslavement. He, not the gentle Frigga, had been the one telling his sons over and over again that taking pleasure in unnecessary violence was a dishonor, and the greatest shame a warrior could conceive.

The demi-god loosened Barton's ankle straps, then walked around the bed and freed his wrists as well. He sat on the mattress and took in the tortured body. He leaned down, as though about to kiss Barton's neck; but he hesitated inches from his skin, and in the end, just breathed him in for a while. He smelled of herbal salve.

Then Loki straightened up and ordered, “Up.”

Barton's eyes blinked open. Loki watched his features closely, in sudden anxiety. What if Barton panicked at finding himself in captivity? He had been confused with withdrawal, sleep-deprived and worn out when Loki had taken him. Now that he had rested, now that the pain of the whipping had cleared his mind, would he not rebel? Would he not fight and scream and try to escape?

Barton's grey eyes stared in space, uncertain; and then his eyelids fell shut and an expression of disbeliefing bliss spread over his face. Loki's breath was taken away—and because he didn't want to acknowledge his relief, he slapped Barton's lacerated thighs, making him jolt violently.

“Up,” he repeated.

This time, Barton pushed on his arms to sit up, wincing and hissing with pain; when he looked up at
Loki towering above him, he suddenly seemed a little frightened. But not terrified. Not panicked. Only... anxious.

Now, this Loki liked. He grinned and realized he was still holding the tethers; he let them fall down and said, “Do I really have to ask a third time?”

Barton startled and let himself slide off the bed; but instead of standing there, he sank to his knees and bowed his head, awkward and stiff with pain.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

Loki was shocked—actually shocked. Because there was something very simple he hadn’t realized.

Barton was willing; he might be rebellious, cocky and ill-tempered, but he was willing. Which meant he was going to try and be a slave. Which meant sometimes he was going to kneel without any prompting.

Only the acute awareness of both Barton's wounds and Odin's threats kept Loki from manhandling the archer back on the bed; but beyond his arousal, he felt ridiculously cheerful all of a sudden. Almost giddy. Barton was his. Barton was rightfully his and no one could tell him otherwise.

Suddenly, Loki was almost eager to face Odin—he felt so invulnerable at the moment.

He looked down again. The archer was waiting, growing a bit nervous; Loki eyed his body and realized that Barton was his to dress, as well. If he deemed it fit to give him any clothes.

Well, of course he did. If anything, they were fun to tear off. And constant nudity was boring; took all the excitement out of it. So what would he wear? Leather, of course—the Asgardian way; but still soft enough not to hurt his raw body. Loki thought of making them green and black, but it seemed a little vain, and it would be better for Barton to keep his own colors anyway, for now. Loki wanted him to understand he was to stay himself in his submission.

He invoked the clothes then realized, with a smile, that Barton was still waiting, struggling not to speak. He was really trying to be obedient.

Soon he wouldn't have to try anymore.

Loki dropped the clothes on him, just because he could, and the archer's surprised startle got a laugh out of him. This was something he really liked; surprising Clint with something else than violence or cruelty. He should remember it.


Barton bowed forward to grab a piece of clothing and his welts came into sight again. Loki's breath was taken away; he pushed the archer's head down to expose his wounds better. Barton stilled under his hand, but said nothing.

The demi-god swallowed, then brushed the great bloody X he'd cut over Barton's back. The skin flinched under his fingertips. I did this, he thought, enthralled. I really did this. And he is not mad at me. He is my prisoner and my slave and my whore, and he does not resent me.

No. Odin could never take something so priceless away from Loki.

“We have a busy day before us,” the demi-god murmured. Then as his arousal warmed him inside, he added with a sharp smirk, “If you slow us down with even the slightest complaint, if you let your
discomfort show in any way, I will chain you again. And take care of your front side.”

Barton swallowed distinctly; and oh, yes, he was subdued. He was not the type to flaunt his pain, but still Loki liked to utter this kind of threats; because they were real, unlike the ridiculous, empty things he'd stammered during their last sessions on Midgard. He liked to maintain this trepidation flowing between them; and he liked that Barton was not drowning in it. Not terrified breathless, but properly scared into submission.

“Yessir,” he said, obediently.

“Good.” Loki let him go and added, “Do not make me wait.”

He sauntered out the door and into the dining room; he plunged his face in his hands, raked his fingers up his black hair, still fighting off a thin smile. Norns, but he was happy.

How unexpected.

He invoked a full Asgardian breakfast and sat down; and, for the first time in two months, he found that he was ravenous. After a few minutes, Barton hesitantly entered the dining room, taking in his surroundings in one glance. Of course, he was a trained agent. Well—had been, Loki thought with satisfaction.

Barton looked a bit pale; perhaps he was starting to realize how far he was from home, or perhaps he was just in a lot of pain and trying to hide it. Loki resisted the urge to check through the neural link.

“Sit and feed yourself,” he called out. “You lost quite a lot of blood yesterday. I will not have you fainting.”

Well...

“At least not until the end of the day,” he caught himself, smirking.

Barton huffed a joyless laugh, then sat down and started eating in silence.

Oddly enough, he looked more awkward in this peaceful setting than he'd been when naked and writhing under the whip. Loki guessed it did feel weird. After all, they were eating together, like equals or allies, when most masters would have their slaves kneeling at their feet. Loki did not feel like decreeing rules about such details, though. Boring—boring and useless. If Barton had to kneel at all times to feel like a slave, if he had to be given constant reminders of his state, then he was no slave at all. It didn't matter whether he was allowed to wear clothes, or eating at his master's table, or allowed to carry a weapon; if such trifling details were enough to make Loki's dominance waver, he was in the wrong, not Barton. No, the demi-god wasn't going to start resorting to cheap tricks, not now, not ever.

“Um,” Barton said, low and embarrassed. “Is there a... uh... bathroom?”

Loki nodded and waved his hand to invoke a door through the wall. He realized he'd have to show Barton his way around the house, and it unsettled him a little. He'd kept this place secret for nearly a thousand years. The walls were almost literally made of spells, so Barton could probably use the doors without too much difficulty, even though his kind was particularly impervious to magic.

Loki looked up to ask something but his words died in his mouth when he realized Barton was gone. He instinctively tapped into the neural link because where?—but then he remembered the archer had excused himself. He felt a slight pang of pain which didn't belong to him, and the archer came back into the dining room a few minutes later.
He looked a little unsettled, too. Loki wondered once more if and when Barton would start panicking over his exile and new-found state of slavery; the demi-god dreaded for it to happen, but at the same time, he almost wished it would, so they could get it over with and move on.

Well. He would have to think about this later; Odin came first on the list of unpleasant things to worry about. Loki got up, licking his lips, then walked to Barton, calling the house's powers of transportation as he walked.

“Ready?” he asked.

“For what?” Barton frowned.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him, then backhanded him across the face.

Loki would let himself punish his slave out of instinct; it seemed like the thing to do. Barton was not getting any explicit rules; rules were both too fragile and too final for Loki's taste. From the beginning, their relationship had been based on gut feelings, and he intended to keep it that way.

Oh, but Barton would learn.

The archer was taken off guard; surprise and anger burst across his face and for a second, Loki almost thought he would hit back. But no; he swallowed down his pride and clenched his jaw. The demi-god grinned and resisted the urge to compliment him. “Ready?” he asked again instead.

Barton swallowed again, cheek hot and red, and said “Yessir,” through gritted teeth.

Loki smiled. The archer really had grown feral over the past two months; his beautiful, spontaneous obedience of earlier had already vanished like morning dew under the sun. But Loki didn't mind reminding him of his place; this was what they were here for, after all.

And hurting him was so damn fun.

He grabbed Barton's arm, thought about kissing his red cheek—and transported them away instead.

* *

He picked the very middle of the Bifrost, because although Heimdall would be watching either way, Loki preferred not to actually feel the golden eyes piercing his back. He released Barton and looked at the infinite skies. The view had stopped stunning him after the first few decades, but still, there was something soothing about the endless skies.

He took a deep breath. There was a specific reason he'd chosen this place for the meeting; a specific reason he'd taken the chance to find himself on the Bifrost.

He carefully peered down.

The void looked ready to engulf him. Distant galaxies were pulsing far away, clouds of gas and stars, nebulae and comets knitted together over nothingness. It was breathtakingly terrifying, but Loki didn't look away. He swallowed, fascinated, terrified but standing tall. He'd fell down into this chasm so many times in his own mind, over and over again for two months. He could stand looking down at it from the bridge. As long as he didn't fall over the rainbow.
Looking up again, he exhaled deeply. He was trembling and he was... he couldn't help it, he was a little proud of himself. Facing Odin would be another story, but maybe not a worse one.

Glancing at Barton, Loki realized he was also standing very straight with his fists clenched, staring up at the stars. And looking as though the shadow of death was upon him. The archer swallowed thickly and flinched a little, nervously, as though striving to contain his shudders within him, but his eyes were too wide and his breathing too irregular.

So. It was happening now. Clint was realizing he would never go home again.

Loki had had this same epiphany, in this very same spot, a few years ago. He knew how it felt. Barton was so very taut and of course, of course, Loki had told him not to show his pain. He was worthy of the demi-god's help all the more. And this was Loki's responsibility. Beating him bloodless was fun, but could he control him enough to fight off fear itself?

“Barton,” he murmured.

Clint snapped round at him; and he winced a little when he realized he hadn't managed to hide his panic. He looked down again at once, slightly hunching in on himself to prevent a punishing blow.

Loki knew what to do this time. Words were excellent to torture Barton, but soothing him was a matter of gestures. The demi-god cupped his jaw, looked into his eyes to reassure him. “Down on your knees,” he murmured.

Barton blinked warily, but then sank down, stiff and trembling. Loki pressed his face into his thigh and kept him there. The archer took a deep, shaky breath, which seemed to loosen his entire body on its way out. He started shuddering violently, but it didn't last; his panic had rippled through him, and then it was gone.

He crossed his hands behind his back, pushed his forehead against Loki's leg, and just breathed. Loki could have shackled him to ground him even more, but somehow, he wanted to let him realize he was strong enough to fight this particular fear alone. Loki would help him as far as he was needed; but if kneeling was enough, then there was no use restraining Clint more. This was not a matter of pleasure, but of confidence.

Calculating all these parameters made Loki a bit nervous himself, but as Clint sank down into serenity, the demi-god's own worries faded away. He'd done it, he'd done it completely this time, and it had been so easy.

You're mine, he thought, rubbing Barton's scalp. I can take care of you.

“Well,” Barton exhaled.

“No, it's alright,” Loki said under his breath.

Barton nodded with relief and relaxed even more; he outright leaned against Loki and stayed there, on his knees, pressing his face into the demi-god's leather-clad thigh.

Loki looked up at the stars again. Heimdall was undoubtedly watching him; Loki gave him a smile, a bit arrogant, maybe, but without any wickedness. You see, he wanted to say. He felt absurdly proud again. Even more than when he'd looked down into the abyss.

They stayed there for quite some time; they were doing nothing at all, really, but Loki would have been glad to do it forever. For the first time in hundreds of years, he was struck again with the insane
beauty of the Bifrost. It was nice getting this particular feeling back. A small unsullied piece of who he'd once been.

The golden gates opened in the distance and two horses came galloping out. Loki's stomach suddenly twisted with an apprehension he'd denied until now. Clint Barton was his; and nobody, not even the King of the Nine Realms, could change that. Odin had already taken everything away from him once; he would not do it again. Not this time. Loki had fought for Barton and gained him of his own right.

“On your feet, Barton,” he murmured.

Gods, he was nervous. But he was the Silvertongue; if Barton could sweet-talk the Avengers into letting Loki seemingly rape him twice in an hour (and how the Hel had he done that?) Loki could confront Odin.

“Do not speak,” he ordered. “Unless spoken to.”

Barton bowed his head gracefully as he got up, and Loki drew some strength from his peacefulness. Thor's and Odin's horses had stopped running now; they were walking slowly on the sparkling glass. Loki exhaled silently through his nose. Pretend. He knew how to pretend.

Thor looked hesitant as he dismounted. Loki would have preferred for him not to be here at all, which was, of course, the very reason Odin had brought him along. Loki stared at his once-father square in the eye and marveled at how vivid his own hatred had stayed after all this time. Thor looked actually almost friendly in comparison.

“Brother,” the thunderer said, low. “Thank you for meeting us.”

Loki was irritated at his own gratitude towards Thor for speaking first. He covered it all under a sarcastic smile and said, “Why, it was my genuine pleasure. And your father came along, how charming.”

“I understand Midgard absolved you,” Odin said brutally. “Why is that?”

As if the old bastard did not know.

“Oh, probably my rakish charm,” Loki murmured. “Mortals—always so vain.”

Damn it, he could do better than that. But he was so tense, because even now he felt just how out-powered he was. Odin was not on his scale, not even on Thor's; he was on Thanos's, and Loki realized he was terrified, and he bit his cheek until he drew blood because he would not let himself be afraid of that man.

“Thor is telling me you promised them peace and enslaved one of your victors in exchange,” Odin went on.

“Clint Barton,” Thor murmured.

An hysterical laugh threatened to burst past Loki's lips. Thor, you sad, unspeakable oaf. Odin did not care about Barton's name. He did not care about Barton, period; the mortal could die in horrible pains for all the All-Father cared. He simply couldn't stand the idea of Loki getting anything he actually wanted.

“That is the relative truth,” Loki said amiably enough.
“I cannot allow it,” Odin snapped. “Humans are not your plaything, Loki. Midgard has been off-limits for thousands of years.”

There it was. Plain and brutal. He meant to take Barton away.

“But—did you not break that taboo yourself?” Loki pretended to muse, very calm and composed to hide his furiously beating heart. “Banishing Thor on these muddy lands; did you honestly think your oaf of a son would leave them undisturbed?”

“You disturbed them, Loki—” his name sounded like a curse in that mouth—“you brought chaos and mayhem with you as you always do!”

“What do you want, old man?” Loki snapped, because he could not hear this all over again, he'd heard it too many times already—“surely, you did not arrange this meeting only to recall those past wastes?”

“Release the mortal!” Odin ordered. “No one shall bow before the likes of you.”

Ah, now we get to the heart of the problem, Loki thought, clenching his fists. A Jotun with a slave; indeed, it was yet unheard-of.

“You have no power over me,” he snarled, and it was true; but the law could not protect him from a tyrant. “Not anymore!”

“I cannot banish you indeed—indeed no, not when the entire universe lays within the walls of my house—“but I will not allow you to humiliate those who are a hundred times worthier than you!”

“Hey Thor,” Barton said.

Loki thought he was having a heart attack.

He snapped round at Barton, who stared placidly at Thor and said, “Do you mind setting your hammer down?”

Loki was breathless. In Hel's name, what was he doing?

He caught a movement in the corner of his eye and realized that Thor was putting Mjölnir down on the glass. What? Had they planned this? What was it all about?

“May I?” Barton asked.

As nobody answered, he walked forward and crouched. Only then did Loki understand what he was about to do.

It terrified him.

Barton might have disobeyed a direct order just now, but his act was one of pure faith, and Loki could have been touched. However, he was just scared to death. Because Barton was going to lift Mjölnir. And then, it would mean—nothing, Loki could still enslave him, this would change nothing—but no, this would change everything, everything, because Loki could not believe in himself enough to be a master still; not after being faced with the evidence of Barton being so much worthier than him.
But it was too late; Barton grabbed the handle, and pulled.

And Mjölnir didn't move.

Loki almost dove into the neural link, frantic, desperate to know. Was Barton faking? If he was faking, if he was—but no. The demi-god could feel Barton's muscles bulge and strain as he pulled as hard as he could. Mjölnir was not moving. Mjölnir was not moving.

Mjölnir was not moving for Clint Barton.

And then Loki understood.
He understood everything.

\textit{Oh.}

\textit{Oh, Gods!}

He suddenly felt like laughing and laughing. Oh, by all the Gods. In the name of \textit{Hel}.

\textit{This was just a dumb hammer.}

Unbelievable. And yet—it made so much sense. Oh, yes, now Loki saw it, saw the simple beauty and the perversity of the stratagem. Damn it, just a tool, just a brick of metal Odin had enchanted to serve his own purposes. To think Loki had fallen for it—to think he'd believed in this ridiculous tale of \textit{worthier-than-thou}, all this time!

When in truth, Mjölnir meant nothing. When in truth, it could only be wielded by Thor, regardless of his worth—of anyone else's worth. A hammer—Odin had tamed both his sons with a chunk of metal. Mjölnir meant \textit{nothing at all}, and Thor himself probably didn't know it. He was honest, he was sincere, poor fool.

Loki looked straight at Odin, his temples throbbing with hatred. \textit{You are the God of Lies. Not me.} He finally understood the extent of Odin's game, for all those centuries. Loki had been wrecked by this
man but Thor had, too. From the beginning, their father had set them up against each other.

Clint straightened up again, then went back next to his master and told Odin, “Your turn.”

This time Loki nearly burst out laughing. Barton, he marveled. Barton, you amazing creature, you are already perfect.

“What did you say, mortal?” Odin barked like an old dog.

“What?” Clint said calmly. “Why not give it a try? What are you afraid of?”

My slave sees through your lies, All-Father. How does it feel?

“You can lift it, right?” Clint asked.

“Barton, enough,” Loki murmured, because Odin was going to kill the archer and although it would certainly prove Loki’s point, he was not ready to make that kind of sacrifice.

But he knew the truth, now.

And truth was something he could wield.

I am worthy, he thought, almost breathless as he stared at the hammer. This means nothing. I can be worthy.

He looked up at Odin, stared into the old eye, and Odin saw that he knew.

“Apologies,” Loki grinned, groping for Barton's arm. “He is still in training.”

He wondered how much Thor had understood of what had just happened. Of all the people on this bridge, the thunderer was the most caged; the most deluded of them all. Poor fool, taken advantage of by everyone, including his own father.

Loki could not help Thor. Now was not the time and neither was it the place. But even as he remembered his brutal beating at the hand of his own brother, even as he remembered Thor's words like poison in his ear, promising to kill him as an act of generosity, Loki's hatred flared not for the thunderer, but for Odin All-Father. Because he had put those twisted thoughts inside Thor's mind, just like he'd put them inside Loki's.

“I believe we are done here,” the demi-god murmured. “I do thank you for your interest.”

He let his all-encompassing house swallow them down in its core of stone, and the wonderful colors vanished from sight.
Tadaaa! as Loki would say. ^^ What did you think?
It took Loki only one second to go through the fabric of the Universe and reach his house; but as he let his own magic carry him forward, he felt like he could see each star and moon passing by as he went. Something was beating inside him, something dazzling and scalding, something which made him want to scream and laugh and dance and explode all at once. He only discovered now that he had a talent for insane happiness just like he had a talent for insane despair.

He had seen through Odin's greatest lie. He was free from the clutches of Mjölnir. Worthy. I can be worthy. And he owed it all to Barton. To Clint Barton, who had known exactly what to do and when. Who had understood more about this situation than Loki had in a thousand years.

No one had ever stood up for Loki. No one. And not only had Barton done so, but he'd won. He'd won over Odin like he'd won over Thanos, by simply existing.

Fear added itself to the mix of raw exultation throbbing inside Loki, the same fear he'd felt as Barton had grabbed Mjölnir's handle. Could he do this? Could he make a slave out of this creature who'd defeated the two most powerful beings of this world without even trying?

Loki was delirious, and worried, and Barton expected a punishment anyway and oh, the demi-god had almost forgotten, but the archer's body was his. The anxiety, the bliss, the need for revenge—it all morphed into the most intense burst of arousal Loki had ever felt.

The endless second suddenly ended, and they found themselves back in the torture chambers. Loki had not even the patience to rip Barton's clothes; he slammed the archer on his stomach on the great table, and directly wished both their clothing away; then he tied up his arms, gagged him, spread him open and penetrated him violently.

Barton shouted behind the muzzle and oh, Loki was hurting him—no stretch, no lubricant, no regard for his wounds—and he reveled in that fact. The demi-god was being so brutal it was painful for him, too, Barton too tight and too dry around his cock, but he did not care. He was only raw desire and he was not going to last, but it would be shameless, because he did what he wanted. Barton was his slave and Loki was free to enjoy himself.

And so he did, ramming his cock into him, shuddering madly with the pleasure which built and built in his loins, flaring hot, hotter with each thrust, and he pushed and forced and came, too fast indeed, but as he rode the crest of his pleasure, he realized another orgasm was already coiling in the pit of his stomach; so he picked up his pace, impaled Barton deep and hard, and the archer was writhing with each thrust, panting, muscles bulging under the red stripes of his earlier punishment. To own this tortured body was more than Loki could bear, he was going to come again, soon, too soon, and
he rammed his cock inside Barton in a sharp, brutal thrust; the archer screamed behind the gag and oh, how Loki loved his screams, so he made him scream again, again, again and he exploded for the second time, thoughts melting into a blissful lava as his entire body convulsed with its release.

He slumped forward and Gods, this might just have been the best climax of his long life. He braced on one hand against the table, panting, and peered at the look on Barton's face. The archer was slack-mouthed behind the muzzle, eyes ajar and unfocused; and Loki could feel his cock hanging hard and heavy between his legs.

He'd loved it, the little slut.

Loki wrapped a hand over Barton's mouth to flick open his muzzle, collecting come on the fingers of his other hand. The archer startled and let out a muffled protestation. He did not mind getting his ass ploughed, but he hated tasting fluids. How adorable.

Loki's arousal smoldered still inside him; he ripped off the gag altogether and pushed his slick fingers inside Barton's unwilling mouth. The archer moaned again when the digits pushed past his lips, but he sagged in defeat instantly and licked Loki's fingers clean.

The demi-god chuckled; another chuckle bubbled in his throat, and then he realized it was actually full, hearty laughter coming out of his mouth, shaking his body with a mirth he had not experienced in several centuries. He was delirious with pleasure and joy, crazy with adrenaline and relief, and he laughed and laughed and laughed because Clint Barton had freed him from Odin, from a thousand years of abuse by Odin, just because Odin had been too proud to make Mjölnir yield to a mortal's grasp. Because this was the truth—this made sense; Loki knew enough of Barton to know that the hammer should have yielded; and if it hadn't, it meant Odin controlled it; and if Odin controlled it, it meant he did not respect mortals enough to allow one of them to be Thor's equal. Odin was just as flawed, just as mean, as despicable, and as weak and nasty as Loki himself.

And Loki felt like he could breathe freely for the first time of his long life.

“Oh,” he chuckled, still wheezing with joy. “In Hel's name, Barton.”

Loki leaned forward, rested against him, and let his hand slip between the archer's thighs, who startled with surprise then immediate eagerness. “Yes—yes, please, yes!”

He was desperate for it, but for once he needed not beg; Loki had never wanted to pleasure him more than in this moment. He squeezed and stroked and caressed, nibbling at Barton's ear, and the archer writhed helplessly with pleasure under him for only a few minutes before shooting hot and thick in Loki's hand with a dying moan. Loki loved it, utterly loved it, making his slave come, ruining him entirely with pleasure.

Damn, but Loki's inner turmoil would come to no rest. He was still pulsing with heat and pleasure and want. Oh, he wanted to devour Barton entirely—but he must let him rest, because his mortal body could not take much more at the moment.

For the first time, Loki thought he would have to do something about it.

He was beginning to realize just how utterly Barton was his. He could be sculpted in whatever shape Loki wished for, if he was skilled enough to achieve it. And he certainly did have the will and skills.
For now, he should get away before he gave in to himself again. A bath might be a good idea. With a smile on his lips, he pushed Barton so he would climb entirely on the table, pulling his hair just because he could; and he strapped him down on his stomach, spread-eagled and bound tight with unforgiving tethers. On second thought, he gagged him again—he liked to think of his mouth full—then parted his ass cheeks, smiling at his rim red with abuse, and pushed an ass plug inside him so he would not tighten again. Barton moaned behind the gag and arched as much as his restraints would allow (which wasn't much) when the toy was pushed into him. Loki grabbed his hair and pulled again to jerk his head back and see the scowl of humiliation on his face.

Oh, Barton was very lucky to be plugged, because that look was enough to make Loki fully hard yet again.

“Well,” he smiled. “I could use a long bath.”

Loki stayed in the waters for almost an hour and a half indeed. He let his lingering arousal alone—although he noticed the thought of taking care of himself disgusted him a bit less than before. He swam back and forth until the exertion and the heat soothed his own red-hot desire. He also liked his pleasure delayed at times. To think of Barton, strapped alone in the next room, cold and uncomfortable with the sweat and come drying on his skin, with a plug shoved up his ass so he would be ready for Loki’s pleasure.... That was pleasure in itself.

Loki sighed dreamily, then got out of the bath and dried his hair, wringing it with both hands before throwing it behind his shoulder. He tapped into the neural link regularly—but very shortly so Barton would not feel it—to check whether he wasn't choking; but Loki had placed the muzzle well, and although the archer's nerves echoed with discomfort and pain and cold and repressed arousal, his life was by no means endangered.

Loki spent a long time drying himself and clothing himself without the aid of his magic; something he did when he needed to pace himself. But this ritual made him think, and his thoughts took a turn he did not like.

Because he believed, now, that this was not just about keeping darkness away and finding a bit of pleasure before an inevitable death. This was life, life flowing back in his veins like it hadn't flowed ever since Thanos, and maybe even longer before that. For the first time, Loki felt he was authorized to exist, and the change made him all the more aware that Thanos was actively pursuing the end of this world in the darkness, while Loki did nothing to stop it.

He'd sworn to himself that he would not worry until he'd made Barton a proper slave. But this was not just about enslaving him anymore. This was about living together in their new-found freedom. Suddenly, Loki wanted to fight for the future with an urgency yet unknown to him. What he had found was so unexpectedly precious. So unexpectedly likely to last. Nothing had ever lasted before; and the one thing which might was doomed already, by his inaction.

He shook himself up. Yes. He had to fight, and he would. For Clint Barton, he would fight.

But right now, the very same Clint Barton was bound and suffering, and waiting for him. So Loki forced those apocalyptic thoughts out of his mind, and went back to the torture rooms. He was unreasonably happy to find Barton there—as though he could have escaped—and more than a little
aroused; the excitement he'd repressed not to harm Barton's body was making itself known again.

Barton's grey eyes followed him as he crossed the room. The archer's gaze was hopeful and needy.

Loki snapped Barton's ankles free and made him scramble up, so he found himself face down and ass up, his wrists still firmly bound to the corners of the table. Loki caressed the curve of his ass, slipped his fingers inside the crack, found the plug—and ripped it out. Barton tensed brutally but didn't make a sound. Loki chuckled, then pushed his fingers in the loose hole and reached his pleasure spot effortlessly. Barton squirmed a little and whined; he was desperately hard, had been during these whole two hours, maybe. Oh, that must hurt, and Loki's teasing was not helping at all.

Well, then he would help.

He grinned and pulled out his fingers, then violently slapped Barton's ass. He would have loved to use a paddle, or a switch or a cane, but the archer's skin was still crisscrossed with bloody welts; this would be painful enough, and anything worse was likely to injure him more seriously than Loki wanted. He slapped again, hard and sudden; Barton jolted and clenched his jaw around the gag when Loki cupped his ass. He buckled violently at the next slap, then at the next and the next and the next until the demi-god noticed his hand was stained with blood and there were tears in Barton's eyes.

There; now he could get his reward.

Loki grabbed the archer's cock and Barton buckled more violently than under any torture; he writhed and rutted and came in five seconds flat. Loki smiled indulgently when he sagged against the table and began to shiver uncontrollably. This had been a very demanding session. Barton was exhausted, and abused, and dirty.

Gods, Loki loved it.

He untied his wrists from the table, but let the cuffs on and manhandled Barton on his knees on the cold floor; the archer slid down and bowed his head, slumping, shivering. Loki invoked a chain bolted in the ceiling, and let it come down to his kneeling slave. Barton whimpered a little when his arms were chained above his head; the chain retracted slowly, pulling him up on his knees, then on his feet; he just hung there, exhausted, and Loki's twisted sense of care battled with his renewed arousal.

He invoked a soft piece of cloth which he soaked in warm water, and started wiping the sweat, blood and come off Barton's body. The archer jumped at first but Loki pulled his hair and hissed, “Stay still or stay there for five hours more.”

And Barton stayed still. Loki cleaned him, wiped the drool off his chin as he adjusted the muzzle, cleaned his face and chest and limbs. He spent a long time on his genitals and on the cleft of his ass. The water had healing powers, just like the herbal salve Loki had used on him yesterday; nothing worth a good spell, but still powerful enough to soothe the angry red of Barton's abused rim. Loki could feel his body warming up slowly; Barton closed his eyes with shame when the wet cloth rubbed between his legs, but he was obviously too tired to feel actually uncomfortable.

“Aren't you sweet,” Loki mocked. “My little domesticated hawk.”

Damn, but even the peacefulness of this moment aroused him. Could Barton take him again? Tapping into the neural link did not give him many answers—but it did tell him that Barton's jaw was growing unbearably stiff. Loki had almost forgotten about the muzzle. He unlocked it, welcomed by Barton's moan of relief.
Loki's desire was not exactly cruel at the moment. He wanted Barton to feel how completely owned he was; how completely he could give in to the pain, but also to the relief. The demi-god framed his face and kissed him, slow and deep. Barton let out a small, drugged whimper, but when Loki released him, he sagged completely in his chains again, wincing at the renewed strain on his shoulders.

Loki lifted him in his arms; Barton startled a little, but clung onto the demi-god's shoulders when his chains unclasped themselves. He closed his eyes and almost dozed off before Loki could even carry him to bed. The demi-god lay him on his stomach, and tied him down again, but in a much more forgiving way than when he'd left him spread-eagled and nearly quartered on the table. Barton sighed and relaxed completely, hazy and grateful, blissed out with submission.

Loki was still hard, and Barton's naked, striped body was too appealing. The demi-god carefully spread his ass cheeks, then wished his own clothing away and pushed in, sliding home effortlessly. Thanks to the plug, Barton had not tightened too much and he let himself be taken, humming in helpless pleasure now and then. Loki discovered slow, sloppy sex was something he also really liked. He pulled out just before his climax and splattered Barton's tan skin with stripes of white come, which he spread over the brand mark.

_Mine._

Loki didn't want to stop touching him, even though he feel he would not get hard again this time. _Mine,_ he thought again, rubbing Barton's shoulders to relieve them from the strain of the chains. _Mine, mine, mine._ Barton had fallen asleep long before Loki was done rubbing his shoulders, and kissing his neck, and his back, and his neck again, and letting himself feel this warmth—the strange warmth of a human body which had saved him today from a thousand years of coldness.

Loki spent the next few hours by Barton's side, with his eyes closed and his mind scattered all over the endless fields of space.

He knew Thanos needed five stones to adorn the Glove and one stone to power it. He had only four stones out of five—the amethyst was still stranded—and as to power, both the ruby and the Tesseract were out of reach. But he was likely to find more power sources; and Loki himself could not make the Tesseract and the ruby more secure than they already were. What he should worry about, what he should seek, was the amethyst. If managed to steal it, Thanos's plans would be thwarted for a least a few millenia.

Loki sought and sought, but truth be told, astral projection was not his best trick. He could pin-point things he already knew, but lost treasures were out of his reach. Frigga had taught him everything she knew, but she was not the master of the art of sight-seeking; Heimdall was. And he was not overly likely to lend Loki his help.

The demi-god sighed. He should start by assuming that the purple stone was lost somewhere in the Nine Realms. Not on Asgard, obviously—Odin would have found it—and not in Helheim—Thanos would have found it since he literally lived beneath Hel itself. Were left Niflheim, Vanheim, Alfheim, Svartalfheim, Muspellheim, Jotunheim and Midgard.

The dwarves were renowned for their taste for treasures; Loki should start looking there.
Technically, his bathroom was in Niflheim; thus it would be easier to cast his spell here. He got up and crossed the door, changing into his blue skin not to let the suffocating heat make him too mellow. He sat on the floor near the pool of clear waters and closed his eyes.

It was winter at the surface of this earth. Snow—snow weighing on black twisted naked branches—birds birds flying scattering away a white sky fumes and fumes and villages everywhere the sound of metal on metal people fighting people chopping wood people forging metal on metal on metal and the black branches crisscrossing the sky gold under the earth glittering gold and jewels and cold cold cold waters, translucent water, fields of ice and the smell of food of smoked salmon warm and crisp Mommy I found a weird rock just look! Under the earth once more gold and stone and crystal and the wide open space of the underground cities cut and ground into the rock rock rock the sound of pickaxes on rock further down, further down, the flames at the core and further up up up through the layers and layers of earth and stone, into the white sky once again, immense and white and lost and the eyes of a dwarf following him across the heavens—

Loki startled and straightened up, heart hammering against his ribs. He'd been seen. It didn't really matter, but—what if it did? He could not allow himself to be seen. He could not...

Relax, Loki, Frigga's soft voice said in his ear.

He took a deep, deep breath, and without really knowing why, tapped into Barton's neural link.

It felt so good. So warm, all muscles limp and relaxed, blood pulsing slowly, no pain, only bliss. He breathed more easily. Barton was just in the other room. Loki was not alone.

What a strange thought.

He took another deep breath, then closed his eyes and expanded his mind again. White skies, black twisted naked branches against the white skies...

Hours later, Loki hadn't found anything, but he still felt calmer and satisfied for having, at the very least, tried. He got up, stretched himself, then went back to the torture rooms and let his blue skin fade away as he crossed the door.

Barton was still asleep, but not nearly as deeply as before. Loki sat next to him and trailed a hand across his short hair. The archer squirmed a little and let out a pleased hum, then tugged on his restraints as he stretched himself. When he relaxed again, Loki began untying him, by no magical means as to give him the time to remember where he was, and why.

To be honest, the demi-god still feared another drop; but Barton just looked sort of mellow as he sat up. Loki decided to give him more time to gather himself and got up, leaving folded clothes on the nightstand.

“Dress yourself, then come eat,” he said.
He'd appreciate a bit of food, himself. Astral projections were truly draining.

“How does it work?” Barton suddenly asked as they ate.

Loki looked up from his food, surprised. The archer froze, as though he hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud; his voice echoed in the wide dining room.

They had been silent until then; Loki was used not to talk during meals, and although he'd just realized everything Odin had always told him was a lie, his reflexes were still well in place. Old habits were hard to break.

Barton hesitated, licked his lips, then bravely tried again. “How does... this place work? I mean, with all the food and the instant furniture and... you said Asgard, but I don't even know where we are exactly.”

Oh. Well, Loki had no problem satisfying his curiosity. After all, this was Barton's house too, now.

What a strange thought.

“This is my house,” he said. “I built it over the years. Each room exists in a different place, and they are all linked by magic.”

Barton frowned. “You can do that? Jumping from one place to another all the time—isn't it... demanding?”

Loki had not expected him to have this kind of knowledge. But no—it wasn't knowledge; just common sense. “Such magic is usually consuming,” he nodded. “But I am not required to personally teleport—otherwise, you would not be able to cross the thresholds, Barton. It is the house itself who does it, thanks to the spells I embedded in the walls. A long-term investment, if you will.”

Barton gave him a strange look. He stared at the wide, empty room; its grey walls, its sloping ceiling, all washed down in Vanaheim's cold daylight. Loki was suddenly struck with how unwelcoming this place was. How cold. Coldness had always come naturally to him, but for the first time, a stranger was discovering his life's work; and Loki felt unpleasantly... uncomfortable. He wondered how Barton's house looked like. Did he even have one? Where did he live before Stark Tower?

“It's amazing,” Barton muttered.

Loki blinked at him. The archer caught his gaze and repeated firmly, “This place is amazing. I can't imagine how hard it was to build.”

Loki swallowed and suddenly felt like a little boy again with a green flame dancing over his palm. This was ridiculous—but compliments... sincere compliments were something he was definitely not used to. How was he supposed to react?

Barton went on before he could say anything. “Does... does anyone know about it?”

“Er,” Loki murmured. Damn it! “...No. Only me. And you now.”
He looked down at his food. He was being completely ridiculous, really. But... this was too odd. He'd just tortured this man, abused him and forced him for his pleasure; and there Barton was, saying nice things and meaning them, as far as the God of Lies could tell.

Loki stabbed a piece of meat in his plate and started chewing again. Barton said nothing and took a bite as well. There was a long silence.

“Do you,” Loki said, forcing the words out of his mouth. “Do you like... the food?”

It was Barton's turn to look up in puzzlement. “What?”

“The food,” Loki said impatiently. “Do you like it? I can conjure anything; we do not have to eat meat and mead if it is not to your liking.”

Barton stared at him.

“Uh,” he said, obviously confused. “I can... I can choose?”

Loki shrugged and said a bit dryly, “It's all the same to me.”

“Uh—well—no,” Barton murmured, “it's... it's fine, really. This is good.”

Loki narrowed his eyes, then gave a light kick to Barton under the table. “Barton. I just told you you could ask.”

Barton fidgeted a little and yes, Loki preferred it when he was the embarrassed one. “I... um... I don't know. Bacon?”

“Bacon,” Loki said. “Like this?”

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at Barton's plate. The archer's eyes widened when a single piece of bacon appeared before him; he ate it enthusiastically and chuckled. “Man, this is the best superpower.”

Loki couldn't help smiling a little. “This is what you like?” he said, peering curiously at him. “Salty, grilled pork meat?”

“You don't like it?”

“I cannot say I am seeing any specific appeal,” Loki shrugged.

Barton looked almost scandalized and the demi-god's lips quirked minutely again. They started eating in silence once more, but Barton was glancing at Loki from times to times and, although the room was still wide and empty, it didn't feel as cold.
(Guys, I need you to mentally prepare for a hiatus, because of Internet-less holidays ahead.)

Thoughts, please? ^^
“Alright,” Loki said. “Sit down.”

Barton obediently sat on the chair, looking a bit nervous. This was the same chair Loki had tied him to when he'd first come to see him in Stark Tower, and obviously, he remembered.

Loki tied him in the exact same position—hands behind the wooden back, ankles strapped to the wooden legs—but let the ropes wrap themselves around his whole body and trap him in a tight harness clutching at his thighs, groin, and chest. Barton took a deep breath, but a quick peek into the neural link told Loki his heart rate had dropped and his breathing had imperceptibly slowed.

“Very well,” Loki said, sitting in front of him. “Answer me this. How old are you?”

Barton blinked, puzzled—and Loki slapped him harshly for it. His face crunched but he did not make a sound.

“How old are you?” Loki repeated calmly.

“Forty-one,” Barton muttered.

“What is your full name?”

“...Clinton Francis Barton.”

“Tell me about all the wounds you sustained and when.”

“Gonna be a long list,” the archer murmured.

Loki brutally grabbed his throat. Barton froze, barely breathing; Loki kept him on that edge for a second, then relaxed his grip minutely.

“How old are you?” he said, thumb smoothly rubbing over his pulse point. “Do not make this any harder on yourself.”

He released him.
“Just answer me. Your wounds: where and when.”

“Twisted my ankle in the circus. Nine years old,” Barton began.

_The circus._ Loki thought. He didn’t know much about Barton—he’d mainly asked about his teammates during the attack on Manhattan; and before the attack, he’d watched Selvig rather than Selvig’s watcher. But the demi-god didn’t ask for any precisions. This was about knitting a line of thought and using it to pull Barton down; he couldn’t ask too broad a question. However, it was true that he didn’t know anything about Barton.

That would change. He’d have two months to slowly dissect him.

“Twisted my thumb,” Barton was going on. “Broke my clavicle the next year.” He took a deep breath. “Got four broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a broken nose, a broken leg, a displaced vertebra, a ruptured spleen, and a concussion when I was seventeen. Last circus year.”

His voice was toneless. He licked his lips and looked up, wary and nervous. His cheek and throat were reddening already.

“And then?” Loki said, without asking for any explanation.

Barton relaxed, and kept going for an awful length of time indeed. Loki stopped him when he started describing the wounds he’d sustained in his care.

“I know that part,” he said. “Tell me your favorite color.”

Barton smiled a little. “Purple,” he mumbled.

“Tell me your greatest fear.”

The archer squirmed in the ropes. Loki slapped him again, hard; Barton did not fight the pain this time, just let it wash over him, and it cleared his eyes on its way out. “Blindness,” he let out.

Loki did not believe it to be the right answer, but he did not believe Barton to be lying either, so he let it drop for now.

“How many hours of sleep do you need?”

“Six. Six is enough.”

“How many lovers have you had?”

“...Nine.”

“All of them female?”

“Yes.”

“Which one was your favorite?”

Barton winced a little. “I don’t...”

Loki slapped him hard for the third time.

“No lies, Barton” he warned him. “I don’t care how improper it is on Midgard to rank your lovers. I know you did it in the back of your soul where no one looks.”
His fingers grazed Barton's jaw. “And this is all about upturning it,” he murmured.

He closed in and his voice dropped down a notch. “I will know everything of you. I will expose your darkest corners.”

Barton's breathing had quickened and he looked more frightened than he'd been during the physical tortures. Loki rubbed his jaw with his knuckles. “But like everywhere else,” he said softly, “we will take it slow.”

The archer sucked in a deeper breath and nodded. Loki waited until his breathing had calmed down.

“Now,” he said.

He leaned back and let his hand fall down. “Who was your favorite?”

“...Jessica Drew,” Barton muttered in miserable shame. “I... guess it didn't work out in the end, but I —”

“If I want details, I will ask,” Loki cut off sharply.

Barton shrank down a little, but the demi-god didn't hit him this time. The interrogation went on. Loki's questions grew more and more invasive; he interspersed them with lighter topics to give the archer a bit of breathing space. But Loki kept punishing him every time he stepped out of line or was too slow to answer. By the end of the session, Barton was breathing deeply, loudly; his heart rate had dramatically dropped and he was sagging a little in his restraints.

“Very well,” Loki said again.

He cupped Barton's jaw, then rubbed his inflamed cheek. Tears welled in the archer's eyes.

“You are not used to being pried open,” Loki said in a low, soft voice. “I know.”

He thought of his spear piercing Barton's chest and winced inwardly, but his features remained as smooth and cold as ever. This was different and they both needed to get used to it.

“Tell me this,” he said. “And I will be done for today. Have you ever been tortured on the field?”

“Yes, sir,” Barton said blandly.

“How many times?”

“Four.”

Loki's hand went down on his neck, rubbed his damp nape. “Did you enjoy it?”

A shiver ran through Barton's body. “No, sir,” he said through gritted teeth. He screwed his eyes shut and repeated desperately, “No.”

“Ssh,” Loki murmured.

He grabbed Barton's rope harness to pull him close and kissed him, tipping the chair just enough to balance it on two wooden legs. Barton let himself be invaded, still shivering; but his heart rate was slowing down again. When Loki pulled back a little, Barton's head fell against his shoulder, and he pressed his forehead against the leather, shivering. Maybe there were a few tears; Loki had the decency not to check through the link.
“You did good,” he said, letting the chair slowly set back down.

Barton was shaking and couldn't answer.

“It's over,” Loki said in a low voice. “It's over for now.”

The archer nodded again, jerkily. “Yes, sir,” he finally managed. “Thank you, sir.”

“Now,” the demi-god murmured. “Get up—the ropes fell down—and strip.”

Barton stood up slowly, stiffly, and let his garments fall down one after the other. Loki stayed on his chair, watching him intently. There were rope marks on Barton's wrists and ankles, but also, quite fainter, on his chest and thighs. When he was stripped bare, Loki made him climb on the bed and tied him on his stomach as usual. Barton squirmed a little to get comfortable, but he had had a long, exhausting day, physically and emotionally; and despite having rested earlier in the afternoon, he fell asleep again almost instantly.

Loki watched him sleep for a long time, then got up and walked away, turning everything he'd learned in his mind. He could do this, without the aid of Thanos's staff this time. He could gut Barton open by the book and shape his mind according to his wishes. Step by step.

And maybe he'd even learn something.

* 

He did not sleep that night, but explored the depths of Vanaheim's forests from the middle of his dining room. *Trees and leaves and trees and even more leaves, and sky and earth and rock* but no amethyst. Vanaheim was a land of sorcerers anyway; they would have found the jewel themselves by now. Loki was quick to drop it, and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and leaned back against the wall—he was sitting on the floor; he actually liked it when there was no one else around. His thoughts wandered towards his captive in the other room. Obviously, Barton knew nothing about magic; he knew almost nothing about Vanaheim and Niflheim and about the Nine Realms in a whole.

And Loki knew nothing about him either, really. His interrogation of the evening had been more about breaking Barton's defenses than actually learning things about him, but he had read many things between the lines. Obviously, there had been a grave incident in his youth which had left him seriously injured, both in body and spirit. But that was all Loki could tell, really.

There was also something about his greatest fear. *Blindness.* It sounded true enough, but too shallow; as though it was hiding an even greater terror.

Well, Loki did not want to rush anything. There were other ways he could get Barton to open himself. The archer was a man of few words, but of many actions; Loki thought about how desperate he'd been to keep his bow.

Yes—there was an idea here.

He got up and walked into the torture rooms again. Barton was sleeping soundly. Loki crafted a few clothes for him, then remembered Barton needed to eat regularly and left him a loaf of bread as well
—he was too excited to start this to wait for him to get a proper breakfast; he could hardly bear to let
him sleep. He untied him so the archer could come to him at once, then strode out and into the magic
room.

So. He invoked various targets by snapping his fingers. At first they were just wooden panels like
anyone could find in Asgard's archery; but those would be no challenge for Barton. Moving targets
would be better. And how about booby trapped targets?

Loki got more and more excited as ideas burst inside his mind. He was really curious—he wanted to
know what Barton was capable of, but he also wanted to know what he would think of the idea; he
yearned to see the pleasure on his face when he was given back his bow; he craved for more
evidence of Barton's enjoyment at finding himself here—in Loki's realm of stone and coldness. It
was so unusual, to have someone else here with him. So worrying.

And so pleasant.

Loki stayed wired to Barton's nerves from a distance while he precised his thoughts in the magic
room; when he felt him twitch and stir, he knew he was about to wake up. He shut off the
connection and snapped his fingers. Everything he'd constructed disappeared; he walked away and
into the dining room to test a theory of his.

Sure enough, Barton crossed the threshold a few minutes later. Funny. He could use the magic
doors, but only to go to places he already knew about. Well, this only furthered Frigga's teachings.
Magic was all about faith. Barton thought he could walk through these doors, so he did. It did not
require much conviction from his part, since the magic was embedded in the walls; he just had to
activate preexisting spells—and aim at a target he knew. Archer at heart.

Loki had kept Barton's bow in a corner of his mind; when he entered the room, the demi-god
casually tossed it at him and said, “Catch.”

Barton caught it at once and for a second, his sullen features quivered with what had to be pure
delight. Loki felt strangely warmed. He didn't need the neural link to see that Barton grew more
relaxed the second he buckled his weapon of choice around his shoulder.

“Now, come,” Loki said.

They went into the magic room; Loki eyed Barton to spy his reaction. The archer didn't seem very
flustered, rather curious as he glanced around the empty cube.

“There is an old Vanir saying,” Loki said, “which can be translated as, art is when you listen to the
Universe; magic is when the Universe listens to you.”

He did not quite know why he had said that now; maybe just so he could see Barton's interest—or
lack thereof—in magic. As it was, the archer only seemed cautious. True, his experiences in the
matter had not been pleasant.

“I built this room so it would listen unconditionally,” Loki went on. “A trained sorcerer is virtually
omnipotent inside it—I think even you could use it partly, with a bit of practice.”
“Me?” Barton blinked, taken short. “But I don't have any powers or shit—I'm 100% human.”

He said it like it was such a shameful thing, Loki realized. Well, he knew what it was, being ashamed of his own nature. But weren't humans proud of themselves? There was something strange here he might have to study in depth during his next interrogation.

“Magic is about exterior sources, not—but that is not my point,” he reminded himself. “Let us begin.”

Now. He snapped his fingers and their world changed. A silver platform carried them high above a grassy field which reached the horizon all around them; Loki's moving targets began floating around, thousands and thousands of them, as he'd crafted them in his mind during his night of reflections.

Barton looked thrilled with the challenge. He snapped open his bow and was about to shoot when he suddenly turned to Loki. “Are you... asking me to show off?”

Again with that hesitant tone of voice. Loki remembered the screens in Stark's living room. Apart from that single quality piece of footage, Barton was almost never represented. Loki did not think his friends had not cared about him; but Barton obviously did not care much about himself.

Human, Loki realized. While his comrades were not, not entirely. Barton had no green force lurking inside him, no cheating serum coursing through his veins and no mechanical device to carry him across the skies. Only his bow.

He was so pure, in a way. He thought he'd already pushed himself nearly to his limits and it wasn't enough. Loki was beginning to see where his shame was coming from; and the more he understood, the more he really wanted to show him what he could do.

“I am ordering you to 'show off', Barton,” he said in a low voice. “Let me see how useful you can be.” Let us both see.

Something zinged through the air and a target burst out. Loki almost startled, but then understood—Barton had begun. Showing off.

And what a show it was.

Loki grew more and more entranced as he watched. At first, he was controlling the moving targets, causing them to fight back, to attack, to dodge, to slow down or go faster. But his own magic got ahead of him and eventually, he realized the room had started obeying Barton rather than him, automatically adapting and upgrading to present him with a higher challenge he could always, always match. Barton was not there anymore. He was not even conscious that he was manipulating the room to his own ends. He was shooting and shooting and shooting and his quiver never got empty.

Loki realized the motion of his hands and the curve of his bow had actually nothing to do with it. Everything was in his gaze. The way he looked at the world around him; the way he aimed at it. There was something greater at work here, something more graceful and more powerful than he could ever surmise, He was simply... in tune. He was both the bow and the target. In such moments, he was everything Loki wanted. He was already perfect and growing into his own perfection.

And Loki owned him. He owned him.

He was breathless with the consciousness of his own obscene luck. The targets kept exploding, showering Barton in gleaming knives, colorful darts, live snakes or fireballs. He dodged them all; he kept shooting. He looked so...
He looked so free. And Loki thought he was himself on the verge of understanding something of
great importance. He urged himself to delve deeper into that thought. Barton was—

—Barton was hit.

The world of moving silver abruptly shattered around them.

Loki felt the phantom of an awful pain shooting through Barton body and reverberating through the
neural link. Barton was falling on his knees, then on all fours. There was a huge dart piercing
through his chest. It was an illusion, of course. Just an illusion. But...

The dart had red feathers which spilled like blood on the now shapeless ground. Like blood, or like
strands of hair. And when Barton looked up, with eyes full of fear, Loki understood why he'd
missed.

Oh, he understood.

Romanov.

Yes, the room had started obeying to Barton; and this was what had come out of it. The red hair of
the Black Widow.

Loki should have seen this coming. He should have seen this coming. Barton was strong, but not for
himself. He was perfect, but not in the eyes of his friends. Hence his friends alone could hurt him.
His friends alone could still threaten Loki's power. Barton had missed. He'd missed on purpose.
Unconsciously or not.

Barton looked up, suffocating, sweating. Loki was shell-shocked. He knew not what it was to be tied
to a happy past; but Barton had been happy, if imperfectly so. He had loved, he had been loved, and
he did not love Loki.

The demi-god's breath stopped when he realized that there was no easy way out of this. Norns, he'd
wanted to go slow. To tear Barton apart session after session; to dig slowly until he'd reached the
darkest depths. But fate had other ideas; he now knew what Barton's greatest fear was. Blindness,
because blindness meant he could not be an archer anymore. And if he was not an archer, he had no
right to remain among his friends. He could not protect them. He would be left behind.

They already left you behind, Loki thought with anger and despair. But obviously, Barton hadn't
abandoned them.

This was his greatest fear. This was the last stronghold of his dignity—the reason he could not be
called Loki's slave yet, even after his abduction, even after a week of training. This was a Gordian
knot Loki could not ignore. He had to cut right through it.

Now.

He shut off the magic in the room and Barton could breathe again as the dart disappeared from his
He swallowed huge lungfuls of air, trembling—trembling?—trembling not in pain, but in fear. Tears were rolling down his cheeks.

Loki was petrified, but he still managed to whisper, “Get up.”

Barton got up slowly and for a single moment, Loki hated him with the heat of a dying star. *Everything was going so well. So well!*

Barton was dropping again, in a chasm which couldn’t have been avoided. Once again, he was conscious he’d done wrong; and once again, he was expecting Loki to punish him. And Loki had to. He must do his duty. He could catch him—catch them both. He had to make Barton bow, no matter the price to pay for his submission.

“Strip,” Loki spat.

Barton obeyed without a word. Loki stepped forward; he collared him, *tight*, strapped his arms behind his back in a armbinder to put as much strain as he could on his shoulders. He put him on a leash, then willed a door into existence and dragged him into the torture rooms.

When he saw the cage, Barton stopped and tugged on the leash.

“No,” he choked.

Loki wanted to enjoy his reluctance, but his body felt hollowed out again. Just like the last time Barton had dropped. This was no matter of pleasure. This was a battle of wills and *Loki must win*. Or they would both be lost.

The demi-god was breathing too fast. What was he doing? What was he punishing him for? Barton did not want to harm his friends; this was to be expected. Maybe even honored.

But this was the exact same thing as the last time they'd found themselves in this situation. Barton thought he'd failed. He needed to be punished, *so I can be your slave again, sir.*

Yes, Loki thought, and his beating heart calmed down. This was what this punishment was about. Barton kept doubting himself. Kept thinking Loki might give up on him. This was his greatest fear. *Being left behind.* Loki had made promises before, but Barton hadn't believed in them—with reason, too. However, today was the real thing; Loki wasn't playing anymore, and Barton would believe him, would have his mind knocked into shape, or he would die.

Yes; the harsher Loki would be, the more Barton would be likely to understand how tightly trapped he was. And he liked to be tightly trapped; only because—Loki only understood it *now*—it meant he was looked after.

Doubts were in his nature. Diminishing himself and his own abilities was in his nature. Well—Loki would bend and break his very *nature*, and shape it otherwise. This, nothing else, was the essence of slave training. He must prove it to Barton *now*, or he might as well give up indeed.

So many reasons to do it; and yet he was still terrified. Because he knew that, if he failed *now*, all would be lost.

Loki forced Barton to his knees. Last time's punishment had obviously made but a fleeting impression. This time, he had to be absolutely merciless. It would be painful; it would be humiliating; it would *last*. For as long as was necessary. Barton must not break; he must *shatter*, utterly so, so Loki could put him back together in an irremediably different form.
He invoked a wooden cock of appreciable size and forced it into Barton's ass. The archer buckled; Loki slapped his exposed flesh, then made the toy bottom out and tied the leather straps at its end to Barton's inner thighs, so it would stay in place. He then opened the gleaming cage; when his fingers touched the cold bars, he experienced the deep, almost ascetic feeling of his responsibility. No warmth between his thighs this time, but dominance in black and white. This was the right thing to do. He could feel it. This was what Barton needed and what only Loki could give him. He would make him better. He would show him he could be. And Loki would also show him he could be trusted as a master.

“Get inside,” he murmured.

Barton clenched his jaw but crawled inside without a word.

Loki's thoughts were running a mile a minute. He remembered every little thing Barton truly hated. Fluids; his own fluids, more than Loki's. Humiliation. And, of course, abandonment.

He lifted the cage and slammed it on the table, causing Barton to stumble inside. Grabbing the archer's leash, he tied it to the bars above his head so he could not kneel without risking to get strangled. He strapped his thighs on each side of the cage as to keep him open, then trapped his cock in a tight ring and stroked it to full hardness. He tacked into Barton's neural link. Stinging pain from the ring; dull pain from the dildo shoved up his ass. A bit of pleasure—Loki stilled his hand, then started it again. It took him almost three minutes before he could milk Barton properly, but he was positive the ejaculation had been as uncomfortable and painful as possible.

And he'd collected Barton come in a bowl which he now pushed in a corner of the cage. Barton's eyes burned with hatred, and he opened his mouth to—

—Loki focused on the toy up his ass which started buzzing furiously. Barton buckled and almost cried out. How invaded—how violated he must feel.

Yes. This had to work.

“Learn your place,” Loki murmured. “Your pride—I will rip it off you, Barton. You will beg. You will break.”

“Not this time,” the archer panted.

The demi-god approved. Very good—he was putting up a fight. Loki could not break an already broken soul. He needed Barton to fight him precisely so he could be brought down.

“We will see,” the demi-god said in a low voice, before nodding at the bowl. “Eat it.”

Barton, of course, did not move.

“I am in no hurry,” Loki whispered. “You will lick this bowl clean of your filth, Barton.”

He turned away, and left.

This was torture. This was torture.
Loki wondered what Barton thought his master was doing. Did the archer actually believe Loki flipped through a book or took a stroll while his slave was suffering? No, Loki was linked to Barton's nerves and he was feeling every single of his twitches of pain. And his muscles were so stiff. His jaws so tightly clenched. He was not giving up.

Loki had milked him twice already and increased the vibrations of the punishing toy in Barton's ass. The archer could not curl up; could not move his arms. He was cold, he was in pain, and he was alone. Loki wanted to get him out of here. To rub the pain out of his sore muscles, to make him warm again, to soothe his panic.

But he couldn't. He couldn't. Barton had to yield. There was no other possible outcome for the both of them. He had to break. Eleven times already Loki had jumped on his feet to walk towards the door with the firm decision to free Barton from the cage; but he'd argued with himself each time and turned away before he could leave the room. Why was he doing this to him? Because there was no other choice. No way around this step of their journey. Loki had failed Barton so many times as a master. He could not back off now. He had to finish what he'd started.

But why had he started it? What had Barton done which deserved such a dreadful punishment? In Hel's name, Loki knew he had reasoned logically about this, only a few hours ago, but his mind seemed devoid of all thoughts now. Barton had missed a target he'd unconsciously mistaken for Romanov. Loki would have called him out on it; he might have whipped him; but so terrible a torture?

But Barton had not just missed. He had been afraid. He had not been afraid of Loki's wrath, but of his disappointment. And maybe Loki was disappointed—but even though he selfishly wanted to be the only one in Barton's heart and mind, Barton still cared for his friends. And Loki could have brainwashed him into hating them; he could have tied him up to the chair again and invoked visions of his dearest Natasha coldly discussing his enslavement with Coulson; visions of his beloved Captain mocking his lack of powers with Iron Man. Barton might not have believed in these illusions, but they would have hurt his heart all the same. Because he always thought his friends might give up on him. And why shouldn't he? They had! He had been sold to Loki!

But Loki would not let him go. Never. And the cage was his way of showing this. The torture was his way of showing this. If he carried out Barton's punishment, if he broke him down, if he won—then Barton might begin to believe that he would be owned, owned, for the rest of his life.

So Loki could not free him. He had to win. He had to make him yield.

Gods, Gods, this was so difficult. This was torture.

Loki curled up on himself, screwed his eyes shut, pressed his palms over his ears; but the neural link pulsed from inside, and he felt Barton's pain, Barton's fear, Barton's agony. And he could not bring himself to tear himself away from it.

An entire day had passed. Barton was wrung out, exhausted, dehydrated, but the flame of will still burned bright in his eye.

And Loki began to doubt. He was teeming with doubts, like cockroaches gnawing at his eyes to slip
inside his skull and crawl under his skin. The last time he had milked him, Barton had been crying. His levels of pain were hitting critical thresholds. His sight was dizzy; his whole body sore. Loki could feel it, he saw through his eyes and felt his suffering, and the neural link was slowly driving him insane.

Loki could do nothing to relieve his own agitation, because his sole and only outlet had been left to suffer in a narrow cage, in a cold war none of them was likely to win. *Barton, yield, yield now.* But Barton was not yielding, and Loki wouldn't either.

And so they were stuck.

There had to be a way out of this. There had to be a way *out* of this! Something which wouldn't challenge Barton's faith in Loki, but something which might allow Loki to save his life. Because Barton was slowly starving now. It had been two days. *Two damn days!* No, he wouldn't break. He had said he wouldn't, and he *wouldn't.* Loki did not need the neural link to know that the mortal's body was being pushed to its near limits. But no, no, no, Barton was tougher than that, he could endure so much, *had* endured so much. He was so strong, so strong, but he was actually too strong, too goddamn stubborn, too strong of spirit but too weak of body, and he was going to die of stubbornness and there was nothing Loki could do to stop it.

Twenty-two more times he almost went to free him, then talked himself out of it at the last minute. But his objections were growing more and more frantic, and anxiety was clawing at his heart, leaving him breathless and in such pain that he did not even need to share Barton's anymore. He did so anyway, living through the torture with him, praying that he would yield, that this stubborn will would break and give, for both their sakes.

Barton was trapped inside the cage, but Loki was trapped inside Barton, in an even narrower space. He clenched his teeth, grabbed his left thumb and *broke* it in a swift movement. The pain exploded through him and helped him live through another minute. He hadn't hurt himself like this since Odin's cells, but he couldn't go on without help now.

*Barton, please. Oh, Norns, please.*

“Sir,” Barton rasped when Loki opened the door.

The demi-god stilled; his heart could have beaten out of his chest with the furious hope which suddenly washed through him like a tidal wave.

“Please. Sir. Please,” the archer stammered, hoarse and delirious after two days under constant torture. “I'm sorry.” He was sobbing. “I'm so sorry. Please, sir, let me out. I will do anything.”

*Yes, Loki thought, but there was no triumph in it, only desperation and relief, yes, yes, thank all the Gods, thank you, Barton, yes!*

“You know what I want,” he said, icy and indifferent, and this was the most difficult part he'd ever had to play. He clenched his left hand; he hadn't healed his thumb and the awful jolt of pain helped him keep his composure.
Barton swallowed another sob and crawled forward on his knees, painfully and stiffly; and he did what Loki wanted, this demeaning act, he licked his own come off the bowl, he obeyed, he *yielded*, and Loki had won, Loki was finally free to reward him, to help him, to stop this torture.

He almost flew towards the cage and just wished the goddamn door away before carefully pulling Barton's body out. The archer felt like he was entirely made of wood. His rim was bleeding with the constant vibration of the toy. He'd fought so hard and for so long. And yet Loki had won.

It did not feel like winning at all.

Gods, Gods, his hands were trembling as he untied Barton's stiff arms and turned off the dildo to pull it out of his ass. When he did, Barton convulsed in agony and passed out.

Loki caught the limp body in his arms and held him tight. He buried his face in Barton's neck and murmured words against his skin, words which caused a golden glow to rise on the archer's sweaty skin.

Magic did not need words to function, really; but they helped the spellcaster to focus, and Hel knew how Loki needed to focus right now. He was almost crazy with remorse and relief. He whispered blessings in Old Norse and let his magic wash its warmth over Barton's body, closing his wounds, healing his twisted muscles, chasing the stiffness out of his limbs. Loki had sworn himself never to heal Barton with magic, but see if he cared.

He invoked a glass of water and took a sip, before pressing his mouth against Barton's and letting the fresh liquid trickle down his throat, massaging it so he would swallow. Barton coughed a little, but he was too limp not to be manipulated in this way; Loki made him drink the entire glass, mouthful after mouthful, until he could tack into the neural link without feeling parched. Barton was starved, too, but this would have to wait. Above all, he needed rest.

Loki realized then that he hadn't let go of him ever since he'd pulled him out of the cage. He pressed him against his heart and started shuddering a little; but he wouldn't cry, and he wouldn't panic. He'd done what had to be done. And now they could move on; they could use all that suffering, that stubbornness, to build and learn. Now they could make it all worth the trouble.

Loki got up, then lifted Barton in his arms and carried him to the bed. He did not tie him up, but lay him down on his back—his lacerations had healed enough—and drew thick, plump covers over him. He let himself fall on a chair next to the bed and focused on Barton's body, until he felt the last of his tremors fade away in relaxation and sleep.

Only then did Loki exit the neural link and let himself go limp; he hid his face in his hands and stayed there, shivering with shock, breathing in ragged, shallow gasps for a long dreadful while.

He healed his thumb like an afterthought, then leaned back and pressed the back of his hand against his eyes, forcing himself to breathe slower.

Barton slept for fifteen hours and Loki watched him unwaveringly. His confusion and panic had settled into a more sober bitterness, almost like a mourning. He felt like he'd grown up. It was a very foreign, forgotten sensation after a thousand years of selfishness. But still, he was scared. He had never broken Barton so thoroughly—so mercilessly. He had left him no choice at all, cornering him
in a cage and torturing him until he gave up. That had been—that had been true torture. Loki still felt like it was necessary and he knew, he knew he had had a good reason, he was absolutely certain this was not something he had done out of selfish pleasure—Gods, no, there had been no pleasure there. He had never felt less pleasure in his life.

But still he felt guilty. Awfully guilty. What if Barton woke up shattered and meek? What if Loki had not broken in his spirit, but simply broken it?

The archer squirmed and moaned. He was waking up. Loki's breath quickened at once; he slowed it back. Now was the time not to make a single mistake. Loki sincerely believed this situation could represent a great step forward; but he had no doubt it could also be both their ruin if he did not get this right.

The archer opened his eyes; he blinked at the ceiling for a second, gaze weary and confused, immediately turned to Loki. The demi-god stared back, and he was so relieved, so sorry, and so stressed that he spoke the truth without thinking.

“I thought I would have to kill you, Barton.”

Barton stared at him for a long time. He did not look indignant in the slightest; he had this faraway gaze of survivors; of people who'd gone through transcendence and back. Loki was amazed, because —anyone else would have blamed him, resented him, or feared him. But not Barton.

Like Loki himself, Barton had grown up. He did not look shattered—there was no fear in his eyes, and Loki was disbelievingly, desperately grateful for it. So strong.

He still looked hesitant; he'd only walked half the way. But that was precisely what the demi-god was there for. He was there to show him the way; to make him walk the path.

“Have you ever had something you wanted to protect, no matter the price?” Barton asked in a hoarse voice. “Something you would die for?”

You, Loki thought.

Barton waited for an answer without realizing Loki's gaze on him was the answer. He closed his eyes and muttered, “I'm sorry. I took myself hostage. I deserved the punishment.”

“You chose your life over your dignity after all,” Loki said in a low voice. And I cannot be grateful enough that you did. Loki didn't think he'd ever been so terrified in his entire existence, not even when he'd fallen into the abyss.

“Yeah,” Barton muttered. “But, if I must be honest, even now, I can't—I couldn't hurt them.”

Them?

“So, kill me off,” he said in defeat.

The Avengers. He still thought this was about the Avengers. Loki almost wanted to laugh; but he also wanted to cry.

“Barton, just how stupid do you think I am?” he said brutally.

The archer blinked at him and Loki sighed. “Some masters enjoy placing their slaves between a rock and a hard place. They trick them into being faulted, just so they can punish them.”
And they were precisely what Loki strove not to be. Barton could not defend himself. What would have Loki won by tricking him? Where was the dignity in that? The pride in that? The sense of achievement?

“They are just shameful, pathetic beings who refuse to admit how much they enjoy the pain of others. They try to find themselves excuses, justifications other than their sheer pleasure. But blaming it all on the slave is petty and despicable.”

He remembered the slave maiden, a long time ago, who’d been executed for killing her master. “Not to mention dangerous—many of these pathetic lords found their end at the hands of torture pets they had let live for just a day too long,” he added, smiling slightly. Perhaps he would have liked this girl; but at the time, he could not have been good for her. And she wasn’t willing anyway; therefore of no interest for Loki’s plans.

Barton was willing; Barton could and would learn.

And he still thought this was about his friends. Loki was not fond of spelling things out, but sometimes clarity was simply mandatory. “I know you once loved, Clint Barton,” he said. “I am not enough of a fool to threaten what you loved.”

“But...” Barton stammered, sitting up a little in his bed. He still looked very pale. “If there are orders you can’t give me...”

Ah; now they were getting to the heart of the matter. “Who says I can’t?” Loki asked. “Make no mistake, you have no say in the matter. I can force you to aim at the one target you refuse to hit. But this would be a foolish order to give, because I will give it knowing that you will miss on purpose, and that I will then have to torture you to death for your disobedience. We both lose.”

This was something he’d confusedly realized during the two days of their common ordeal. Now he was phrasing it out and it all made beautiful, perfect sense. “You are mine, Barton,” and he was burning once again with the cold fire of responsibility, the cold passion of want—he wanted Barton to understand, so badly—“which means I must be clever for us both. Make the choices for us both.”

Do you understand? This is my responsibility. To know you enough to know which orders to give; as to never give you orders you couldn’t obey. Do you see?

Barton looked at him; but slowly, amazingly, his face lit up. “Wow,” he said, looking at Loki like he’d never seen anything like it.

Loki looked back in hope and disbelief. He’d felt sick and cold by Barton's bedside; he’d shivered in shock and regret. But now, Barton was staring at him like he’d never stared at him before. This was more than just dread; more than just acknowledgment. What was it? Loki did not recognize this look. Respect? Admiration?

Love?

It suddenly hit him how completely things had changed. And not because of Barton's enslavement. Simply put, Loki had once reveled in Clint Barton's hatred towards him; and now, desperately, he craved his love.

How had it happened? At which point had the balance started to tip?
“Wow,” Clint repeated more softly. “I’m a real moron.”

“No,” Loki said instantly. *Barton, you are perfect and I cannot bring you to see it. You were right,*” he insisted, “to put up a fight for your friends. And I was right to break you in retaliation.”

This was the truth, no matter how painful or harsh. Barton swallowed and nodded. And something kept shifting in his eyes, like gears clicking into place—gears which had always been there, only waiting for the right clockmaker. *You were made to be ruled.* There was nothing contemptuous or mocking in that statement anymore. It was both an encouragement and a cry of hope. *You were made to be ruled.*

“I get it,” Clint murmured, sounding amazed. “I think I get it.”

Loki smiled. “What you showed me in the magic room,” he said. Barton, so strong, so talented, and most of all—so happy. Blooming into his true nature. “This is what I want.”

“And I’ll give it to you, sir.”

Loki felt so warmed by these words that his mischievous self took over to save him from sincerity. “Let us hope so; you looked good in a cage, but I would rather not starve you again if I can avoid it.”

“Yeah,” Clint winced. “You and me both.”

The demi-god chuckled—he could have laughed out loud in relief and joy and pride, but he checked himself, he did—then tilted his head on the side, still smiling broadly. “Speaking of which. Are you hungry?”

The archer blinked at him. “Fuck, yes.”

*Beg,*” Loki spat.

And Clint answered instantly: “Please let me eat.”

Loki felt pride wash through him in an exhausting wave of relief. By all the Gods, they had done it. They had really *done* it. Oh, he wanted to go in his cold bedroom and sleep for a thousand years. And he also wanted to kiss Barton, to climb in bed with him and hold him and just *stay.*

But that was the one thing he couldn’t do; he had a character to be in at the moment. Besides, he’d promised food. He got up and said, “Well, come along, then.”

Barton jumped on his feet—which was very unwise of him; Loki felt the blood rushing to the archer’s head before he wavered and almost collapsed. Loki hurried to catch him; he felt this frail body against him, so sturdy and warm and yet so very *frail,* this beating heart like a caged bird, this human flesh and human soul, his, all *his,* bent to his will and his will only.

Loki felt such a rush of fondness that he could have carried Barton all the way to the dining room; but he let him regain his dignity instead. Barton had earned the right to walk. His steps were slow and dizzy, but Loki helped him all the way, and he gained more assurance and strength as he went.

And thus side by side, they crossed the door.
Uh, sorry, apparently most of you thought I meant hiatus now. But I meant hiatus soon. (Besides, it won't be a very long hiatus, only a week or so. ^^)

Anyway. Another giant chapter. I'm really anxious to know what you thought about this one. Thanks for reading!
The next day, Loki felt almost shy.

The day before had caused such new feelings to wash through him with such strength and intensity that he was almost scared now. So of course, he forced himself to ignore his own qualms all the more, and strode inside the torture rooms.

The archer was already awake. Loki stopped in the middle of the room, and tapped his foot on the floor.

“Come here.”

Barton's restraints opened; he hesitantly set his feet on the cold floor.

“No,” Loki said calmly. “Crawl.”

He invoked a comfortable chair behind him and sat down, eyes fixed on his slave. Barton sank down and crawled on all fours. When he was close enough, Loki grabbed his hair and murmured, “Open your mouth.”

The archer shivered and complied; he let out a small moan when Loki pushed slowly down his throat.

“Get comfortable,” Loki warned him. “You're going to stay here for a long time.”

Barton let out another minute moan; he settled between Loki's knees indeed, then started sucking him with an earnestness which felt very much like enjoyment. Loki tugged his hair and got a shiver of pleasure in return; he felt himself grow even harder inside Barton's wet mouth. He loved it when Barton was reluctant, but the days when he was eager were almost even better. And for him to be eager today, after the cage, after those two days of dread and horrid suffering for them both? It was a token of submission. Of trust. Of...

Loki pulled Barton further down between his thighs, making him gag for a second; he lay back with a sigh and gladly let his pleasure dissipate his duskier thoughts. Barton picked up a pace which he held almost leisurely, whimpering a little every time Loki forced him to take him deeper or harder.
So, he mused, shuddering in delight. Now that Barton's training had been so spectacularly salvaged, his master had to think indeed. He had to educate Barton's mind as well as his soul and body; and Midgard had been tragically forgotten ever since the war of Norway. The archer knew nothing of the Nine Realms. Loki remembered how subtly Barton made his way through the various layers of the Midgardian society; he now needed learn to blend with similar skill among the crowds of the Nine Realms. And as much as Loki loved the thought, fucking Barton through his two months of complete captivity would be a sore waste of their time. The stone house was a shelter for the Midgardian he was; he should, while he was safe, use this time to prepare himself. He had a lot to catch up on. Loki's library—

Barton sucked a bit more keenly and Loki made an effort not to jerk his hips. *Hmm.* So. Yes. Thinking. His library; yes, Barton could make use of it. Most of the books were written in All-Speak. Loki had never intended anyone to ever lay eyes on what might be the only place he considered sacred in the entire Universe. But he could trust Barton.

The thought suddenly shone bright like moonlight inside his mind as the words echoed in his head for the second time in a few minutes. *Trust?*

He threw his head back and stared at the ceiling, eyes ajar. He could trust him? He could trust him. Barton was his slave. Which meant—which meant he simply *could* not betray him. Would not. Never.

Loki's wary mind withdrew into itself at the thought. No—no—fool, he could never grant his trust to anyone. He had trusted Barton not to tell the Avengers of their arrangement, true enough; he could allow it as long as it all remained on the surface of things. But actual trust was something he had never granted to anyone; and it wasn't out of bitterness, but of mere logic. He knew firsthand how easily one could be drawn to lie or deceive. Even enslaved, even molded to Loki's will, Barton could still be turned against him. He could still—

He sucked, licked and sucked and took Loki *deep,* and the demi-god almost cried out even though he took pride in not making any sounds during any sort of intercourse. No, he could not—he would not trust him, not really, not *truly.* He would stay safe. He wouldn't give in, he would—he would—

A moan bubbled in his throat and he bit his lip to hold it down, but then the rest of his being exploded and he arched back in his chair, thighs straining in their effort not to crush Barton's head, hand clenching in his short hair and pulling close, closer, closest, and pulsing deep and hot and wet and he was swallowing, of course he was. *You're mine. Mine, mine, mine.*

Loki lay in the afterglow for a moment; and it was almost as though it would never end, as though he could stay here, in his tiny moment of safety and peace and pleasure, when nothing mattered but the shared warmth of the master and the slave.

He didn't open his library to Barton that day; he would wait for the next.

But the next day, Loki found himself shackling Barton to a spreader bar instead, and enjoying it very much.

Made of smooth iron, the bar was hanging horizontally from the ceiling like some sort of metallic
trapeze. It allowed Barton to turn from one side to the other, except that instead of being merely chained up, his arms were spread wide enough to strain his shoulders and tense the skin of his back.

Loki leaned against him from behind and wrapped an arm around his torso. He intended his library to open Barton's mind, did he not? But he could also give private lessons beforehand.

“So,” he mused out loud, “I was wondering. Why do you think there are so many kind of whips?”

Now that was food for thought.

Barton swallowed, but didn't answer—only shivered again when Loki's hand roamed down his navel to push inside his pants. The demi-god lazily stroked Barton's cock as he enumerated. “Whips, bullwhips—floggers, switches, crops, birch, and so many more. I think—” he pressed his mouth against Barton's ear, “—they were all created by a bored master. Punishing a slave gets so repetitive sometimes. A bit of variety doesn't hurt.”

He laughed a little when Barton's breath quickened. “Oh—what an unfortunate play on words,” he grinned. “No, I wouldn't lie to you. They all hurt. In many, many different ways.”

He grabbed Barton's cock and gave it a firm, hard squeeze. “A flogger,” he whispered in a voiceless breath, “will make you squirm and twitch and clench your teeth. It will make your skin tingle and flush hot. And eventually, it will bore even you.”

He pinched the head of Barton's cock. “But then a riding crop will get your attention again. It is more precise; more incisive. Almost like canes, and—” he was almost kissing his ear as he whispered, “we both know how much you hate canes. Don't you?”

He dug his nails into the slit and Barton hissed in pain. “Hence the crop will have you alert and ready for more. By then, your back will be smooth and pink with pain. So sensitive the brush of my fingers will feel like torture.”

“Sir—” Barton panted.

Loki's grabbed his balls and squeezed them in an iron grip, sending a visible jolt of pain up his spine. “Behave,” he said. “I need your undivided attention. Now; after the flogger and the crop, will come the switch. At this point, you will start to fight off screams. Your back will be set ablaze with pain, so hot you'll fear your skin might catch on fire; and you will be crying out with each blow in the end; and on your red skin will bloom redder stripes, with a matching scream for each.”

Barton was trembling and slightly whimpering at times, as though he couldn't help himself. Loki rested his chin on his quivering shoulder. “Then,” he breathed. “Only then, after having so thoroughly worked you over, I will drop the switch. I will caress your flaming back.”

He pushed his hand deeper in the archer's pants, then articulated in his ear: “And then I will pick up the whip.”

Barton convulsed violently.

“And you will beg me,” Loki went on in entranced delight. “You will know it to be useless—for I am telling it to you, right now—yet you will implore me, you will sob and writhe and implore me in your terror. And I will listen to your prayers; and I will ignore them.”

He kissed Barton's neck, slow and tender. “And I will whip you until you forget your own name.”

Barton was shuddering so violently Loki could feel it in his entire body. The cock in his grip was
dripping sticky pre-come on his fingers.

“So,” Loki said with a sharp, wide grin, pulling his hand out.

He invoked a flogger in his free hand and let the soft lashes trail over Barton's back. “Let's see if my predictions can come true.”

And they did.

Every single one of them.

Barton was completely limp when Loki untied him from the spreader bar; his face was red and hot, wet with tears and sweat; his abused back was a mess of welts and lashes. He was sucking in huge lungfuls of air, and collapsed to his knees as soon as his chains stopped holding him up. He had come at least once, probably twice during the torture. As to him, Loki had lost count of his own orgasms; he only knew he hadn't had enough.

He kissed Barton's glistening forehead, then whispered, “We could use a hot bath, don't you think?”

Barton was in no state to answer, still gasping for breath.

“But—wait,” Loki said, as if struck by a sudden thought. “Scalding water will probably hurt you even more.”

He framed Barton's face and grinned sharply at him. “How *fun* is that?”

The archer closed his eyes and inched away, but it was futile; the torture had drained him out, and he couldn't move. Loki lifted Barton in his arms and wished the rest of their clothing away as he stepped out of the room and into the bathroom.

Truth be told, the helpless archer had almost fainted; but when he was immersed in hot water, he struggled and scrambled in Loki's arms like a wild animal.

“Shh,” the demi-god soothed, still grinning fiercely. He held Barton down to his waist in the hot water and repeated, “Shh,” as his victim panted and sobbed and tried to get out.

Eventually, the archer surrendered and went limp again, softly crying against the demi-god's shoulder. He let out a broken yell and clutched at Loki's arms when the hot water reached the middle of his abused back, then went up to his shoulders; but he'd stopped fighting. Loki chuckled and petted his hair.

Even in his lingering agony, Barton would not protest anymore, and he did not react when Loki washed him thoroughly without any regard for his privacy or dignity; at the moment, he had none. He complied with anything Loki asked of him; and had the demi-god wanted to whip him more, Barton, in his blurry haze of brainwashed submission, would have gone and fetched the whip for him.

Even as he rode the wave of his sadistic ecstasy, a part of Loki's mind still wondered at the archer's state, so completely tamed and pliant. Down in such unfathomable depths, it seemed unlikely that Barton should ever resurface again. Yet the demi-god knew he would, and he loved him all the more for it.
For this guiltless pleasure.

“Can you hear me?” he asked.

Barton sounded like he was very far away. “Yes, sir.”

“First of all, you may access the bathroom on your free time in the future; but no more than fifteen minutes a day. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, here is what is going to happen.”

Loki rubbed his hands up and down Barton's abused back. “I am going to bend you over the side of the pool and fuck you dry until I come twice. Afterwards, I will bring you back to your bed, and you will be allowed to rest until the evening.” He smirked. “Am I clear?”

Barton was pressing his face against the demi-god's chest, clenching his jaw not to start sobbing again. “Very clear, sir,” he managed to utter. “Thank you, sir.”

“Well then,” Loki grinned. “Let's get on with it.”

Drained with pain and thoroughly fucked, Barton offered no resistance to the deep slumber which seized him at once when he was laid down in bed—before Loki could even strap him down, actually. The demi-god smiled indulgently, then spread Barton's limbs and tied him spread-eagled to the bedposts. He got up and stretched himself in contentment.

He felt warm and sated on levels hitherto unknown to him; so much that he went into his library to curl up in a deep leather chair, and spread his mind across the stars, to scan both Muspellheim and Alfheim at once. His soul felt so nimble, and warm, and light, that his magic flowed more freely than ever through his veins and bones. It was easy. He danced from one sky to the other in renewed will. The amethyst—he could find it.

_blue sky, green sky, black birds, scared birds flying high...

##

He'd found nothing once again, but he was in too peaceful a state to torment himself with it. Again, he felt as though he'd done his duty for the day. The spell had exhausted him, but his headache vanished when he entered the torture rooms to find that Barton was already awake and patiently waiting to be freed.

“Did you sleep well?” Loki asked with a smile.

Barton rolled his shoulders and tugged at his restraints. “Very well,” he murmured.

He looked so well-rested and so relaxed indeed. It was amazing; the louder he screamed, the happier he looked afterwards. Loki felt dizzy for just a moment; he leaned down and pressed their mouths together, in a strangely chaste kiss.
Then he straightened up and the cuffs snapped open.

“Come now,” the demi-god said. “There is another room I meant to show you.”

Barton blinked, but he was trained enough already not to ask any questions; he quickly clothed himself with the garments he was provided with, then followed Loki into the library.

When the door opened on the wide, pleasant room, Barton couldn't help gaping a little. He turned to Loki. “This is all yours?”

Loki felt pathetically proud. “Yes,” he smiled. “Go on, explore a little. Most books you'll be able to read.”

Barton walked inside with something which resembled reverence. Loki hadn't pegged him as a bookworm per se, but intelligent people would know the value of such a library, and Barton was no exception. He let his fingertips trail over the rows of leather-bound covers, and Loki felt a thrill as though these fingers had run up his own spine. No one had ever entered this room—no one had ever entered the other rooms, either, but this place was special. It was the first Loki had built.

Just like before, to have a foreign soul in his most secret shrine caused the demi-god to cast a new look upon it. The library was pleasant enough, what with the smell of old brown leather, the dark wood of the shelves, the deep chairs and the tables scattered across the room as though a dozen scholars used it as a study. This was the only room Loki wasn't lighting by magic or through natural means; oil lamps burned low on the tables and shelves, and he kept them filled so they would never be put out.

He'd never thought twice about this millenial habit of his, but now, this detail seemed almost embarrassingly intimate.

And the years hadn't been kind. The library, the first room of all, was warm and inviting; the dining room was vast and cold. And all the other rooms were windowless. Not to mention the last of them all—the bedroom in Jotunheim.

What a splendid evolution, really.

“You read Midgardian stuff?” Barton called out from across the room.

Loki started into the present. He caught the archer's disbelieving gaze and smiled a little. “Why not, Barton?”

It was true; he had collected a bit of literature from Earth. Not that he'd reread much of it, but he could see how odd it would seem to Barton's eyes.

“I thought... I don't know,” the archer admitted.

He wandered along the shelves, sharp eyes darting from one book to another.

“I take what is worth taking,” Loki precised.

Barton let his gaze sweep back and forth again, then turned to him. “You've been doing this for some time, haven't you? Scavenging the other Realms for knowledge?”

Loki suddenly saw him, saw him standing in the middle of this warmly lit room, as though the
shelves had been the frame of a painting waiting only for the main figure to step in.

“Not just knowledge,” he said breathlessly. *Treasures, too.*

And indeed, Loki did keep Barton in what had been meant to be his vault. His heart rate quickened at the thought. No—Barton wasn't just a stolen relic like Loki had been. He knew precisely why he was here. As a matter of fact, he was the first and only one Loki didn't want to lie to.

He caught himself and shook his head. Enough sentiment already. “The general facts about Yggdrasil are on the bottom shelf of the Asgardian section,” he said, pointing at it. “Read it. Then start reading the rest.”

Barton nodded, then took out a heavy volume and carefully opened it. They were under spells not to shred despite their age, but Loki still liked the cautious way Barton handled things. He had surprisingly light hands, no matter how rough and calloused.

He started reading and Loki let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

*C*ln*t Barton was reading in his library.*

The thought was so absurd and unbelievable Loki felt like laughing. He was gleeful, he couldn't help it, gleeful and light-headed like a fool. He remembered Thanos as to check himself, and his joy died out in his throat. Gods, he had to preserve this. He had to find the amethyst.

And if he never found it, he must, at the very least, engrave this image in his mind. The quiet flip of the pages under Barton's fingers.

*\

Loki spent the next two days reading by Barton's side, each of them burrowed into a chair with a book in their lap. While the archer was deep inside his study, Loki only pretended to; he simply liked the weight of an old book resting atop his thighs, and he was letting his mind wander with more ease in this way. For the last forty-eight hours, he'd scanned the dry, dead lands of Svartalfheim and found nothing, except for a few stray Elves mourning here and there. He did not like their kind, if only because he'd lived side by side with them in Thanos's world. Their empty, dead eyes awoke too many memories.

When it got too desolate or too suffocating, Loki resurfaced to the quietness of the library; he glanced at Barton facing him. The archer was surprisingly focused. Not once did Loki catch him looking up; and every time he rose and declared it was time to eat, Barton startled and peered at his book in surprise, as though he'd forgotten he was in fact reading. At dinner, Loki asked him what he'd read. Barton's insight on the Nine Realms was keener already, but still delightfully thwarted by a thick ignorance Loki found endlessly funny.

“Hey, you've had a thousand years to get used to all this,” Barton would mutter. “What if I asked *you* about the New York baseball teams, uh?”

Barton flushed red and said nothing. The demi-god laughed under his breath and sipped a bit of water.

Loki was deep in his searching spell by the end of their second day of relative peace. He had tried to delay it as long as possible, but he couldn't avoid it now—today, he was looking for the missing gem in Jotunheim.

*Black and blue ice, grey and white sky, darkness and coldness and puffs of frozen steam...*

...Barton flipped the pages peacefully, focused on his reading...

...ice, ice everywhere, layers and layers of frozen earth and blocks of frozen water the size of a small castle, strange worlds of ice he was going to stay caged in—

—Barton, warm and calm, right there, Loki took a deep breath...

...no life, no warmth, but active death at work, freezing death lurking from the darkened skies down to the frozen ground, and what kind of animal would live there, what kind of animal would be born there, what kind—

—Loki clenched his fingers around his book and breathed deeply; he tacked into the neural link and let Barton's warmth envelop him for a second. Not too long; he didn't want to distract him. He had to stop now. He had to go back to...

...ice, ice, ice, endless ice and he could not possibly belong to this place, everything felt foreign and horrid and repulsive, the coldness, the sharp wind, the tons of ice and that small purple sparkle in the...

...Loki's eyes widened...

...that sparkle deep beneath the ice, so faint he could have passed over it without noticing it a thousand times...

...he straightened up and his breath quickened, his eyes were unseeing, no, no, please, no...

...a purple stone glistening with power...

...not in Jotunheim, anywhere but in Jotunheim!

But of course it had to be there, Loki had searched all other places so Jotunheim had been his last chance, but he would almost had preferred for Thanos to have it, because now he had to go there, he had to physically go there and—

*Tap.*

*Tap.*

Loki snapped back into the present and looked up, heart pounding. Barton was tapping his fingers against the cover of his book. *Tap, tap, tap.* He was wriggling nervously on his seat. It took Loki a ridiculously long while to recognize those symptoms; but in the end he understood, and he almost
laughed.

Barton wanted him.

“You are fidgeting,” Loki said in a low, playful voice.

The archer startled violently and looked up. Loki stared back at him, still smiling. Barton wanted him, needed him, and Loki needed to be needed after the shock he’d received. After realizing what ordeal awaited him. Yes—he would need to gather supplies of warmth before going there.

Warmth and heat.

“Stop it,” he said in apparent indifference, then pretended to go back to his own book. He wasn't even seeing the words; his eyes shifted into blindness again. Ice... Yes, the amethyst was definitely there. Buried under almost a mile of frozen water and stones. Loki would have to—

Tap.

Tap, tap, tap.

He smiled, breathing more easily again. He kept staring at his book and said, “Last warning.”

Oh, he could almost feel it build up inside Barton. Good; Loki was going to need a lot of energy from him. Besides, they hadn't played in nearly two days. Loki chuckled inwardly at Barton's desperate efforts to stay still. The demi-god had a hard time pretending to be indifferent, himself.

Now that he had pin-pointed the gem, he needed something else to focus on. He zeroed on the page he'd been pretending to read for almost half an hour. This was an ancient book he'd stolen on Midgard almost three centuries ago.

Spanish Inquisition.

He outright grinned. What a perfect incentive.

Barton was flinching again, trying to block his breath, but he had goosebumps, he was twitching in his his seat and definitely not focused on his reading anymore and Loki slammed his book shut.

“I warned you,” he said.

He got up and toppled Barton's chair to pin him down on the floor. Straddling him, he stayed there for a second, relishing the warmth, the solid warmth of the body between his thighs.

Thank you.

He closed his eyes.

Jotunheim.

Yes, he was going to Jotunheim.
Chapter End Notes

So, we are now in a sort of hiatus. Expect updates to be back by the end of the week. Merry Christmas ("if that's your thing" as Clint would say) and Happy New Year, readers! Your comments are the best presents ever, you naughty Santas!
Northern Lights

Chapter Notes

And here we go agaiiiiiin!! Sorry for the wait; I hope Dimensions of Trust was a pleasant way to pass the time. Updates every two days, just like before. Welcome back, and leave a comment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crusher had been fun.

Loki had never seen his slave so reluctant before; but he'd resigned himself to be shackled and impaled in the fucking machine, and hadn't even tried to plead his way out of it even when Loki had made obvious that it was designed to crush him to death.

Of course, this was not his true goal. This was a mere fantasy.

Nothing more.

He had never been so careful before, making the gears turn in a ridiculously slow way, never weakening their neural connection as to make sure that Barton's ribs weren't breaking and his rim wasn't tearing. The fact that it was a machine helped; had Loki done this with his bare hands, he might have lost control—because Barton's screams, his strangled, breathless pleas were so delightful.

Loki had told him it was all about making him beg either for his life, either for his pleasure. Quite frankly, the demi-god thought it would be life. But Barton's voice, weak and wheezing, had risen up only to beg for Loki, for Loki to touch him, to free him and make him come. Perhaps he'd gone crazy with endorphins; perhaps he would have said anything to be freed.

Or perhaps he trusted Loki so much he hadn't even considered he might truly be left to die.

Loki didn't want those thoughts in his mind, so he freed Barton indeed, sucked him off, and fucked him until he came for the fourth and fifth time of the day—he had not touched himself while Barton was in the crusher, but it hadn't stopped his body from melting into crazed bliss thrice.

Well, he'd wanted warmth.

He dozed off with Barton's limp, satisfied body in his arms, but a startle wakened him a few hours
later. Brusquely sobered up, he sat up in the dark and realized he could not allow himself to stall any longer.

He got up and gently let the archer roll on his side. His wrists were still cruelly tied up behind his back. Loki unknotted the bonds, cursing softly in the dark at his too short nails; but sometimes, magic just wasn't wanted.

After Barton was freed, Loki sat up and simply watched him sleep. It took him a ridiculously long time to realize he was shuddering.

Jotunheim. He had to leave to Jotunheim.

“What am I going to do with you?” he heard himself say in a low voice.

He wasn't taking Barton with him there. No—absolutely no way. First of all, his training wasn't complete; until it was, he was meant to feel like a captive—a prisoner deprived of the most basic rights. Which he was.

Loki clenched his fists. Fine—this was not the only reason. He didn't want Barton to see Jotunheim. To see those desolated lands of ice and rock and realized that even this frozen hell had rejected its runt of a spawn.

Ludicrous.

He took a deep breath. This was too dangerous anyway. Barton was just human—he wouldn't even be able to survive in Jotunheim.

And Loki thought again, for the second time, that he had to do something about it.

Because Barton would die. Even if Loki managed to steal the amethyst and hide it away from Thanos, Barton was going to die eventually. He'd said he was forty-one. He had already lived off maybe half of his life. Maybe even more than half.

And Loki started thinking thoughts he'd never thought before. He started thinking about Idunn's apples. He had never wanted one for himself—maybe he would reconsider in four thousand years, but for now, even the thing he had become in the darkness wouldn't have dreamed of it. Breaking Idunn's law was simply unthinkable.

The demi-god glanced at Barton sleeping next to him. Mortal. Even if Loki managed to steal an apple, to eat it would kill a human being. His body would simply rupture under the power of it.

Unless...

Loki sat thinking for long, long minutes.

Eventually, he got up. This had to wait for now. He looked at Barton sleeping soundly on the mattress, then at the gleaming cage in a corner.

His desire had nothing to do with cruelty—not exactly. Just... he wanted to keep him still, to keep him submitted and bent, even if Loki wasn't here to hold his wrists. He could have tied Barton up, but who knew for how long he would be gone. The cage was a good alternative.

And a good reminder for them both.

Yes. Loki clothed himself with his leather armor, then lightly touched his slave's shoulder and
murmured, “Barton.”

The archer shifted.

“Up.”

Barton opened his eyes, then automatically—without a single beat—he slid off the bed and bowed deeply at Loki's feet.

The demi-god was moved to tears. He laughed for them not to show and said, “Aren't you pliant today.”

Barton's answer was as pure and sincere as Loki's comment had been false and sarcastic. “I live to serve you, sir.”

Oh, Loki did feel warm. Warm enough to go to Jotunheim and back.

“Then you will not mind going into the cage while I'm away,” he said, testing the waters. “Will you?”

Barton hesitated. “The cage, sir?”

“Yes. I must leave,” Loki explained, because this was not a punishment and Barton had to be well aware of it, “and I will not have my house untidy in my absence.”

The idea of putting Barton away, of tidying up the room by locking him into a cage, was extremely, extremely arousing. And it was made even better by Barton's deeper bow and low murmur of, “As you wish.”

“Very well,” Loki breathed.

He grabbed Barton's collar and forced him out of the warm bed and across the room, to kneel in front of the cage. Barton did not resist, but he still shivered a little when he was made to crawl inside. Soft and naked behind the steel bars, he looked more humbled than ever. Loki's arousal was pulsing low in the pit of his stomach. Heat. I'll take your heat with me.

Loki had to tear his gaze away and stride out. He closed the door behind him, took a deep breath, then screwed his eyes shut and—

—Gods, the cold.

Loki didn't open his eyes at once, steeling himself against the howling wind. He tried to remember how it had felt the last time he had come here; in Laufey's devastated ruin of a palace.

He hadn't felt the cold then.

He wasn't feeling it. Not really. He had just stalled for too long, and now his repressed worries were getting back at him. He shook himself and took a sharp breath, then opened his eyes. The skies were dark with this particular mix of colors which existed only in Jotunheim—forever clouded over with black, and grey, and a haunted blue illuminated with gleaming lights from time to time. The mountains all around pointed their jagged angles at the skies as if to shred it even more; the slow waters of a frozen glacier had filled the valley beneath, forming a block of ice the size of a small sea.

Loki took a deep breath, leather coat billowing in the wind, then felt about with his mind for a
second. Yes, the gem was here, at the bottom of the glacier. If he pushed his powers of sight, he could almost distinguish the shape of an ancient corpse curled around the amethyst. The gem did grant the power to rearrange space at one's liking. But the prior user, whoever he or she had been, had obviously not thought this through. Loki preferred to use his own considerable magic; it was more exhausting, yes, but at least he hadn't died crushed under a million tons of ice because of a slight miscalculation.

Heimdall was probably watching him. Loki was not sure whether Odin would intervene—after all, this was Loki's birthplace; he had every right to be here.

He thought of Barton in his cage and shook himself again. The faster he retrieved the jewel, the faster he could go back to his house. He shut his mind to his surroundings and went down the snowy slope of the mountain.

The ice was unmoving beneath his boots. He walked across the glacier for a long while, a solitary silhouette in the mangled scenery. The wind had come to a transient rest, but snowflakes were still twirling around him. Eventually, he found himself just above the amethyst, half a mile beneath him.

A movement made him glance up.

The Frost Giant was giant indeed. It must be twice as tall as Loki, who couldn't contain his own disgust at the sight of it. Gods, Gods, he wouldn't last much longer in this place. Take the gem, and never come back.

He stared at the giant for a long time, not knowing what to do. It stayed unmoving and dull against the duller background. Attacking it would be most unwise. But at the same time, Loki couldn't simply start digging right before its eyes. Still—this place would do him no good. He was not sure the Jotnar knew he'd been the one to kill Laufey and turn the Bifrost against them; but he must not fool himself—Odin had probably told them. Hel, the old swine would have been delighted to tell them just how completely he wasn't at fault. After all, he had been sleeping while his youngest son...

Loki took a sharp breath. He had been here for way too long already. He had to make a choice and he had to make it now.

The giant was still staring at him.

Loki clenched his fists, then projected his magic at his feet—why shouldn't the ice be warm—and stood tall in the resulting cloud of steam. It crystallized as soon as it left Loki's field of control and fell back around in a glittering shower of pulverized ice. The whole glacier was very slightly sloping towards the opening of the valley; the ice melting down under Loki's feet trickled down that slope before freezing again after a few yards. The resulting trickles of ice looked like the roots of a tree.

He looked up, and the giant was gone. Loki clenched his teeth and wished the ice to melt faster. He was burning his strength away here, but he did not care. He had to leave this place. As soon as possible. Melt the ice, get the gem. It was extremely simple.

He felt a presence behind him and snapped round. The giant was back. Or was it another one? They all looked the same. It was standing among the blocks of ice and stone, as useless and immobile as one of them. A puff of thick steam suddenly obscured Loki's view; by the time it cleared away, the giant was not alone anymore.

There were dozens of them staring unmovingly at Loki.

Red, red eyes, like rubies in blue blocks of rough stone. Those were no Asgardians. There was no
protocol. They were slowly surrounding Loki like wolves in winter.

The demi-god stayed calm and tall, almost snarling in contempt. What did he care? The gem was slowly coming back up under his feet while those living icicles wasted their time trying to scare him. The second his fingers closed around the jewel, he would just have one step to take to reach his house.

*Kingslayer,* the rocks and ice said.

The Frost Giants were all gone.

Loki looked around with quick glances, blinking too fast. Had they ever been there? Was he imagining things? He cursed himself for being afraid. The steam of his own spell kept rising around him, troubling his vision. But he had to keep going.

*Kingslayer.*

There was a giant on the glacier—mere *yards* away from Loki. Its blood-red eyes were fixed on the demi-god. Behind him were piles of stones and icicles and blocks of ice; a blink, and they all turned into Jotnar.

A crowd of Jotnar silently smirking at Loki. One of them opened its mouth; but it was the howling wind who whispered in Loki's ear, *Kingslayer.*

He felt about with his mind. The amethyst was very close now. But his spell was projecting a column of steam in the skies, signaling him to all Frost Giants, and they kept gathering around him. There was almost a hundred of them now. Loki never caught one moving; he glanced around and they were simply there, more and more with each glance, as though they were springing from the very frozen ground while he was not looking.

*Kingslayer.*

*Thief.*

“Thief?” Loki repeated with a small, nasty laugh.

He shouldn't have spoken, but he couldn't stay silent any longer. Now that he had started anyway, he had to keep going. He spoke in a strong, clear voice, “What have I ever stolen from you that Odin hadn't already ripped away?”

He waited; but the expected answer did not come. Instead, something happened which was a hundred times worse.

“The little thief, the little slave who thought he could run away...”

Loki's growing fear suddenly melted into blinding urgency.

*Oh no.*

No, no, no, this was something else entirely, he had been mistaken from the start—*idiot!*—and now he had to hurry or he would soon be dead.

The giants grinned and stepped aside. Among them was the much darker, much smaller silhouette which still haunted Loki's memories. This cockroach smile and voice. The *Other.*

Loki clenched his fists and said, “I was never Thanos's slave.”
He stood tall and cold in the column of steam, and yet he felt weak, and frail, and terrified.

“We all are Thanos's slaves,” the Other said, showing his black teeth. “We are tossing and turning in the darkness which brought him forth. Our lives have no other end than death; and death is his own and his goal. Therefore, all life is devoted to him. To death. To the return of the darkness.”

Loki let out a little laugh. “I am pretty sure death turned him down more than once already.”

The Other hissed, but then grinned again. “And so in your freedom you came back in this country to—thaw it? I admire your perseverance in destroying those frozen lands, but this will take longer than the Bifrost, I fear.”

_Kingslayer._

_Thief._

_World-eater._

_Monster._

Loki's blood boiled in his veins—and a tendril of ice suddenly sprung from the ground to _impale_ the giant he was staring at. It howled, only once, a choked, strangled sound, then it fell limp and its red blood slowly trickled down the icicle, freezing half-way down.

Everything went very still.

The Other's smile had never been so broad.

“What did my master say?” he mocked. “A Jotun runt in drag...”

A terrible powerlessness suddenly weighed over Loki—the ice, the ice coursing in his body was too much, echoing with this dreadful country, and he tried to resist, he tried to think, _No, no no no no, 'why shouldn't I resemble an Aesir?'_ but in this split second, he couldn't believe hard enough; magic is when the Universe listens to you, but he was not listening to himself—_Jotunheim_ was, the land of stone and ice bowing to Frost Giants alone, which had answered his anger and fear, just like his magic room answered his wistfulness; and he couldn't hold back his disguise which slipped and vanished like a blown flame.

The whole frozen mountain seemed to hiss at him.

_JOTUN!

He stared at his blue hands, panting.

_Runt! Traitor! Kingslayer! Thief! Liar! Jotun! Jotun! JOTUN!

“YES!” he roared with blue skin and red eyes. “I am Jotun like you, and your king's slayer—and if you take one more step, I will slay you all! Get back, you frozen scum, get BACK!”

He blasted the steam away but then—then—through the clouds of pulverized ice fell something dark, something swift and dark like a giant insect, and the Other broke past his spell and clawed Loki across the face deep enough to tear through his cheek and take his left eye out.
Loki screamed like an animal and stumbled back. He felt like the left half of his face was melting. He tried to heal himself, but the venom was strong, and growing his eyeball back would take some time—and he had no time. Among the confusion and pain, he grabbed his scepter and hit the Other to make him step back. They were in the middle of the circle of Frost Giants, and he couldn't get away but he could, he could, he just had to finish his task and the amethyst would be his and would carry him away no matter how much his faith in himself was wavering.

He kept fighting with all the desperation and the wrath of a cornered wolf, he kept missing but at least he was biding his time. The gem was slowly coming back up. Almost there. Almost there—

*Thief,* whispered the land—and the amethyst sprung from the ice only to be snatched by the Other.

And abruptly there was only Clint Barton in Loki's mind.

Because if the Other took the gem back to Thanos—all would be lost.

Barton would be lost.

Loki hissed and suddenly morphed back into his Aesir skin; and he needed two eyes if he wanted to fight, so he wished his left eye back, and when the Other closed his claws around the stone and vanished, Loki followed him in a heartbeat—leaving behind him a circle of Frost Giants closing around an empty pit of molten ice.

They reappeared on top of the frozen crest of a mountain, in the middle of a snow storm high above the white and grey lands. The Other smiled horribly and shouted, “This is your one and only Realm, Frost Giant! You killed their king! A dead kingdom for a Jotun runt, till the world ends!”

Loki didn't waste his time answering and just lashed at him all the more. But the Other was leaping around, vanishing here to reappear there, laughing like a maniac. “All our thanks for the gem, Loki Laufeyson! The last one is now just a leap away!”

Loki kept attacking him, and he kept missing—so the Other would keep leaping. Because—because if the demi-god managed to distract him enough, if he managed to make the Other taunt him enough to lose control and materialize—say, under a *glacier*...

“You have no hope!” the Other was laughing. “You have nothing to fight for and this is the reason you will always lose! This is the reason we must all fight in order to *lose,* because—”

He disappeared—and reappeared with a scream of agony.

There. *There.* He had miscalculated his leap and his foot had melted into a frozen rock. He couldn't get away—Loki struck him across the face with his spear and threw him down. The Other was in so much pain from his crushed bones that he didn't even seem to notice.

“Because?” Loki taunted him with a nasty laugh, marching towards him to deliver the fatal blow. “Because?”

Something pushed through him and he stopped with a distant shock.
He looked down to see the Other grinning at him, all pain gone from his face, his blade buried in Loki’s stomach to the hilt.

“Because,” he said in entrancement, “in the end, there is only and always death.”

He ripped his weapon out. “So why not rush towards the goal?”

Loki bent double and fell to his knees in the snow to cough up a warm flow of blood. The Other grinned and got up before breaking his own foot to get free. “I live in the darkness by my master’s side,” he boasted in his cockroach voice. “He taught me the value of pain.”

Loki choked and tears rolled down his face for a reason which had nothing to do with his wound. Because what the Other had just said—Barton could have said too.

Loki’s stomach kept heaving as blood kept spilling inside it and he couldn’t stop throwing it all out, warm life literally flowing out of his mouth to splatter the dirty snow.

“You will die,” the Other informed him. “In the land where you were born.”

He put his foot against Loki’s side. “Not all of us have this luck.”

And he pushed violently to throw him into the chasm of rock and ice; Loki rolled down the frozen slope of the mountain, slowly at first, then faster and faster, bouncing from rock to rock, feeling his bones crack and splinter with the repeated shocks, until he saw a bigger rock coming at him—and his spine snapped under the shock; and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

(Man, maybe we should’ve stayed in hiatus, uh?)
His agony was so intense he wasn't feeling it anymore.

There was no blood around him; it had all been covered by a layer of fresh virgin snow in which he was half-buried. Like a white, soft cover drawn over him, just before a single snowflake kissed him to sleep.

*Why am I still alive?*

Frozen.

He would have laughed, but he couldn't move. He was frozen. This was why he had not lost all the blood in his veins. His body was completely numb; he could not tell whether it was due to the deadly cold clutching at his limbs, or to his spine injury.

He had to heal himself.

*What for?* asked a nasty little voice.

This was a disaster. The Other had gotten away with the gem. Soon the Glove would shine around Thanos's fist, and this dreadful light would cast onto the world an eternal shadow.

He might as well die here. Peacefully.

He was hungry.

He frowned.

He was *hungry*? He could not even feel his body. How could he possibly be hungry? This sensation...

...this sensation was not *his*.

His fingers quivered minutely under the snow and he wanted to tack into the neural link, but it didn't work. His spine was clearly irretrievable. But not to the point that he couldn't move his fingers; and
not to the point that he couldn't feel, very faintly, the one sensation Barton and him did not have in common at the moment. Their respective aches and pains were meddling together in a haze of suffering, but this hunger... this hunger stood out against the background of coldness and agony.

And it reminded him Clint still lived.

*But not for long.* The whole Universe was coming to an end. Because Loki had let it happen. Because he had been too lazy and too careless, and because...

...you lack conviction.

A spike of anger surged inside of him. *Shut your mortal mouth, Philip.*

*Between the two of us, I'm hardly the one who screwed up the most.*

Loki clenched at the snow with all his pathetic strength. He waited for the next vision, for another of his acquaintances staring down at him and telling him to stop being such a weakling. But nothing came.

No one had ever told him to stop whining and fight. No one had ever told him he had it in him.

Except.

*I can't live without you.*

*Literally.*

Yes.

He started breathing faster. Yes. Without him, Clint Barton would simply die. Loki had left him locked up in a nonexistent house with absolutely no resources and no hope of getting out. He would starve to death. And maybe the world was ending, but Loki had sworn to himself he would never fail as a master again.

This mortal—this man in the cage was his responsibility. There was no one to impress; no one to lie to. If he gave up now, Clint would die, sooner than he would if Loki chose to keep fighting.

*He was always going to die.*

Yes. The three deaths of Clint Barton. Starving to death in a steel cage; disappearing along with all of creation; or simply dying a mortal death, leaving Loki alone to face the eons to come.

*No,* Loki thought. He was *not* going to allow *any* of these deaths. He had told Barton a long time ago. *Forbidden to die.* And he was his *master* and by all the Gods, he would be *obeyed!*

He arched and screamed in the snow when magic flared through him and repaired his broken spine. As his shattered bones mended themselves, snow melted around him like an early spring, steam hissing to echo the hiss of pain coming out of his mouth. He pushed against the frozen ground and got on all fours, making the layers of ice around him crack and break.

“No,” he snarled. “No—no—no!”
He stared into space and grinned madly. “No, I am too good for you, lover of Thanos. And Barton,” he started laughing, “don't even dream of ever touching Barton. He is mine.”

As life flowed back into his veins, a stinging pain on his cheeks reminded him of his frozen tears. He got up with another repressed cry of pain and wobbled in the snow for a second. Now was not the time to remember everything—the Frost Giants, the Other, his own blue skin, the gem, his complete failure. No—now was the time to go back for Barton.

To go back home.

* *

It took everything Loki had to make the last leap—into his bedroom, miles under the layers of permafrost. His Jotunheim room who felt almost warm in comparison with the surface. He would have never thought it would be so useful to him one day.

He limped out of the bedroom as his bones finished to knit themselves back, and he crossed the threshold of the torture rooms. Barton was huddled up in the cage. Loki’s sadism had deserted him—he only wanted to get him out of here.

Thankfully, this time, he was allowed to.

He dropped his coat, then walked to the cage and knelt heavily in front of the door. Barton was awake; his grey eyes never looked away from his master, but they were not pleading. He had waited for him all day, patiently and trustfully.

Shame crashed on Loki; he bowed his head under the weight of it and closed his eyes. It was all sinking in, and he realized what he had almost let happen. He had locked Barton up, and recklessly endangered his life at a time when his death also meant Barton’s death. He had been so bloody damn careless.

He silently swore to himself that next time he risked his life, Barton would be safe and able to carry on his own if anything should happen to Loki.

For now, for now, he could take care of him. Gods, Clint had waited for him all day long without panicking, without doubting him, even after what had happened the last time he'd found himself in the cage.

Loki opened the door, then silently pulled Barton out and helped him up. The archer's left leg was obviously numb and he almost fell down; Loki caught him right on time, then helped him to the bed and made him sit down. He mechanically tied the archer's hands behind his back, then took Barton’s face between his hands and looked into the peaceful gaze.

Loki needed that peace. He was so desperate and selfish, but he had seen too much and heard too much in Jotunheim, and he needed that peace so badly. He kissed him, relishing the warmth of his mouth, and he wanted nothing more than plunge deeper inside this heat, bury himself inside Barton to the hilt and fall asleep there, on top of the warm body of his slave.

But this would have been supremely unfair and petty of him. Loki had almost left him to die. He had been selfish enough for today.
He grabbed Clint's thighs and squeezed, tacking into the neural link. The jolt of pain informed him that the left leg was completely asleep indeed. He started kneading it, mindful of the archer's soft hisses which gradually morphed into silent breaths as the pain receded. But he was still aching and stiff from his uncomfortable day.

And Loki was so grateful for it. Because this pain, he could soothe. This problem, he could solve. This was not about balancing himself on the edge of Barton's mind, this was not about failing to save the Universe. This was about aching muscles. And Loki wondered whether he wasn't actually hurting Barton only so he could heal him afterwards; only to get this feeling that he could be merciful, he could be good, if only for the little things.

But did it count, when he was the one who caused the pain in the first place?

Oh, he didn't know, and he didn't want to think about it. He wanted to focus on Clint, on making Clint feel good, so he could forget everything that had happened in Jotunheim. He wanted to make him feel good... as an apology. Because he had doomed him, as surely as if he had left him to die in that cage. He had let the Other get to him. He had let...

Kingslayer.

...Jotunheim get to him.

What a fool. A weakling and a fool.

Barton was growing warmer and more pliant under his fingers. His eyes were closed. When he was done with his legs, Loki climbed on the bed and pulled Barton into his lap, chest to chest; he wrapped his arms around him and hooked his hands on his shoulders to keep rubbing them as he leaned against him. He wanted warmth, but if he fucked Barton now, he would be even more pathetic than before. Barton was the dignified one here, and today, Loki should just serve him, should just make himself useful for once in his worthless life. He—

"Were you in Jotunheim?" Barton murmured.

Loki froze, eyes wide.

He waited for something to happen—for his mind to snap in fury or despair, like the last times Jotunheim had been mentioned.

But he felt nothing. Except a deadly weariness. He had wanted Barton to know, and Barton did know now, didn't he? Enough to guess. To see through Loki. And Loki was too tired not to let him be his judge.

He was really too tired. He couldn't even be a master—couldn't even keep his own problems away long enough to take care of his slave.

He let himself melt against Barton and let out in a dying breath, "Yes. Yes, I was."

And he just stayed there. He couldn't go on anymore. He didn't know what to do. He had nearly resurrected himself today, for Clint Barton's sake only, and now he realized he couldn't crawl any further than Clint Barton indeed. Now he would let him decide.
Loki was too desperately *tired*.

“Sir?”

With a tremendous effort, the demi-god pulled back to look at him. “What?” he said under his breath.

“Please, let me see you.”

It took Loki a full minute to understand what he meant.

When he *did*, he expected once more anger to wash through him; and once more, he felt nothing but fatigue. Why would Barton want to see *this*? Why would he want to see anything from Jotunheim, this damned, frozen place which sucked the souls of men devoid of all hope?

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. It was beyond him.

And because it was, he complied. He kept his eyes downcast. Most of his body was covered by his armor, but his eyes—nothing could hide the burning red of his eyes. He remembered hundreds of similar gazes piercing him through the snow storm.

“Now what, Barton?” he murmured.

He did not know what to do. He was asking his slave for guidance, because he had never felt more miserable, and cold, and lost in his wretched life.

Barton kissed him.

Loki was so surprised he closed his eyes and let him. The archer felt almost unbearably warm against his mouth. This was no invasive kiss, but it still made him feel even more vulnerable. Why would you kiss *me*.

“Please, untie me,” Barton whispered.

He was ready to take control. And Loki would let him. A small flicker of him knew he was letting himself fall—knew that the more he let go now, the worse it would be for him afterwards. But he couldn't escape the downwards spiral of his own dark thoughts, so he willed Barton's D-rings open and just waited for what he could come next.

This was the first time he had offered himself to anyone.

He could not care what happened. Maybe Barton would take advantage of it—hit him or avenge himself in one way or another. Maybe he would fuck him, who knew. In this second, Loki was absolutely defenseless. As raw as he would ever be.

Barton ran his fingers through his hair, gently pulled Loki closer and kissed him again. His fingertips left tingling trails on the demi-god's skin when they brushed his neck to go down his armored back. Loki was motionless. Eyes open but unseeing. He finally realized he was in shock. He could have laughed. *I am in shock. Me.*

“Can I undress you?” Clint murmured in his ear.

*you can't let him undress you you cannot take your armor off he could do anything he will kill you he will murder you to escape this was his plan from the beginning he wants to avenge himself he lied all the way you are helpless you are in shock you are not in your right mind you are at your most*
vulnerable and he is in your goddamn house you let him in you let someone else in and you let him see you let him see it all it is dangerous you have to kill him now KILL HIM NOW

“Yes,” Loki said blandly.

Clint pulled back, then got to work with stark efficiency. He must have studied Loki’s armor, because he had no problem figuring out how to dismantle it, although it did take him a long time. Loki was holding very still, and Barton had probably no idea Loki was struggling against himself not to rip his head off.

It lasted for a very, very long time, and Loki was on the verge of passing out with how much he was restraining himself by the end of it. He did not understand what Clint was doing and he did not understand why he was letting him do it.

He had no idea what was coming next. Why did Barton want him naked? Was he really trying to fuck him? But then why had he not asked Loki to undress himself? The demi-god didn’t know, he had no idea what was coming next, and he was struggling to balance himself between giving himself away to Barton—like a master being thrown to his own dogs—or murdering him right now—like a cornered wolf attacking out of despair.

Loki needed something to hang onto and he opened his eyes.

Barton was looking at him.

Loki stared back, trying to understand this gaze. For once, he couldn’t read Barton—not in the slightest bit. A naked Jotun before him. His own stomach was churning at the thought. He could not bear this stillness for much longer. He could not—

—Barton leaned forward and kissed himself again, and Loki almost cried in frustration because he didn’t understand why Barton was being so—

—so kind.

To him.

This time, their lips parted and Barton’s tongue pushed in, but this was the less invasive invasion Loki had ever endured; the archer was almost painfully careful, and he started brushing his hands over Loki’s chest as he pressed against him. The coldness of Loki’s body must be burning his own fragile skin, but he only held him closer. Loki could feel him, chest against chest, cheek against cheek, arms wrapped around him. And then—Loki’s mind was as slow as a glacier—only then, he understood Barton had asked to be freed just so he could touch him. Just so he could...

...comfort him?

Pity? Loki thought in a shocked haze. He’s pitying me?

Barton locked his embrace around him; he was violently shuddering with cold and yet he kissed him again, he kissed the demi-god’s collarbone, or rather he brushed his lips against it, ghosted up his throat, and he was holding him so close and he—and he—

—he was not pitying him. He was serving him. He was trying to chase the cold away with his feeble mortal warmth.
Loki finally thought about tacking into the neural link, and what he found horrified him. Barton had gone almost completely numb again with cold—Loki had underestimated his own nefarious influence. And yet the archer kept going. He was kissing his way down his chest now, with lips almost as blue as the skin they pressed against. He knew it was pointless, but it didn't matter. He had never wanted to attack Loki. He wanted to help him.

He was ready to die of coldness to prove it...

No—Loki grabbed his wrists without thinking. “Enough,” he breathed.

He did not deserve this. This tan skin against his blue skin was something he would never deserve. He realized his eyes were filling with tears, and quickly blinked it away.

Loki felt even more worthless now that he had forced Barton to stop. As though he still had the right to make him do anything. He had no idea how to react now. To be simply looked at without disgust was a revolution—but this? This undying token of trust? This submission to the monster?

He did not know what to do. He only knew Barton was cold and he should be warm again.

Loki got up and turned away. “Come,” he murmured absently.

He heard Barton follow him; and they both walked into the steaming bathroom. Loki was nearly scalded alive by the puffs of steam on his skin of ice, and he was glad to use that excuse to change back. He got into the water and closed his eyes as he tapped into the link to check whether Barton's shudders were relenting; and they did fade away after a while, which was a tremendous relief.

But then, Clint asked, “Can I wash you?”

Again, Loki feared a humiliation; and again, he understood that what Barton offered was the very opposite.

But he did not deserve any of it.

Still. Barton was the one in charge now. Loki was simply too tired to oppose him.

What a pathetic excuse.

“Yes,” he murmured, so low he couldn't hear himself.

Clint pressed against him and Loki screwed his eyes shut, suddenly overwhelmed. Barton lathered his chest first. It took Loki a while to realize the archer was tracing the pattern of his Jotun marks on the now unsullied skin. Norns, but he had good eyes.

A bubble of distress swelled into Loki's throat; but then, Clint's fingers abandoned their chilling dance and went off pattern.

This probably meant nothing to him—nothing at all.

But to Loki it was freeing.

So freeing.

Barton was worshipping him. There was no other word. He was worshipping someone who, at the moment, had never felt less of a god. A desperate gratitude washed over Loki with such strength that he felt weaker than ever.
This was unreal, he thought as Clint kept cleaning his body with unfaltering reverence. This was truly miraculous. He had lowered all his defenses and yet he wasn't being hurt. Clint was staring straight at his gutted-out heart and all he said was, in a soft voice, for Loki to sit down so he could wash his hair.

Clint's fingers felt so good on his scalp that Loki felt another pang of shame. This was not supposed to be like this. The slave should not be the one protecting, reassuring, and comforting the master. Or should he? Was this supposed to happen?

Loki did not know what to do, and he would have panicked if not for the fact that nothing bad was happening to him. He let himself be taken care of, and it was difficult, so difficult he felt like his very body was dissolving into shreds in the soapy water.

But he let himself be dissolved into oblivion, to the point that he completely stopped thinking, as though confusion had shut out his mind and disconnected his body—

When he came to, he was in the dining-room with Barton, and they were sharing a late night meal.

Loki was not exactly shocked—it wasn't as though he had no memory at all of what had happened. But he had spaced out. Completely spaced out. Barton's clothes, his own, the food on the table—he must have done it all out of habit, while his mind still cowered in fear from the unknown. Now, they had returned to a more normal pattern, and the haze was clearing. He still felt weary and washed out, and frail—so frail a gush of wind could have brought him down.

He remembered Barton worshiping him, worshiping his body, taking care of him, and he almost burst into tears.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

Because no matter how much he wished Barton had simply left him alone, Loki knew he had only wanted to help him. And that simple fact left the demi-god almost crushed with gratitude and emotion.

He was still shuddering from the consciousness of his extreme vulnerability. Barton could have done anything to him.

Was this how he felt all the time? In Loki's hands, those stronger hands? Was he shaking like this for hours afterwards, when Loki left him tied up on the bed? Did he feel like he was thinning out to the point of vanishing completely?
No, he didn't. Loki was. Because this was what powerlessness did to him. This was why he had a pathological need for control. Because everyone—everyone—he'd ever let in had broken him.

Even Barton, in some way. His respect, his trust, his worship, it had all been too overwhelming for Loki's raw soul. He was not prepared to handle them. He had needed them, in his state of self-disgust; nothing else could have saved him. Still—it had taken him apart.

But maybe the pieces could be used to build something worth the trouble.

When they were done eating, he got up and grabbed Barton's wrist to lead him into the torture rooms. He wished the archer's clothes away, then gently made him lie down on the bed and tied him spread-eagled with bonds of silk.

He invoked a switch and beat him until his ass was blue and black with bruises.

Barton was tied up, and helpless, and tortured; he muffled screams of agony in his pillow with each strike; and it helped, just a little bit. Because Loki knew, now, that he couldn't help trusting this mortal who could have done so much worse than killing him, earlier in the evening. And the depth of his trust frightened him. The epiphany that submission and dominance boiled down to the exact same thing—trust; that was too much of a shock. Barton had seen him, seen everything of him, and now Loki needed to hear him scream to know that despite it all, nothing had changed.

Except many, many things had changed. Master and slave were molding themselves one after the other.

Loki hit him a last time, then dropped the switch, panting, and pressed his cold hands against the burning skin. Barton's breath was hitching with sobs; he pulled on his silk bonds and exhaled, “Thank you—thank you—thank you...”

And Loki was still exhausted; and he was still flawed, and broken, and malfunctioning; but he knew it could change. He was scared, and it hurt, it upset everything inside him—but he wanted to go on, he wanted to let himself be upset, because this training was also his; and Gods—Gods, he wanted to complete it. The road might be twisted but the goal was true. All they needed was time.

But time, he knew, was running out.
Thank you for reading and commenting!
Spoilin' for a fight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki had expected Barton to frown at him the next day—to confront him, maybe; Loki's own actions seemed in retrospect to be bleeding with panic and unbalanced instincts. Yet Barton looked so accepting and unquestioning that Loki couldn't help wondering whether he wasn't faking. But as the day went on, it was obvious that Barton was sincere—that, or Loki had never been able to read him at all. His unjustified punishment of the night before had called forth no indignation of any kind.

Or maybe it was his way to tell Loki he didn't think it had been unjustified.

The demi-god almost wanted to ask him for an explanation, but he thought twice and decided some things were best left unsaid. So they went back to their study.

Barton looked serene and happy as he focused on his reading; but the demi-god's mind was left vacant. He had nothing to focus on except for Thanos himself, but Loki knew exactly where he was and no magic would allow him to reach the chasm beneath Hel. Besides, there was no need; he knew the Glove was complete.

Save for the ruby, which was for power. Thanos still needed a power source. And where could he find power on such scale? He needed the ruby—the last stone—but the ruby was safe in Idunn House...

Loki suddenly remembered something else from yesterday—the coldness might have shattered his thoughts like exploding glass, but this particular idea had remained painted on the shards. Barton had been mortal long enough. Loki could simply not stand to have him so vulnerable any longer. If he did manage to impede Thanos's plans, the Titan would certainly attempt to strike back and it would be too late to ensure that Barton could not be killed in the blink of an eye. Besides—for Loki to change the very nature of his slave, physically so, would be the strongest assertion of his dominance over him. He needed to remind himself he had every right when it came to Barton, just as Barton had reminded him yesterday.

Albeit in a very different way.

The more his training went on, the more Loki questioned himself and the more Barton grew certain and serene. But perhaps it was supposed to be so—after all, while their dependence was obviously mutual, Barton was the slave and Loki the master. It was exactly what Loki had told him—I have to think for us both. And worry for them both, as well. Until the revelation of his true parentage, Loki had never once questioned his legitimacy, while Barton had spent all his short life worrying about it. Perhaps this role reversal was a natural step of their process as they learned to function together.
Loki exhaled slowly. If not for Barton's serenity, he would have had trouble reasoning with himself in this way after his desperate outburst of last night. But he had come home broken, cold and filled with disgust towards himself; and yet he had found only acceptance, care, and even worship.

Surely, he must be, for once, doing something right.

The small things had changed, as well; like the way Barton drew Loki’s chair before drawing his own as they sat down for a late dinner after a night of study—the demi-god now divided his time between looking for sources of power throughout the Universe and studying the House of Idunn before he made his play. Or the way Barton glanced up at once when Loki talked to him; not out of nervousness, but of alertness.

And he had been tapping the dinner table without thinking for the entire meal. This was just asking for it—and maybe he was asking, unconsciously so. Besides, there was something Loki had to check before he took his final decision.

“Barton,” he murmured.

Glancing up. “Sir?”

Loki sipped a bit of wine, then licked his lips and said, “Strip.”

They were not finished eating, but Barton still got up at once and shed his clothing.

Loki smiled; he got up and took a few limes on the table to pocket them just as Barton shucked his shirt over his head.

“This way,” he said, and led him to the torture chambers.

Heat was already starting to pulse between his legs at the thought of what would come. Despite his restlessness, Barton was still mostly hazy from their long evening in the library. It was the perfect time for this.

“Get on the table.”

Barton frowned—not good; it meant this was something he hadn't anticipated; which meant he was still trying to anticipate what Loki chose to do. It was deeply rooted in his former training and maybe it was an unconscious reflex, but it had to be punished all the same.

Loki slapped him hard enough to leave his ears ringing, then seized his face in an iron grip right after.

“Barton,” he said.

He let a few heartbeats settle in the silence. Then he grinned and repeated with exaggerated politeness, “Get on the table.”

“Yessir,” Barton let out through gritted teeth.

Was he angry at himself, or at Loki? It was entertaining all the same. Loki brutally let him go, and
Barton climbed on the heavy table, settling on all fours.

“Good,” Loki approved. “Don’t move.”

He invoked a leather collar which he buckled around Barton’s neck. He slipped a rope in the O-ring and solidly tied it to a special pulley embedded in the middle of the table. It acted as a retractable leash; Barton could bend down as low as he wanted, but then he wouldn’t be able to get back up afterwards, which meant he had to fight to keep the leash under constant tension.

Loki grabbed his wrists and crossed them behind his back, forcing Barton to stay level but without the support of his arms. It wasn’t too hard of a position to maintain for now, but it could become very straining with time. Thankfully, it wasn’t the plan.

Although if asked, Barton might have favored this option over the other.

Loki let a chain click down from the ceiling until it started coiling on Barton’s back; the cold metal made him startle, and as he buckled down, the winding swallowed a few inches of his leash. Loki wrapped the chain around his wrists—those links were bound to bite—and let the chain tense again. Barton’s arms grew tenser as they were elevated and stretched behind his back, making his shoulder blades protrude like clipped wings. He could either hang in his chains at the cost of a painful strain over his shoulders and of a shortening of the leash, or struggle to stay up as much as the leash would allow.

Loki trailed his fingers up Barton’s arm, then suddenly punched him in the stomach—not too hard; but hard enough. The archer instinctively buckled and let out a groan of pain when the weight of his body violently pulled at his shoulders. The leash forced him another inch down and he struggled against it.

“There,” Loki grinned, leaving his fist pressed into Barton’s stomach.

He tilted his head on the side as he released him gradually. “Found your marks yet?”

“Yes sir,” Barton hissed, panting against the pain, and this time he was undoubtedly mad at him.

Loki grinned some more, then put on his glove. This was something he’d copied from Midgard as well. It was soft, black fabric—with silver bristles along the fingers and the palm.

He put his gloved hand on Barton’s ass and lightly brushed up the curve of his back, scraping him with the dozen flexible spikes. It wasn’t leaving any marks.

Yet.

“So,” Loki said, smirking at Barton’s deep shudder and suddenly quickening breath.

He rested his gloved hand on the small of his back, over the brand.

“I want you to tell me about Romanov.”

Barton stiffened—Loki had expected it, and he flattened his hand over the skin to scrape him up his spine, leaving dozen of fiery red marks. Barton buckled again and scrambled not to fall hanging in his chains. The winding brought him another few inches down, forcing him to put some strain on his shoulders as his arms tensed in the chains. Loki stilled his hand and grinned at him.

“Yes—you were a bit too comfortable the last time we talked,” he said idly.
Barton was breathing very deeply and quickly, and looked like he wanted to say something which wouldn't have helped his case. Loki tilted his head on the side to see his face. “Yes?”

“I—” Barton panted.

He swallowed thickly and his muscles bulged in the restraints. “I... She's a—please, you already know all that...”

“I know what she is,” Loki said. “I don't know what she is to you.”

He increased his pressure again and Barton fought his chains. “Please—please, I'll... alright. Sorry... Alright.”

He took another deep breath. “I met her on—on the field.”

“Mnh,” Loki said lightly, lightly scratching him up his back.

Barton gasped and squirmed—and Loki crushed the glove between his bulging shoulder blades and scraped him again, drawing dozens of small bloody scratches in retaliation. The archer let out a short strangled scream and desperately tugged at his chains. The bristled glove really looked like it panicked him. Loki knew, from their experiments with the whips, that the slighter pains added trepidation to the suffering in itself. Intense torture short-circuited his thinking—dazed him—but pains like this? Made him tense. Made him nervous. Made him pay attention.

All the better.

“I would advise you to go on,” Loki said.

“I—yes,” Barton panted, almost hyper-ventilating. “She was—she was my target.”

Loki pressed down on the back of his head to scrape his scalp beneath his short, thick hair. He felt Barton struggle back as to avoid bowing down and feeding the winding another few inches of his leash.

“Your target?” Loki asked. “For how long had you been with SHIELD?”

Barton's jaws clenched automatically shut. Loki grinned and very, very lightly brushed the bristled glove over the raw, bloody scratches he'd already drawn.

“Is it classified?” he asked.

Barton let out a slow breath. He needed to let go, let go of it all. Loki was ready to help.

“I'd—I'd been with SHIELD for nine years,” Barton stammered brokenly. He'd been brainwashed never to disclose such things—even less so to an enemy. He had to be rewritten. “I joined when I was—when I was seventeen.”

Good, Loki noted, he was opening out more easily than last time already, adding new information of his own—but it still took a great deal of pain to break past his defenses.

“Right after you'd left the circus, then?” Loki asked.

Barton tensed again and said very blandly, “Yes, sir.”

Hmm. Something about the circus. It really worried him—as though he was in fact afraid of Loki's reaction. Now still wasn't the time to push it. “Isn't seventeen very young even for a human?”
“It is,” Barton nodded. “It’s—”

He stopped abruptly when Loki’s bare hand cradled his balls. The demi-god smirked and rested his gloved hand on the curve of his ass. “Are you sure you want to stop talking now?”

“They didn’t leave me any choice I was fucked I would've gone to prison otherwise,” he said hurriedly.

“I see,” Loki said—then he gripped his balls in his bristled hand and rolled them against the spiked palm of the glove.

Barton buckled and squirmed and scrambled on the table, trying to contain the half-screams breaking through his lips; but unfortunately, he only managed to give some slack to the leash which tensed again as the winding swallowed it up. He’d lost a dozen inches this time, and his strained shoulders were making him pay for it. At the beginning, his back had been horizontal, parallel to the table; the more the interrogation went, the further down he bent; except the chain wrapped around his wrists wasn't getting any longer. Oh, his shoulders must hurt.

“You stopped talking,” Loki said innocently.

He squeezed him harder, tickled him with three bristled fingers and slowly scraped down his balls. The sensation must be unbearable on so thin, so sensitive a skin. Barton's tortured shoulders were trembling and the chain had started to dig in his wrists.

“Back to Romanov,” Loki said, still working over his balls. “You had to kill her. Why didn't you?”

“I—I don't know,” he moaned. “Please—”

Loki released his balls but pressed the glove against his left buttock and scraped—scratched—shredded his skin excruciatingly slowly. This time Barton screamed, and his scream morphed into wordless begging when Loki's bristled fingers slipped into his crack of his ass to prod at his entrance.

“Please—please!” he implored feverishly when he could speak again. “I don't know—I really don't! I just—I just—I couldn't let her die!”

“Because she was young and pretty?” Loki said.

“Because—because she was me,” Clint blurted.

There was a second of silence. Barton was biting his lips and frantic tears were welling up in his eyes. Loki had stopped his hand.

“She was you,” Loki murmured.

“She was... she was... she was me, just—on the other side. What I could've been. And I thought...” He swallowed. “I thought if it was me I would've liked someone to reach out.”

“Mmh.”

Loki's bristled hand left Barton's ass to travel up his left side, brushing over his ribs, going up a little along his twisted left arm. Barton was squirming and moaning slightly between his clenched teeth. He obviously hated it, but Loki doubted the glove was what he hated the most at the moment.

All Loki could think, himself, was how he couldn't have imagined two people more different that Clint Barton and the Black Widow.
“Very well,” he said. “Here is another question.”

He stilled for a second.

“If I was to kill you now,” he said in a low voice, “and throw your body back on Midgard.”

Barton shuddered, but said nothing.

“Who would come to your funeral?”

The archer laughed a little through his tears. “Right now?” he said. “Nobody.”

Loki said nothing.

He leaned forward, then cupped Barton's jaw with his bare hand and made him turn his head to press their lips together. The archer all but melted into the kiss with some sort of relief and a lot of despair. The interrogations were really what drained him the most. He tasted of tears and sweat, and he was still shivering.

Without breaking the kiss, Loki started brushing his bristled glove over Clint's back, eliciting goose bumps over his skin and little whines over his bloody scratches. His shoulders were trembling very violently now, and the collar had chafed around his neck with how much he fought the retractable leash. The chains had broken the tender skin of his wrists and a slow trickle of blood was going down his arm.

“Now,” Loki murmured, pulling back ever so slightly.

He could taste the salt of Barton's tears on his lips. He reached with his gloved hand for Barton's cock—more than half-hard—and started stroking it, bristles scraping it unbearably slowly. The archer gasped and scrambled and whined when Loki teased the tip.

“Please—stop—fuck—stop!”

Loki only tightened his grip and this time when he stroked, he knew he was leaving red marks all along Barton's length. The archer thrashed and screamed and wildly tugged at his chains.

“You're going to hurt yourself,” the demi-god murmured with a nasty smile.

“Please—” he was sobbing. “Please, please, please!”

“Oh,” Loki murmured. “Very well.”

He released Barton's cock; then he brushed the bristles up his thighs—and pushed a gloved finger into his ass. Barton buckled even harder, but that was nothing compared with what happened when Loki reached his prostate—he almost dislocated both his shoulders then and screamed like he was trying to deafen himself. Loki pushed in another finger, then a third, and started slowly rubbing the sensitive spot—rubbing the sharp bristles against it, scraping him as he pumped his fingers in and out. Barton was ready to fall apart—and he did fall apart when Loki covered his other hand with a matching glove, and began stroking his cock.

Barton screamed.

He screamed and sobbed and begged with and without words, but he could do nothing except go insane with pain and over-stimulation. His arms were absolutely twisted backwards now with how low he'd sagged in the chains which were cruelly biting his wrists. The leash had been almost
entirely swallowed down in the winding, bringing Barton’s collar only a few inches from the table. Loki pushed further into him, _wriggled_ his fingers as he stroked harder, and Barton shouted and came so hard it looked like a peak of agony instead of an actual climax. He was still shuddering violently when Loki’s fingers pulled out, still breathless and gasping and completely disheveled, but he was on the brink of letting go, and Loki knew just how to push him over the edge.

He got out one of the limes he’d taken from the dinner table, then put it on the table and neatly severed it in half.

Barton saw it; and beneath the tears and sweat, his face became ghastly pale. “No,” he stammered wanly. “No. Please.” Between the collar around his neck and the chains pulling his arms almost at the vertical now, he could do nothing but beg. “Not this. Fuck, please, _please—_”

Loki slowly squeezed the lime over the bloody scratches all over his back, and let it drip. He might as well have poured liquid fire over him. Barton's scream bubbled behind his lips, got caught into his throat as a whine which grew louder and louder until it exploded in an inarticulate yell. Loki _rubbed_ the lime over the raw wounds and Barton just started sobbing frantically. He yelled again when Loki walked around the table to squeeze acidic juice into all his other wounds; and when it trickled down inside the crack of his ass, he looked as though he might just go mad.

He couldn't really scream anymore, but he still did, hoarse and broken, when Loki rubbed the other half of the lime all over his raw balls and rawer cock; and when juice trickled over his tip, Barton sort of snapped—Loki saw it happen, a sharp wave blasting through his entire body—and passed out from the torture.

Loki had frankly lost count of his own orgasms by now.

He licked the bloodied lime—green and red, acidic and bitter, an interesting match—before dropping it and slowly lowering Barton back onto the table. The winding ate up the last inches of the leash as Barton’s body went down. Loki unwrapped the chains, carefully set his arms on each side of his head as he lay him down on his stomach, and rubbed his stiff shoulders for a long time. The juice was still boring into Barton’s wounds and made him softly whimper. His blackout had been violent but brief; his eyes were already half-open as he slowly came round, but he was completely limp, only able to breathe.

This was good. Right now, he needed not to think at all; Loki knew how prone Barton was to torment himself with remorse and doubts after so deep an introspection. _Nobody_, he’d said, nobody for his funeral. He was torturing himself with thoughts of his own worthlessness. But right now, his eyes reflected nothing; they were dull and unfocused.

When Loki cleaned his back and ass and thighs with a wet cloth, Barton looked like he had been transported straight into Valhalla without even dying a glorious death. He went completely boneless. His hazy eyes followed Loki as he took care of his tortured body. The wounds were almost nothing—a few scratches here and there, a bit of irritated skin—and yet he had almost shattered this time. The psychological torture had, no doubt, played the most part in it. But now his mind had let go, as well as his body, and he mumbled a few weak thanks.

Loki gave him the other half of the lime to suck; he needed vitamins. Barton bit into it and scowled at the acidic bitterness, but took it all like a well-trained slave, sucking the juice into his mouth despite the tears flowing freely down his face again. When Loki unbuckled his collar and rubbed his neck, Barton let his head fall back and exhaled a deep sigh which sounded like all strain was leaving his body in one big gust of wind.
"You can sleep," Loki murmured. "You can rest."

Barton tried to thank him again, but he was too hazy even to speak. He drifted off for good shortly after.

Forestalling Thanos and deceiving Idunn had nothing on persuading Clint Barton that he was worth anyone's trouble. Thankfully, Loki was willing to fight those three fights—and win each of them.

He scooped Barton up in his arms, letting his head rest on his leather-clad shoulder. It was decided.

“No one will come to your funeral,” he murmured.

He kissed his forehead. “Because you will never need one.”

Chapter End Notes

Suddenly, original scene. Sooo... what did you think? ^^
Thanos needed a source of power; and Idunn's ruby was an unlimited source of power.

Loki needed a golden apple to make Barton immortal; and Idunn was the guardian of golden apples.

Well. At least he knew where to go.

When he reappeared on the Bifrost, Loki was nervous again. But this nervousness was the good kind— the kind of trepidation he felt before setting a major prank to work. This was what he did best. The last time he had felt like this was before Thor's coronation, as he opened the path for the Frost Giants to crash his golden brother's party...

Loki rubbed his temples. He was getting a bit of a headache there.

“Loki Laufeyson,” called a deep voice beneath the stars.

Loki sighed, then looked up with his trademark sharp smirk. “Heimdall,” he called. “What an expected pleasure.”

“The Realm of Asgard welcomes you no more,” the guardian said, coming out of the gate with his golden eyes fixed upon him. “Be gone.”

“Now,” Loki said, raising his hands. “There is no need for this. I merely wish to go to Idunn House.”

Heimdall froze and Loki grinned wider.

Idunn House was the one place Loki could not afford to reach by his own means, as it would be seen as a grave profanation. Idunn allowed no great magic to be performed around her; magic amounted to treachery to her eyes, Norns only knew why. Loki had often rolled his own eyes at this; and it was the main reason he had never been interested into visiting this place, even after he had come of age. But even the Trickster and the Liesmith knew some rules are not meant to be broken, but only bent. The fact that Idunn was the guardian of the golden apples which kept all the Aesir alive had probably something to do with it.

“You are no longer invited to the gardens of Idunn,” Heimdall growled.

“And why not?” Loki smiled. “I am an inhabitant of the Nine Realms, just like you.”
“Only the Aesir and the Vanir can feast on the golden apples.”

Idunn House was supposed to welcome even the most wretched criminals as long as they never sinned against its hospitality. But never before had a Frost Giant entered the sacred shrine. Loki knew the apples caused Aesir and Vanir to live longer, had no effect on the Elves, and were lethal to Midgardians; but the effect on the Jotnar was unknown to him.

He cared little about it, since the apple would not be for him.

“Heimdall,” Loki said, taking a step forward. “I am certain you are familiar with the laws you are supposed to enforce. I have committed no crimes within the walls of Idunn House—I have never even been there; I have not sinned against Idunn. I am entitled to be her guest; and if you deny me this right, it is you she will no longer welcome.”

“What business do you have there?”

“I’ve been feeling a little old lately,” Loki said, studying his nails.

Heimdall smiled.

This was unusual enough for a chill to run down Loki’s spine.

“You know nothing,” Heimdall said. “You, of all people, in Idunn House.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Ominous suits you ill, Heimdall. And my ghost flew through this house before; believe me, I have trodden in darkest places.”

He did his best not to remember that the darkest of all places was pulsing under his feet at this very moment. He had no idea how the presence of the chasm had not disturbed him in his youth; he guessed that somehow, he had never truly believed one could fall in this endless void. Until it happened to him.

Heimdall shook his head. “The likes of you are never welcome in Idunn House.”

“Because you know me so well,” Loki spat. “Enough chatter. Open the Bifrost.”

Heimdall smiled again and Loki really didn’t like it. “It is your choice,” the guardian said. “You will not last more than ten minutes.”

Loki said nothing and only closed his eyes when the flaming colors of the rainbow threw him across the stars.

He landed just behind the closed gates and gazed upon the golden manor standing before him. Very well—as of now, he could not use his magic, except for tiny tricks with no consequences. He rolled his shoulders, then walked down the path leading to the front gate.

This place, just like the Bifrost, was apparently blessed with eternal night; multicolored firebugs danced in the soft air, and Loki could see a golden light shining through the windows. He knew the Elves were very fond of Idunn’s hospitality; they must prove themselves most gracious guests since they did not need her apples to stay young, and as such, must maintain a less hypocritical atmosphere
than the Aesir or Vanir visitors.

Loki was immensely grateful for Idunn’s position among the Nine Realms. He could not bear to imagine Odin holding such power in the palm of his hand. Idunn could have blackmailed the King of Asgard, but she knew better and was not ambitious; her place satisfied her. Her existence was secure and her neutrality a blessing to all.

In other words, she was a tool.

Loki went through the carved gates and found himself in a great atrium; stairs of marbles spiraled from both ends of it to reunite at the top in front of a smaller door. He knew from his astral peering that this was the treasure room. The atrium itself led to a few steps down to an immense hall opening on the gardens.

Those were nothing like the neat bushes in front of the entrance. They were plunged in thick, ominous shadows, leaving only monstrous figures to be seen, as though a deep jungle was starting after the razor-sharp edge of the marble terrace.

But the hall was pleasantly lit with floating fire balls, softly glowing over the guests’ heads. They were quite numerous; most of them were Elves, but Loki spotted more than a few Vanir and even some Asgardians he had met before his fall. They did not look at him; he had barely stepped through the front door, and he had no intention to cross the atrium and step into the hall right now.

He turned to one of the great stairs spiraling to the treasure room.

The knot in Loki’s chest loosened gradually as he kept walking without being stopped. For all his bravado, he had feared Idunn would treat him as a criminal despite the fact that he had never broken her rules; but she was fair; his anxiety dimmed a little as he repeated these words to himself—she was fair. Even to the likes of him, as Heimdall had put it. Hel if Loki was going to let him get to him.

Nobody even paid attention to him; there were no guards, no guests wandering in the corridors. He reached the top of the stairs and pushed open the doors.

The inside of the room was completely dark; Loki was surprised to find it had another exit, which apparently led directly to an immense flight of stairs coming back down into the hall. This vault was the least safe place he had ever come across, and yet nothing had been stolen from it in thousands of years.

Or so he hoped.

Treasures, jewels and books were sitting in the shadows; he ignored them all and walked straight towards the ruby. He was almost convinced it would have disappeared, but it was still there, sitting on a small pillow of white silk.

Loki took it, and let it weigh in his palm; he could not afford to check it through magic, but he could feel the energy of the jewel thrum into his bones, and he was positive it was the real one. Thanos had not stolen it.

Loki let out a soundless sigh and the knot in his chest loosened another notch. The crisis was averted for now, but time was still running out. He had to—

“Loki Laufeyson,” a smooth voice said behind him.

He froze, then put the ruby back in place and slowly turned round.
“Lady Idunn, I suppose,” he murmured with a thin smile.

Idunn was nothing like he imagined.

Truth be told, Loki had pictured some sort of female version of Thor, but the woman standing before him was more of a glowing ember than of a bright flame. Her features were somehow too intense, too sharp, or too defined, maybe; she burned with a low intensity as though her blood was lava under the old, pale skin. She had the beauty of the rich, but age had made her wise enough not to flaunt her fortune; her clothes were surprisingly simple, almost austere, and there was a steely grace to her ageless, severe face.

“I have heard much about you,” she said in a dry, husky voice. “What business do you have in my treasure room?”

Loki laughed a little. “Merely having a look. It is a splendid ruby you have here.”

She narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. Loki was obviously not here to steal—or if he was, he was terrible at it; and the vague threat in his words would only draw her to guard her jewels with even more attention.

“I have come for youth,” Loki said.

“You already have it.”

“I meant apple-shaped youth. Of the golden kind.”

Idunn looked supremely unimpressed. “You are lucky not to be thrown out for this petty disguise of yours,” she said. “But it fools me not, Frost Giant.”

Loki was taken aback; he only smiled wider.

“I did wonder why Odin would not bring me here in my youth,” he mused out loud. “You are terribly perceptive, your ladyship.”

He slowly let his white skin wash away. It was a spell—he hadn't thought of it until now. Obviously nothing serious enough to get him banned from the House, but still, it had irritated her.

Idunn stared straight into his glowing red eyes; he smirked and opened his hands. “I apologize. This shifting was not meant to hide my identity. I simply wished not to inconvenience your guests.”

“Jotnar cannot eat the golden apples,” she said brusquely. “They live off their own stubborn coldness, and the warm life of trees and fruits means nothing to their kind.”

“I was raised in the midst of warm life,” Loki said. “Surely—”

“No. You are no different.”

Loki stood straight and clenched his fists.

“I have no business with you,” she said dismissively, turning away. “Be gone now.”

“I want an apple,” Loki articulated. “What do you care what I do with it? So what, if it crumbles into ice in my mouth? I will not go without one.”

She whipped round at him.
“Why, you insolent boy,” she growled—and to see this woman so graceful, so strictly elegant; to hear such a savage sound coming out of her mouth caused Loki to take a step back. “You would have an apple for the pleasure of throwing it to waste?” she said. “You want life, only so you can destroy it?”

“No,” Loki said a bit too violently. “No—please.” He’d begged without meaning it. “It is true, I am Jotun. Maybe I need nothing to survive. But I want to live—and life I cannot have, unless it is outside of me.”

What am I saying? but he could not stop himself. “The apple—it will not go to waste. I want something to preserve what would otherwise wither at my touch. I want life strong enough to fight off the death and destruction I carry inside me.”

Idunn stared at him for a long time. Loki did not understand himself—but perhaps he had felt, from the bottom of his lying soul, that Idunn could only be swayed by truth.

“The apples cannot make you Aesir,” she said. “Nothing can.”

“I don’t want—” Loki began, then abruptly shut up.

He was beginning to understand what Heimdall had meant. It was not that Idunn cared only for truth; she was Truth, just like he was the Liesmith.

Idunn raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. Loki clenched his fists tighter. “I don’t want it for me,” he said at last.

“Liar,” she snapped.

He looked up, ready to fight for himself; but he thought twice and shut his mouth. He must remember—her house, her rules. He must not let himself be carried away. They stayed silent for a long moment; when she saw that he was not going to speak, she nodded slightly in approval.

“You want an apple?” she said. “You have to earn it.”

“How?” he breathed.

“Here you are rambling about life and selflessness,” she said, “when really, you can only ever think of yourself. You want to twist nature only to forget yours.”

She raised her chin and looked down at him. “Shed your clothes and walk to the orchard for all to see.”

Loki was speechless for a stunned second.

“What?” he said at last.

“You heard me. What is it you said? —life strong enough to fight off the death I carry inside me. Lo and behold, boy: there is no such thing. If you cannot fight it off yourself beforehand, you will simply destroy the apple as you pick it. You have to be in agreement with yourself.”

“It is much easier to be in agreement with yourself when you are Aesir—privileged—praised by all!” Loki snarled.

“True,” Idunn said. “And?”

That shut Loki up.
“You can complain that others have it easier,” she said. “Or you can take what you were given and make do.”

“You make it sound so simple,” he said sarcastically.

“It is simple,” she said. “I never said it was easy.”

She opened the other door of the treasure room. Loki could see the great hall crowded with Elves and Aesir and Vanir; and beyond, the dark, deep orchard in which grew the apple tree. He thought of walking naked, in his blue skin, through the entire hall and across the gardens.

Oh, yes, he knew what Heimdall had meant now. And he hated him for being right.

“You just want to humiliate me,” he muttered through clenched teeth.

Idunn’s cold features didn’t falter.

“Aesir and Vanir are made to strip as well,” she said. “It is a sacred ritual; for life comes to us only when we are nude in soul and in body.” She snorted slightly. “Only you would perceive it as a humiliation. Was your own birth humiliating, boy?”

Loki did not answer that.

“What is the point of prolonging the life of a creature which cannot stand itself?” Idunn asked.

“The apple is not for me,” Loki repeated, somehow wanly.

“Yes,” Idunn said again, “it is.”

Loki stayed silent for a long time. Terror was twisting his stomach in knots.

Then he unbuckled his pauldrons and let them fall on the marble floor. He looked at Idunn; once again, she met his red gaze with supreme indifference. He swallowed, then unbuckled his chest-piece; he unlaced his gaiters and wrist-guards, slipped them off, then shrugged off his coat of armor and found himself in pants and tunic. He unlaced his boots, then slipped his shirt over his head.

He had to pause, then; he looked at his blue hands and saw they were trembling.

“You just want to humiliate me,” he repeated in a low, strained voice.

Idunn simply waited. She was the most merciless person Loki had ever met; and he understood now why Odin had left her in peace. Not only because of the apples. Hel, maybe this was not about the apples at all.

Loki closed his eyes and remembered Barton’s hands, roaming over his body, tracing the lines engraved in his flesh. He remembered warm lips brushing his blue lips.

He breathed out, then unlaced his pants and pulled them down. He looked up again at Idunn, who held his gaze with an unmoving stare. Loki thought of Odin again, and of how Odin must have done the same thing—baring his old grey body to walk through the gardens. Idunn’s eyes were probably just as merciless upon him; and the old bastard had probably felt no shame. He had probably made others ashamed to look.

Loki remembered what Idunn had just told him. You are no different. It sounded like an encouragement now. But it wasn’t, and neither was it an insult; it was only truth; she was only truth.
He clenched his fists again and stood tall. “Very well,” he spat. “Show me the way, you damned old witch.”

“Oh I am,” she said, unfazed. “And witch I am.”

She stepped aside to reveal the immense, crowded hall at the bottom of the great stairs, and further, the unfathomable darkness of the gardens.

Loki took a deep breath and walked out of the treasure room.

The steps were flat and cold under his bare feet.

But he felt as though he was stepping on ridges all the same. The air on his naked body made him unbearably aware of his vulnerability; his muscles quivered under his rippling blue skin.

At first, no one saw him. But then, progressively, the conversations died out as the golden-clad guests turned one by one to stare at him in stunned speechlessness.

Loki’s muscles seemed to grow tenser by the second; he felt like their gazes were weighing physically on his shoulders. It was not quite the disgust he had expected. There was disgust, yes; but it was overwhelmed by astonishment and awe. He realized that, had he kept his clothes, he would have been hunted and killed like the monster he was to the Nine Realms; mistaken for a trespasser. But his nudity proved that he was aware of the ritual. That he was entitled to walk among them.

Never before had a Jotun been given the chance to enter Idunn House, because they could not access the Bifrost. But Idunn welcomed races from all Nine Realms. In theory.

Well, stare at will, Loki thought fiercely, squaring his shoulders. Stare at me!

Idunn’s rules protected him; in the sacredness of the ritual, no one could stop him—they could only stare indeed, speechless and breathless, perhaps indignant, perhaps murderous, but powerless. He had a right to exist. He only had to claim that right. No matter how difficult it was in comparison to those who had it granted from the start.

Gods, but she is wise.

He closed his eyes for a second when he reached the bottom of the stairs, then started walking more decidedly across the hall. The beautiful lords and ladies stepped back to let him through. He did not cross their gazes; he could be ironic and indifferent, but not right now, not under the full blast of their attention. Right now he could not pretend not to care, so he looked straight ahead, and this was the most terribly difficult thing he had ever done. The worst of it all was that there was no obvious reason for his panic; no one was lashing at him or even trying to stop him; yet simply walking there, in the truth of his self, stripped bare of all lies, of all deceit, to the point that no one so much as recognized him—it made him sick with dread.

He wondered half-way to the orchard whether Barton shouldn’t have been the one to do this; but Idunn was right. The apple was for Loki. He had said it himself, albeit in veiled terms; he needed the apple so Barton could live for him, and endure for him.

But he already did.

Did he not? Loki had mastered his own strength until then. He had not killed Barton, not even through the coldness of his own body. Although he had lost control so many times, he had always
retained enough of it to keep Barton alive.

So maybe he already knew himself a little; maybe he was indeed ready to let the world see. Maybe he would be able to pick the apple.

Loki held his head higher and kept walking, even though he was feeling like his vertebrae were being fused together one by one. No one dared to say a word.

When he finally reached the blissful shadow of the orchard, he slipped into the darkness, leaned against a tree for balance and stayed there, breathing in deep gasps, reeling and shuddering, for maybe five minutes.

_Gods._

Eventually, he swallowed and raked a hand through his hair; his pounding heart was beginning to calm down. Straightening up, he realized that the tree had started to freeze where he had touched it.

He snatched away but it was too late; the tree froze over entirely, until the last leaf, with a sharp crack of ice.

Burning tears suddenly pricked at Loki’s eyes with an awful pang of terror. There—it was not enough! He could flaunt what he was all he wanted, it changed nothing in the end. Panic rose inside him. He had no idea what to do to repair this—he could not use magic—but then he heard a small sound and spun round.

Idunn was there, looking at him.

“І—” he breathed. “I did not mean—”

“Calm down,” she said with utmost serenity and a bit of disdain. “I told you Jotnar and trees do not mix.”

Loki turned back to stare at the frozen tree which glinted slowly under the starlight.

“It is beautiful,” she remarked distractedly.

Loki was speechless for a moment.

“I killed it,” he pointed out eventually. “I leaned against it and I killed it!”

“You were not warned,” she said. “You have never walked outside in such a skin.”

Loki stared at her for a long time.

“I lost trees to frost before,” she went on. “Are you expecting me to crumble in despair? This is part of a gardener’s harsh life, boy.”

Loki had not been called _boy_ in nearly six hundred years, but this woman overwhelmed him. He turned around and started walking again, if only to get away from her; of course, she followed him, but to move again soothed his inner turmoil enough, and he kept going through the soft darkness.

He went further and further into the orchard with Idunn’s silent presence by his side. Now that he
knew vegetation froze much more easily than, say, a human body, it was easier for him to contain the coldness of his core enough to walk among the bushes without freezing them.

A faint golden glow warned him that he was getting closer from his goal; he slipped beneath a bushy laburnum and found himself before the apple-tree in all its eerie glory. The golden apples were beautiful, lighting up the tree like candles in the dark.

He swallowed, then reached out for a branch and slowly curved it until he could pick a big, heavy apple which almost did not fit in his hand. He released the branch which curved back up, swaying gently.

And there it was.

He turned back to Idunn.

“Is this mine?” he asked.

“You picked it,” she said. “It is yours.”

He took a second to appreciate the sight of his blue fingers against the golden fruit; then he let himself turn paler again, and wished his clothes back on. Almost instantly, he felt as though his entire world had been toned down into a less bright, less overwhelming, less infinite space. He felt the loss, but at the same time, he was tremendously relieved.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

She huffed through her nose.

“Do not thank me,” she said briskly. “This is an orchard; the apples are here to be picked.”

Loki briefly wondered how old Idunn could be. Perhaps as old as the stars themselves. He thought of Thanos shredding this place into nothingness and felt a spike of anger.

Anger. On behalf of something he didn’t know an hour ago.

Gods, he was changing, he kept changing and changing again, and maybe this was what life was all about, outside of the lie he had been taught.

He felt exhausted and he yearned to leave; but he had what he had come for, and more.

“It’s not the apple I’m thanking you for,” he said.

She raised a thin eyebrow, but said nothing. He realized he was still breathless.

“Lady Idunn.” His fingers clenched around the apple. “Till next time.”

* *

Loki was still half in shock when he reappeared on the Bifrost. Somehow, the recent memory of Idunn managed to dwarf even the great Heimdall and his golden stare. Loki looked at the guardian, who raised his eyebrows.
“So?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious. “How was it?”

“Different,” Loki murmured.

He knew his eyes were still too wide, and he could not find it in himself to boast. “Definitely… different.”

“Brother!” Thor called, landing on the colored glass.

Loki closed his eyes and sighed. “Of course you warned Thor,” he mumbled.

Heimdall smiled darkly, then retreated to give them privacy.

“Brother,” Thor repeated, getting up to stride towards him. “You cannot give Barton a golden apple. It will kill him. The power—”

Loki frowned at him. “You’re assuming I did get to pick one?”

Thor obviously did not expect that and stopped mid-sentence.

“And you’re assuming I passed Idunn’s test—for Barton?” Loki went on, smirking.

Oh, come to think of it, Thor was exactly what he needed right now.

Thor clenched his fists. “Brother, do not taunt me—if you did get an apple, you must not give it to —”

“I know,” Loki said. “I know it would kill him. What if this is the way I want him to die? What if I enslaved him only for my experiments?”

Thor closed his eyes. “Loki…”

“I am sure it would be very painful to him,” Loki mused. “Why are you still on Asgard, by the way? Do you not long for your Midgardian love and friends? Oh,” he smirked wider, “wait, I get it. You are here to watch out for Barton and report to them.”

He took a step forward. “Well, brother mine, bad news: you have no way to know whether he is alive, crippled, or dead. Perhaps I killed him the moment I took him. Perhaps he is alive and well. Perhaps I cut off his arms and ripped out his tongue.”

“Loki,” Thor murmured again.

He seemed genuinely desperate and Loki suddenly, brutally, hated himself. Not enough to give Thor proof Barton was alive; but enough to wish he hadn’t said those words.

“Thor,” he said, more calmly.

He waited, then said, “Barton is mine. There is no point in asking about him at all times.”

The apple was warm inside his pocket.

“And if you are going to let your friends use you like Odin used you,” he said quickly, before he could gather himself together enough to regret those words, “I suggest you find new friends.”

Thor looked up at him, frowning. “What?”
“Goodbye, brother,” Loki murmured—and he vanished.

He wanted to see Clint.
“Barton,” Loki called, heart still hammering as he strode through the empty dining room. “Barton!”

The door opened on the library and Clint walked in hastily, looking a little alarmed. He probably hadn’t even noticed he had been left alone for a few hours.

“Sir?” he asked. “Is there a—”

Loki grabbed his face and pulled him in for a rough, hungry kiss. Clint startled a little, but opened himself at once and Loki wanted him, here, now.

He pressed flush against him, wished their clothes away and suddenly—in instinctively—let his blue skin envelop him again.

Barton shivered with the sudden cold, but he showed absolutely no sign of disgust, and Loki kissed him deeper, harsher, and lifted him off the floor to push him on his back on the great table; he leaned forward, grinning very close to his face, boring his red eyes into his. Barton stared back, his own eyes a bit wide, taken aback but in no way scared. Loki kissed him again and spread his legs, blue fingers dimpling his thighs. Barton panted out a breath when he felt him line up—this meant something to him now, to be taken by Loki in this skin and to be able to see it, this meant something to them both—and Loki braced on his hips to push his hard length into him, slowly but decidedly, until he was properly impaled.

It was all unbearable heat and clenching muscles. Barton arched and let out an involuntary moan; Loki bottomed out just to make him squirm, then chafed against his prostate on his way out; he angled his hips and started to thrust inside him, in slow pulsing waves, heart pounding in his efforts not to injure him, neither with his strength, neither with the cold throbbing inside him and demanding to be let loose. Releasing Barton’s already bruising thighs, Loki pinned his wrists on the table above his head, thrust and thrust and rammed his cock inside and leaned down to bite his shoulder, sucked bruises on his skin, tortured a nipple between his sharp teeth then bit around it, hard, until he felt Barton struggle in pain and buck desperately against his hold, clenching in his efforts not to come; he was breathing in gasps now, out of pain or out of shock, Loki wasn’t sure, but he knew Barton was on the brink of falling apart so he nibbled at his ear, thrust harder—making him slide slightly on the table with each snap of his hips—then bit the lobe of his ear, almost bit it off, felt the taste of his blood and heard Barton crying out, and then he tightened his grip to dig bruises in his wrists and whispered, “Come—come—”

Barton arched against him, pulsing cock trapped between their stomachs; he wrapped his legs around Loki’s waist and dug his heels into his back as he came. To see him like this, so disheveled and
bruised and helpless caused Loki to follow him over the edge, welcoming the wave of pleasure which crashed through him and blew up his mind into light for a second. The archer cried out again, struggling against Loki’s hold—of course; Loki’s seed must feel really cold. The demi-god let his eyes flutter shut and rested atop Barton’s shuddering body, feeling heavy, tired, and deeply content.

They stayed there, breathing together, for a long time. And Loki, gradually, felt a strange wistfulness invade him. Barton didn’t know it, but this had been his last orgasm in his body of origin.

And, come to think of it, Loki’s first orgasm in his.

Loki took a deep breath, then kissed him again, slow and gentle. Barton was still panting heavily, and Loki’s rough onslaught had left a hazy look lingering in his grey eyes. Limp and pliant, he had stopped fighting his master’s hold.

Loki released his wrists.

“Dress yourself,” he murmured. “We’re going hunting.”

“…”

“We cannot stay for very long,” Loki said as they walked into the library. “Heimdall might not exactly be thrilled to see us hunting in the lands of Asgard.”

“Asgard?” Barton repeated in surprise as he buckled his quiver.

Loki smiled a little. “Not the city in itself, Barton. There is more to the Realm than the royal palace.” And how, he thought with a small shiver, remembering Idunn House.

He invoked his spear and walked to the door. “Ready?”

He waited for Barton’s for what? but the archer only murmured, “Yessir.” Loki smiled to himself, with a hint of sadism. My, but he was learning.

He strode out of the wooden shack he had built in the great, sunlit fields of Asgard. Turning round, he squinted to see Barton follow him outside; the archer looked very nervous, but Loki wasn’t afraid of another drop. Not this time. That being said, Barton had been kept in complete captivity for almost a month; he needed a bit of time to get his bearings.

Loki let him look around; it was so strange to see him here, standing next to the carved shack Loki had used as a refuge for so many years in his youth. Barton peered at it, looking very interested.

“So—this is your house. Bigger on the inside, uh? Like the TARDIS.”

This was a piece of the Midgardian culture Loki obviously didn’t know about. “I have no idea what you mean, but no,” he said, smiling. “The house exists beyond space. It is… a hub, if you will.”

It was not easy explaining something he had never talked about before. “I need a door to access it—”
“Like Monsters Inc.,” Barton cut off, nodding along.

“—and I must use a different door to leave.” That was not exactly true; Loki could use a door, close it and reopen it again on a different place, but frankly, it looked awkward. He’d rather teleport right inside the house without bothering with doors altogether, but to explain it would prove even more complicated, so he didn’t try for now and went on, “It will then lead me anywhere I want—”

“Like Howl’s Moving Castle.”

Loki stopped and leveled a very calm stare at Barton, who was obviously in an interrupting mood. The archer flushed a little and looked down. “Sorry,” he said quickly. “Helps me fix things in my mind.”

“Midgardians,” Loki muttered.

Another master would have taken this opportunity to teach Barton a few manners, but Loki didn’t feel like it—not about this. Barton’s personality was something he wanted to preserve. Besides, the archer was about to be reminded of his place in a much more lasting way.

They started walking in the tall green grass. It was a beautiful day; Loki himself was mostly indifferent to the weather, but Barton seemed to appreciate it. Good—his renewed captivity would feel all the more acute to him afterwards.

A powerful, vibrating low rang through the golden air.

“Bilgesnipes,” Loki grinned. Now this was just perfect. A bear or even a strong wolf could have done the trick, but bilgesnipes were specifically Asgardian, and the symbolism of it was not lost on Loki. He climbed faster to the top of the hill they were on, and grinned even wider.

The whole pack was there. A few calves were running in the grass while the adults grazed as though the leaves were fresh meat. Loki had never understood what fantasy of nature had turned the bilgesnipes into herbivores when they were so obviously cut to hunt and kill. The leader was particularly impressive, a savage female with titanic antlers, which paced the ground nervously, huffing loudly and shaking her heavy head. She could have gutted Loki open in one blow.

He wanted this one.

“There she is,” he murmured.

Looking at Barton, he was pleased to see the archer had already pulled out an arrow, although he looked very dubious and still a little worried.

“You know,” Barton said, “we meek Earthlings would rather hunt the young. Or the elders.”

He was trying to get informations without asking any direct questions, and it was subtle enough for Loki to reward it with a small hint. “We are not hunting for meat, but for strength.”

It was a testimony to the progress of Barton’s obedience that he didn’t press the issue. He simply drew and aimed at the beast. Loki waited with baited breath; Barton wasn’t waiting for his signal and Loki didn’t expect him to. Archery was the archer’s domain.

Barton’s fingers opened. Bull’s eye. Or rather, bilgesnipe’s eye. He calmly pulled out another arrow and took aim even as his prey lowed horribly and trampled the ground in fury.

“Do not kill it,” Loki said, still breathless with fascination. “Bring her down.”
Barton’s face sort of flickered, as though something had made him uncomfortable; but his features soon regained their sullen smoothness and he shot again. Again—the other eye. He pulled another arrow and hit again—the right forefoot. Another arrow and again—the left forefoot.

The bilgesnipe fell on its knees in the grass, blinded and helpless. Taken down by one single mortal. Four arrows.

Loki grinned at Barton who didn’t smile in return—he still wasn’t prone to boasting, even though there was *much* to boast about. Loki let him have his way and simply said, “Come on,” before going down the hill.

The bilgesnipe, sides heaving, still trying to locate them—to kill—even when she was down, was truly impressive. She growled and Loki let it vibrate in his bones. Oh, yes, he had picked the right one.

“You put up a good fight,” he said.

Then he swiftly put the tip of his spear on the massive skull and released the blue energy which washed away the beast’s will. She suddenly stopped squirming and lowered her head to the ground in sign of defeat.

Loki looked up, but his smile vanished when he saw that Barton looked very pale.

“That’s,” the archer said, in a toneless voice.

He swallowed. “That’s… cheating.”

Loki said nothing; he removed his spear. Yes—of course Barton would identify with their prey.

“It would be,” Loki said softly. “Arguably.”

He took a step closer. “But you took her down by the book beforehand, did you not?”

Barton stared at the defeated animal. It seemed he couldn’t stop staring at her burst eyes which cried fat tears of dark blood. Loki said nothing, giving him time to think.

“Yeah,” Barton murmured eventually.

He didn’t sound very convinced, but he cleared his throat and repeated in a more decided voice, “Yeah. Okay.”

Loki smiled at him and although Barton didn’t smile back, he didn’t frown either. He now looked mostly worried about what was to follow. The demi-god couldn’t help grinning wider again—putting Barton through the pains of trepidation positively delighted him.

“Come, sacrifice,” he said with a dark, thrumming joy. “Show us your strength.”

Obedient, the beast got up and began to walk. Loki beckoned her forward, walking backwards for the first steps before turning round and leading the way. Barton followed him, looking more and more unsure; when they got to the shack, it almost seemed like he was about to ask a question, but he thought better of it and shut his mouth. Loki only smirked more and kept walking, followed by the mortal man and the giant beast.

Loki opened the door on the torture rooms and led the bilgesnipe inside. Barton was outright scared now, but he still wasn’t speaking up. The demi-god couldn’t wait to get started with him. He made
the beast rest down on the floor first, slowly.

He turned to him and ordered sharply, “Strip.” Then he added, “Entirely,” because it had been a long time since Barton had paled so much at so trivial an order. Once again, he bit back a question right in time. Loki wondered for how long he would last; his efforts were meritorious in any case.

Barton shed his clothes as slowly as he could without being actually being told to hurry. He didn’t look exactly enthusiastic when he crossed Loki’s gaze again, and the demi-god couldn’t help finding it fiercely funny. He stepped forward and grabbed Barton’s hair in a cruel grip, making him wince in pain and tense in apprehension. Loki could almost hear his heart pounding. Oh, he’d missed a Barton who was afraid of him.

He forcefully pushed him down and down Barton went, kneeling stiffly, trying not to look away from the bilgesnipe. Loki tugged even harder at his hair, then gave him an indulgent smile. Barton had already started shaking; he still wasn’t asking any questions. He would break very soon.

Loki released his hair, then invoked some strong rope to tie his hands in his back—not using any magic somehow helped him to focus on the magic he was about to handle. Also, tying Barton down manually was always fun.

He collared him a bit more tightly than necessary and tied down the very short leash to a ring bolted in the ground, forcing Barton to bow very low, stomach almost brushing his thighs. The archer was still craning his neck to try and see; maybe he thought Loki would start talking by himself. But Loki was very skilled at keeping silent when he wanted to.

Barton was trembling more and more violently; when Loki seized his chin, almost fondly, then invoked a black, leather ball-gag, his victim finally broke. “Please,” he choked.

Loki grinned at him, shark-like. “What?”

Barton took a moment to pick his words. “Please—tell me what you’re going to do to me.”

*I am making a stand. You will live on because the world will, too. You will live, to prove that I can keep you alive.*

“I’m just making you a little harder to kill,” Loki smirked.

“How—”

Loki cut him off by stuffing the gag into his mouth and buckling it tight behind his head. Barton moaned a little, but there was nothing he could do; he kept quiet. Loki realized he was rapidly getting hard and berated himself—not now.

He got up and inflicted the same treatment to the bilgesnipe, with much more haste and much heavier chains. When the beast was properly restrained and almost bolted down into the floor, Loki took his scepter again and broke the spell.

The bilgesnipe instantly tried to leap forward and was brutally held back by the chains. Loki stared at her, enthralled by this abundance of raw violence at arm’s length, bound for his use, like a hurricane in a jar. Yes. This would be plenty. This would be perfect.

He got closer and grabbed one of the giant antlers; he hadn’t used his full strength in some time, but the beast was so strong he had to wrestle her head back to finally put the razor-sharp blade against her pulse point. He could feel the life throbbing there with panic and fury, ready to be let out, ready to *serve.*
“Now,” he murmured.

He hadn’t killed something in a long time, either. He had missed it. His blood felt like fluid, white-hot molten steel in his veins, and *Gods* he had *missed* it.

“Die,” he said, bloody purple and pitch black rising into his ribcage—“give me *everything.*”

And she did.

He plunged the blade deep into her throat and it was so *freeing* to do this, to do the most forbidden thing, to break something precious and not feel guilty because he had *meant* to break it. It was so empowering, so natural and so savage that a rush of adrenaline flamed through his veins as the blood gushed out and painted him red.

He had planned to collect it on his fingers to stain Barton’s skin—a few drops would have been enough—but the flow had been so violent his slave was speckled with red already. Loki felt the magic heave inside of him, and didn't try to fight it; his eyes rolled back in his head—and everything was *energy.*

Dazzling energy, hot energy, howling energy like the hurricane set loose and he took it, canalized it, oriented it, the bilgesnipe was dying but her life needed not to go to waste, Loki gathered it and kept it from going away, like a spider pulling on a thousand threads, and he redirected it into a blast which hit Barton’s heart and exploded inside his body like a primal scream, and Barton *screamed* again, not with pain but with—everything, everything that was life, energy, any reason anyone needed to scream, he had them all and he screamed and screamed and buckled and thrashed and screamed his lungs out until he suddenly—snapped into silence and went limp into his bonds.

Loki was shivering a little with excitement and expectation, but he had nothing on Barton’s shudders. His were so violent his bones could have dismantled if not for the flesh holding them together. The flesh—the blood—the energy. Loki was tempted to tug on the neural link and take a peek inside, but on second thought, he did not. He would rather hear it from Barton’s own mouth.

Loki was soaked in dark blood and its warmth was getting to his skin. He shivered again in pleasure, and walked to Barton, relishing intensely the sight of him, eyes wide with shock, panting, bloodied, bound.

“How are you feeling?” he murmured, letting the gag unbuckle itself.

Barton was gasping for air; eventually, he managed through chattering teeth, “What—you’re not sure it worked?”

Loki grinned, sharper and wider than ever. *Insolence.* Always something to break. He set the tip of his spear against Barton’s throat, just like had done to the gored bilgesnipe. One little push would be enough. He wanted to do it. He was *dying* to do it.

*Dying.* He cleared his own mind with an intense effort; he was still trembling with the rush of energy which had blasted through him. *No.* He scolded himself, *no,* nobody was dying today—his mind was too hazy to do the math at the moment, but he knew there was a logic behind the fact that he *must* *not* *kill* Barton. No matter how much he *yearned* to.

When he was certain he had gotten a hold of himself, he pushed the extreme tip of the blade into Barton’s throat, just a scratch, just to prove himself he could do it. And he *could* do it; he didn’t kill him. Merciful. He was—merciful.

He was shaking.
“I want to know if you felt what happened,” he breathed.

Barton was shaking even harder—maybe he had felt Loki’s urge, Loki’s craving for his blood. “Yeah—fuck, yeah, I did,” he said quickly. “I still do.”

*Good.* Loki’s mind cleared even more; he let his spear fall on the side. Yes. *Good.* Norns, his mind was still clouded over. He had almost killed him. He had been so close—too damn close.

He had been unprepared for so violent a rush. He needed to tone it down.

He pushed his hand into his pocket and the smooth apple under his fingers definitely helped with that. He closed his eyes, took a breath, reopened them.

“How—how long will it last?” Barton asked anxiously.

Loki smiled, exhaling a shaky breath. Yes, he was back. Norns, he had been *close,* and he would be terrified later, but for now he was back. “As long as you’re alive,” he said. “Worry not, you will get used to the feeling.”

He waved his hand and Barton’s leash vanished; Loki cupped his chin, made him look as he took out the apple.

“Now, Barton,” he murmured. “I believe you can eat this.”

Barton looked somehow even more scared than before. He actually tried to inch away and Loki had to grab his hair. “I’m mortal,” the archer protested. “It’ll kill me!”

Ooh, he had done his homework.

“You are not entirely mortal anymore,” Loki began, and—

—and suddenly the fierceness and blood-thirst crashed through him again—

—and you will always eat what I give you anyway, Barton.” And it would have been *fun,* to give him an apple before the spell, to watch him burn from the inside—poison him, Loki could still *poison* him and strap him down to enjoy the show, watch him writhe more and more feebly in his bonds until—

—Loki clenched his hand around the apple and visualized Idunn’s dark, piercing eyes.

He had picked this apple. She had let him pick an apple. It wasn’t for nothing. He did not want life only so he could destroy it. No—he was worth *better.*

He had to believe it. No one else would.

He released his grip on the apple which sliced open into nine pieces. Loki released Barton’s hair to pick one; the archer obediently opened his mouth.

Loki tacked into the neural link as a precaution, then pushed the piece of fruit past Barton’s lips.

He could instantly tell the pain would be unbearable and he jumped to block Barton’s mouth shut so he wouldn’t spit it out; Barton bucked wildly and Loki was stunned to realize he had to *force* him down, truly use his *strength*—of course, the spell had worked, and the spell wasn’t meant only to get Barton’s body to accept Idunn’s magic—

—Barton swallowed and instantly slumped down, still a little retching and drenched in sweat. Tears
were rolling down his eyes as though Loki had just forced him to eat a red pepper.

The demi-god realized he could feel Barton’s organism changing and reorganizing already—only one piece of the fruit and he was already transforming. This time, this wasn’t a mere strength enhancing spell. He was becoming something else entirely. Not quite a god, but no longer a mortal either.

“You still are Midgardian,” Loki told him. “It is against the rules.”

He tugged at his hair. “Ready for another one?”

“Yes,” Barton gasped, although Loki could tell how badly he wanted to say no. “Please, sir, one more.”

Loki’s pride flared as he pushed another slice through Barton’s lips. Once again, he helped Barton to keep it in long enough so his body would be forced to accept it; he was warned now and held Barton in place without too much effort, but he could still feel his slave’s strength now, and it was a very welcome sensation. More to break, always more to break.

“Ah,” he grinned as a spasm snapped through Barton’s body upon swallowing—“how badly it must hurt.”

“Please,” Barton panted out.

He looked absolutely desperate. Loki echoed calmly, “Please?”

Barton was sobbing brokenly but managed between two gasping breaths, “Please—one—more.”

Loki smirked and made him eat the third one; Barton sobbed desperately through the process, tears rolling over Loki’s hand sealing his mouth; but his spasms were much less violent this time. The hardest part was done.

Loki felt a little light-headed as he fed Barton six other pieces, one after the other. The archer’s tears slowly dried out; he was calming down, obediently eating from his master’s hand. This was a branding in another shape. Today, the irredeemable was done. Loki had broken millennial rules only so Barton could stay.

He regretted nothing.

But as he looked down as the kneeling, shaking silhouette of his slave, Loki remembered this was still Clint Barton. Not a creature of his own; not an illusion he could discard. This was Clint Barton, something exterior. And yet it was his. Something Loki had conquered—his first and only victory.

So Loki withheld the last slice, and let the rest of Barton’s restraints vanish. The archer gratefully slumped to the ground and tried to catch his breath; he had earned a break. Loki left him alone, in silence, for long enough.

“Stand up,” he murmured eventually.

Clint did, very stiffly, as though he hadn’t gotten his bearings in his new body yet. He looked at the last slice, then at Loki.

*Even when you stand up. Even when you fight. Even when you kill. Even when you talk back, even when you struggle, even when you are wilful, and strong, and independent, you are mine.*
They both felt it. More or less unconsciously, perhaps; but they both did.

Loki nodded without a word; Barton slowly took the last slice, and ate him himself, like the free man he was. And Loki wanted nothing else as his slave. He wanted freedom to bind, and strength to break.

He wanted Clint Barton and now, he had him.

“There is no good or bad,” he said after Barton was done eating Idunn’s apple. “There is only what I tell you to do.”

Barton nodded.

Loki slapped him, hard, as hard as he wanted for the first time; Barton took it, let the rush of pain pass, and corrected himself. “Yes, sir.”

Loki was breathless, pupils blown. With joy. With fear. With many other things he had no name for.

“It is the first week of the second month,” he said.

He took a deep breath, then smiled. “I would say your breaking in is going on quite well.”

Barton looked down. “Thank you, sir.”

“But,” Loki whispered, “we still have a month to go.”

He made Barton look up again, and smirked at him. “I cannot wait.”

He leaned down to kiss him, a slow kiss he was pleased in keeping light, light as a feather, among the heavy stench of blood and sweat and the feeling that something had finally changed forever.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and commenting. ^^
The next two weeks were strange.

Somehow, the first month had felt terribly long and terribly short at the same time, because it had been so eventful. Loki had opposed Odin himself; he had opposed Thor; he had battled old fears and new anxieties; he had almost died in Jotunheim; he had condemned the Universe to a near certain doom; he had undergone the strangest trial of his life in Idunn’s orchard; he had changed Clint Barton forever and in the process, changed himself, too. All this, in the span of thirty days.

Now there were another thirty days ahead and there was nothing to do, but worry. Quite frankly, he did not know what scared him the most: not knowing what Thanos was up to, or knowing that the end of Barton’s training was near.

The next two weeks were strange, because they passed too fast. Which was an obvious clue of Loki’s nervousness. He kept telling himself that Barton was strong, now; Idunn’s power had transformed him; and yet Loki had not even tested this new body of his. Not even pinned Barton down to devour him; not even left him to suffer in tight bonds; not even made him beg for mercy. Loki was free to be as violent, as brutal as he wanted; and he didn’t want to do it.

The next two weeks were strange, because they passed too fast even though nothing was happening.

Well—no—that was untrue. After Barton’s forceful transformation, Loki felt they had finally achieved everything they had striven for from the beginning. Barton was peaceful and obedient, taking obvious pleasure in his submission, but never losing his spirit and his casual, practical view of the world. And Loki was looking at him and thinking he couldn’t put him through the Mad Hours.

He couldn’t. He shouldn’t. This was just a stupid ritual written by a crazy old hag in a thousand-year-old book. And he had heard so many stories of slaves dying during training—of course, it was usually no accident.

But Loki didn’t trust himself not to let that kind of accident happen.

If he let go—but he couldn’t let go; he couldn’t stop thinking. First of all, he physically couldn’t; and second of all, if he did, Barton would die. Loki remembered what had happened during the sacrifice. What could have happened.

He was still so terrified of that memory that he hadn’t touched Barton in those two weeks. The archer looked somehow at peace with it. He looked like nothing could disturb him—Loki guessed the shock of having his body and lifespan transformed for his master’s pleasure must have pushed him
deep down the depths of his strange submissive bliss. When Loki had tied him down to the bed for the night a few hours ago, he was already mellow and…

I must keep him down there.

The thought struck Loki like an illumination. Yes! If he managed to keep Barton down—or better; if he also built up his slave’s frustration for, say, two more weeks, he might be able to take Loki. During their time at Stark Tower, Barton was always able to endure more when he had been made to crave it. So Loki would starve him, metaphorically speaking, and thus prepare him for the last step of his training…

No—this was ludicrous. He would simply not do it—there was no point in endangering Barton so uselessly. There was no point in…

Loki’s train of thought came to a halt.

Endangering?

Was it truly what he believed? That deep down, he still was a monster? (And when had he stopped believing it even on the surface?) That if he let himself break loose from all his layers of restraints, he would simply kill Barton and feast on his blood?

But I do want to kill him, he thought desperately. I know I do! The thought aroused him—he couldn’t deny it to himself any longer. The mere idea of it. To kill Clint, to hold him down and see the fear in his eyes when he understood, and then just—

—no. No no no. He was worth better. He was worth better.

Gods.

Loki had locked himself up in the Jotunheim room by now, but even the deadly cold wasn’t enough to calm his boiling thoughts. As a matter of fact, he was almost heating up the room with all his pacing.

He must do this. He could not—he couldn’t decently demand everything from Barton and give nothing in return; simply because he wanted Barton to give himself with full knowledge of his master. Loki didn’t want to lie to him, and he must not lie to him. He had promised himself not to make this mistake again, but Norns, he had never thought it would mean…

He thought about Idunn’s dark eyes again, and screwed his own eyes shut. Gods, she was right, she was right. He must strip himself bare. But—could he really trust himself?

Well, he didn’t know. This was precisely his only way to find out. By canceling all restrictions and watching what happened.

He wanted to laugh and he wanted to cry. So what, he was going to bet Barton’s life on the fact that he was—what—a good person? Ludicrous! If he did this, he was going to kill him and then there would be nothing left to do but wait for death. There was no point.

But if he didn’t do it, then this whole training had no point. It would never get them anywhere. There would never be any closure—any truth to them. Just another mask of Loki’s. And eventually, Barton would feel it again, just like he’d called him out on everything else before. Between them both, Barton was in fact the most ruthless. He wouldn’t let anything slip and certainly not something on this scale.
I have to do it.
Loki was terrified.
I have to do it.
Loki was determined.
I have to do it.

He had to do it.

*

Frustrating Barton was the easy part; and it also happened to soothe Loki’s own anguish, which was very welcome.

Truth be told, he was so nervous by now that he had almost forgotten the impending doom looming over the entire Universe.

*

Loki slammed his book shut.

“Get up,” he said dryly.

Barton hadn’t reacted fast enough and Loki grabbed his arm. “I said get up.” He manhandled him to a table, bent him over it, wished their clothes to Hel and took him in one sharp impalement. He had trouble feeling pleasure, and he knew he was being cold and distant like it was a punishment—this was good. Unfairness was the best source of frustration. Orgasm denial held an honorable second place and Barton was about to be given both.

Loki reached an unsatisfactory, botched climax, then left Barton to pant on the table and simply walked away. He stopped on the threshold to say, “You are not allowed to touch yourself. Kneel besides my chair and wait.”

Waiting suited Barton ill. Another way to drive him mad.

Loki’s heart was pounding as he walked out. He hated this, but he was too afraid of himself to have it any other way.

This was how he would do it—fucking him gracelessly, without any invention or any particular touch of sadism, something which would leave them both increasingly unsatisfied each time. But at least Loki knew why, and he got to climax, while Barton was being cooked in his frustration, too well-trained by now to dare ask exactly what was going on.
Norns, only thirteen days left. Loki might just go insane as well.

“Put that back.”

Barton froze and slowly put the book back on the shelf. He turned to frown at Loki. “Sir?”

“You are not allowed to use the library anymore.”


Loki backhanded him so violently he sent him crashing against the bookshelf. A metallic pang zapped through him and his mouth suddenly watered when he saw the archer fall to his knees, dazed but not even bleeding. A blow like this would have killed the Clint Barton of old. But this one could take a beating.

Loki wanted to give in, so much—just forget all this nonsense and drag Barton into the torture rooms and make him *scream* to free them both. But no—he must keep him in the dark. Until it *was* time to give in.

Gods, this was such a terrible idea.

But now, the cogs were in motion and Loki did not know how to stop it. “Actually,” he said as Clint got up, “you are now forbidden to speak as well.”

He left without even waiting to check Barton’s reaction. He hated himself for being so unsettled and he hated himself more for just *being* like this—not even able to tell for sure whether he was likely to murder someone. When had he become like this? Was it before or after his fall? Had it always been there? Was he born with a rotten soul?

Gods, he wanted to stop thinking. If he could only find a way. If he could only free the worm squirming inside his brain.

Seven days from the day, he blindfolded Barton and told him he wasn’t allowed to even *think* of removing the dark cloth covering his eyes. Barton said nothing; he was biding his time. He knew something was about to happen. Loki could feel it looming over them both, like a storm gathering and coiling and making the atmosphere buzz with static.

*It’s time,* Idunn said from the corner of the room.
Loki was awake, he was perfectly awake.

“For what?”

You know, she said, and then she morphed into Philip Coulson, more than often, we come to realize important things only when they are about to change.

Loki turned round, but there was no one left.

It’s time.

That was—that was Jarvis.

Loki looked around again. “Show yourself!”

Brother, Thor said in a tone of infinite sadness.

“No,” Loki snarled. “You do not—you do not get to invade my dreams!”

He kept turning on himself and every time his gaze swiped over a corner of the room, a different person was standing in it. Loki, sighed Frigga.

How’s that spell going? Coulson asked.

“You don’t know anything about spells,” Loki accused him. “What spell?”

What spell, boy? Idunn asked in her severe, unimpressed voice.

Magic is when the universe listens to you, Frigga said.

The universe is listening, Coulson said. Everyone knows it anyway.

“Everyone knows what?”

It’s time, they all said at once.

They vanished. Clint Barton was lying down on the ground, staring at Loki. He was restrained so tightly he should have been screaming, but looked very calm.

Blood was pooling out of a deep cut in his neck.

It’s time, he said. Sir.

And then he died.

Loki woke up scrambling and gasping for air; it took him a full five minutes to calm down. It was the middle of the night. On the last day.

It was time.

He sprung out of bed and strode out directly into the torture rooms. Barton was sleeping soundly in his bounds.

“Up,” Loki said—then he grabbed him and just threw him down on the ground.
Icy water fell down from nowhere and splashed on Barton, tearing a pained cry out of him; it took Loki a minute to understand he had done this himself, and yes—excellent idea, a cold bath, hypothermia, he should have thought of it earlier—why not right now? No, not right now, hypothermia wasn’t funny, Barton would go limp and cold, Loki wanted him to look alive, and for some reason those words sounded funny, look alive, as though it was just for looks, for a game, stay alive to play the game and then—oh, Barton was too free, he needed restraints, solid restraints, something which would teach him his place and oh he knew, he knew, the well-named humbler—tight—oh, Barton’s face was to die for, on all fours like this with the yoke of wood pulling his balls behind his thighs, how do you like this? And it was just the beginning. Oh, he wasn’t suffering enough, not by a long shot; Loki tightened the hold, tightened and tightened and—

—Gods he had to stop—he was going crazy—he had to stop right now. Stop at once and leave this room. Now. Now.

Now!

He took a deep breath, reeling, staring in space. Then he blinked, and grinned.

“So,” he murmured, blood simmering in his veins.

How he had waited for this.

“Do you have any idea how much I restrained myself?” he said, pacing briskly around the huddled, shuddering silhouette on the ground. Oh, Barton was listening—the humbler and the cold shower had certainly gotten his attention. He was still dripping with icy water; the humbler had caught him off guard, and his eyes were a bit too wide.

“All that time I owned your mortal body—do you know hard it was not to kill you?” Loki breathed.

He felt as though those words were solid blocks of marble crashing through the ceiling. Loki had never been so hungry in his life. His whole body simply craved, without distinction whatsoever.

“I gave you a long time to heal,” he said, words stumbling in his mouth. “Weeks to get used to your new form; weeks to prepare your mind—”

“Prepare to what?” Barton panted.

He’s speaking—he’s conscious—he’s not out—he’s not down, not deep enough, STOP

“Careful, Barton,” Loki said, pupils blowing. “Soon you will wish you had stayed hidden in your pliant state.”

He was trembling with repressed desire, but this time, he wasn’t trying to suppress it—it was simply coiling inside him like a snake preparing to attack. And attack it would.

“I must warn you,” he breathed. “Even Asgardian slaves have been known not to survive the Mad
Hours. And I am—tired of watching myself.”

You wanted truth? The lot of you, you wanted me to stop lying? Then lo and behold—here is my truth. My truth.

“What do I want?” Loki mused between his teeth.

Unexpected—he could do anything and thus did not know what to do. The humbler was a nice start. “I want,” he thought out loud. “I want… to see how much pain you can take.” And what you can’t take. “I want to make you scream yourself mute.” And deaf. “I want to see you on the verge of breaking irretrievably.” And fall over that edge.

He was holding Barton by the hair in a firm grip. He blinked. When had that happened? He was losing track of himself very fast. He hadn’t thought it would be so easy. It scared him—it felt…

It felt so good. It felt so freeing. He knew he could not stop the snowball effect of his own lustful hysteria.

“Maybe I do want to break you,” he murmured.

Who knew?

“Maybe I want to torture you until there is nothing left to do, but put you out of your misery.”

Oh, the pleasure at this idea, the pleasure simmering low in his loins like something perverted and vile…

“Sometimes…”

No—all the time. Always. To see you dead. I want.

“We shall see.”

He had ideas. He had hundreds and hundreds of ideas. Everything he had wanted to do to him during those two long weeks of growing frustration, when he could not allow any of them to give in. Oh, now he would give in. Now he would let go.

He got up and paced around him. He felt drugged. He felt drunk. He put a foot against Barton’s ribs and pushed him on his side; it was a delight to watch him squirm trying not to hurt himself in the humbler. Loki spread his legs as much as the yoke of wood would allow, and a little bit further, until Barton shook with spasms which caused him an ever greater pain and started screaming and begging for him to stop. Loki did, because there was so much to do, so damn much. He knew he should not let Barton take any pleasure. This was about pushing the master’s limits. How much could he bear to make him suffer? How much, before he started hating and horrifying himself too much? His sadism, his monstrosity felt limitless at the moment, and it should have scared him, but he wasn’t thinking, only listening to the pulsing pleasure in his groin as he gripped Barton’s cock and wrapped it in a long strap of leather studded with spikes. He tightened it just to hear Barton’s frantic moan, then pushed a nail in the slit, squeezed the spiked strap, pushed his nail deeper, tortured his cock until it wasn’t funny anymore and he needed to hurt and humiliate him in other ways.

He invoked a small stick of metal and squeezed the tip of Barton’s cock to press the tiny hole open.

When the sound slipped inside, Barton’s hips bucked up.

“Please,” he panted, eyes wide with horror.
Loki smirked. “Not tonight,” he said under his breath—and pushed the sound inside. Barton was strong and stubborn, pressing his lips tightly shut; but when Loki pushed it deeper and squeezed the spikes into his flesh again, he screamed, beautiful and halting.

“Very well,” Loki exhaled in a lustful sigh.

He turned Barton so he would be on his knees again. Somewhere, deep inside the purple and black void of his soul, he was frantically hoping to find himself already sated. Barton was in serious pain. Couldn’t it be enough? Couldn’t Loki stop?

_No,_ growled the carnivorous warmth in the pit of his stomach, _more, more, mmmmmore._ Loki had prepared him for this. And he’d prepared himself, too—such wicked readings. _A choke pear._ He remembered. He’d always wanted to try. See how Barton would react. See how much he could take.

“Loose enough; you ought to be,” he muttered between his teeth, checking Barton’s exposed ass. He invoked the choke pear, obscenely heavy in his hand. “How far can you stretch,” he breathed, “I wonder?”

He pushed it inside Barton, forced it all the way up his ass, and then set the small cogs in motion. The pear jerked a bit more open with a _c-c-click._

Barton froze; then he understood, and he whined, he tried to contain himself but the pear opened him a notch wider and he _whined_, halted, gasping, almost like sobs. He was shuddering, twitching with the pain of the spiked strap, of the sound, of the pear, he was ready for him, completely exposed, a true _slave_—and Loki almost came right here; a tidal wave of lust overflowed his brain and shut away his last qualms. Barton could take it. He _was_ taking it. His body was so powerful now.

And Loki needed to do this, or he would always be wary of the beast within. He had to see for himself. He could not live like this any longer—could never have Barton, _be Clint’s_, if he would not even have himself. He wanted the truth nobody had ever been able to give him. _Was he a monster? Was he a good person? Help me. Help me see._

He got up, grinning wickedly. “Now that you are ready, let us begin.”

A riding crop. _Wasn’t he merciful;_ he hadn’t even picked a cane. He brushed the folded leather against Barton’s closed eyelids, followed the tears running down his face, and was darkly delighted to hear him breathe, “God—don’t—_please._”

Loki made him look up.

Barton’s gaze was nothing like he expected. Loki had thought—hoped?—he might find here a terror so abject, a horror so great it would shake his sadistic haze away and allow himself to stop this madness.

But Barton’s eyes—there was no mistaking it, behind the veil of fear and confusion and pain—were进军.

_C-c-click_ and they screwed shut. The spell was broken; Loki walked behind him in two steps, then raised the riding crop and slapped Barton’s balls _hard._
The inarticulate scream he heard was pure white-hot pleasure flashing through his body. He exhaled, almost reeling with it, then hit again, and again, and again, and unexpectedly came in an explosion of ecstasy, almost blacking out with the sheer power of his pleasure. Coming back to his senses, he laughed a little when he heard Barton begging him again. Oh, he would stop.

He would stop, because he wanted something else—something more. C-c-click. The vicious noise was enough to make him grow hard again. He dove into the neural link; Barton’s nerves were screaming with an inferno of pain and wild contradicting signals Loki’s mind couldn’t translate.

He could take more.

Already—throbbing hard. Loki walked around him and forced Barton to kneel up; the archer scrambled in the humbler and panted and gasped, trying to get a hold of himself despite the shudders of pure pain still wracking his sweat-drenched body. Loki wished his own clothes away and wrapped his hand behind Barton’s head to press his face against his crotch; he listened to his panting, felt the breath of it on his burning, sensitive flesh. He wanted nothing more than to sheath himself into the warm wetness of this throat.

And he would. Since this was all about doing what he wanted.

I’m going to kill him. The thought flew across his mind like a solitary cloud in a white-hot sky. His head was thrown back, his eyes ajar, gazing sightlessly at the ceiling. I won’t be able to stop and I’m going to kill him.

He tightened his grip on Barton’s neck, felt the throat pulse with life.

C-c-c-click. Loki’s lips stretched again in a smirk as the cloud vanished, evaporated in the scalding heat of his lust. “Get at it. And I would advise you not to lose your focus.”

Barton whimpered a little, but then he swallowed Loki and got at it, indeed. And Norns—Gods—fuck, Loki couldn’t—he wouldn’t—this was so—he shuddered and moaned and came again, pulsing deep inside Barton’s throat.

“Very good,” he panted—then he pulled out, took a step back, and brought the riding crop hissing down to hit Barton across the face, leaving a red welt on his cheek. Before he could recover, Loki pushed him face-down yet again.

“You said—” Barton began, but screwed his eyes and mouth shut when he heard the hiss of leather again. The whacking sound was enough for Loki’s cock to jump again—and for Barton’s scream to make it start to fill. And Loki hit, and hit, and hit, and hit, mad with pleasure and despair, this wasn’t enough, this was getting him nowhere, he already knew how the story ended, the monster killed the man, this was how it was written in every legend, every goddamn myth since the beginning of time, so this must be the truth, this must be Loki’s truth, he was this monster destined to feed on pain and death, and he was destined to kill the only man he’d ever l—

“AAAH—YES!”

Loki almost stilled—what? What? But he struck again almost out of reflex, and Barton screamed and squirmed and yelled until he was breathless, “Yes! Yes! YES! Oh please—” Loki hit again, “—oh please, oh God, it’s so—ah—ah!—so fucking good, oh please please please—” He was sobbing, and Loki tacked into the neural link but he understood nothing to what Barton was feeling, what the Hel was going on—“so good, please, more, more, more, more,” with each breath out he gasped, “more, more, harder, harder, harder, please, hurt me!”
Loki fell on his knees and dropped the switch—something was coming, brewing and coiling inside him, tightening his muscles and his stomach, his whole body was clenching and it was going to happen and he needed—he needed Barton, needed this man who saw him at his worst and screamed at him to go on, Loki needed him, not only now, but always, because there was no truth, Loki thought feverishly as he unclasped the humbler. There was no limit. Killing him was easy. A sharp thing, a bit of blood, and it was done. No, there was no truth.

Loki was a monster, or he was not.

It depended on what he chose. Except he was weak; no, not exactly weak—dependent. He could never choose for himself. He had relied on Thor, on Odin, to tell him who he was. They had said, monster.

Barton took it all, and said, sir.

That was all Loki wanted to be. That was him Loki chose. Loki needed him always, he chose to be dependent on him, because he—

—was that what had been building inside him all this time?

Was that the great revelation?

He laughed out loud, febrile and almost hysterical, unstrapped the spiked cock ring, pulled out the sound, took out the choke pear. Barton was completely out of it, but not in a sated way—he was frozen on his way to his climax, breathing fast, stunned into shock. He was too wide, but it didn’t matter—Loki stuck two vibrators up his ass, twisted them to they would rest against his prostate, then plunged inside, and it was—

—perfect. Perfect. Barton shuddered and gasped, and cried out when Loki slammed into him, and Loki felt it building, building to impossible heights, he’d reached it, he’d found the limit, he could look at it all from the top—this was it: he knew himself. He knew himself by knowing he could never know himself, he was entirely in the others’ eyes, a shape-shifter at heart, and he wanted to be in the Hawk’s eyes, because maybe he wanted to kill this man, but it was a fantasy like any other, a fantasy which didn’t have to come true; what truly linked them was deeper, so deeper, and Loki slammed deeper into him and bit him, bit hard and deep and felt salty blood run between his teeth, and he loved it, and he loved him, Clint, there was nobody else, nobody with whom Loki was no monster, not even a little, nobody else for whom Loki would have bared himself in the house of Idunn. And he bit again, licked the warm blood, and everything was so overwhelmingly Clint, letting himself be possessed, be owned, allowing Loki to force him, and the paradox in itself was worth crying tears of beauty, and Loki bit, again, and he realized he was saying it out loud, I love you, he’d been saying it for who knew how long, but he didn’t mind, this was what they were both supposed to find out, this was what they should both know, because he wasn’t going to say it again, he was too proud, he was too much of a mess and too much of a liar, but right here, right now, in the bright, desperate truth of this moment, I love you, I love you, he wished he could make him understand, that excruciating feeling of knowing he could not live without him, Barton had understood this so very long ago, he had been ahead from the start but Loki had finally understood, he needed him, he needed him to exist, to function, to be who he wanted to be, and Barton was such a fool, such a fool to expose himself to this, because this was so much worse than death, so terribly worse, and Loki breathed, I could kill you, it was a suggestion, it was his gift to him, his offering, I could kill you right now, if Barton wanted out, if he didn’t want this, Loki could be merciful one last time, but Barton said if you want—you can kill me if you want, Loki, if you want, and Loki thrust deeper into him, pinned him to the ground, felt he was breaking down and begged, say my name again, never stop saying my name, he was so terrified, but Clint was saying it, reverently, adoringly, Loki!, and also
saying *say mine*, say mine, he needed Loki too, he wanted him too, and wasn’t that the greatest of miracles, *Clint*, Loki said, crying with pain and bliss, blazing into flames, arching into light, *Clint, Clint, Clint, Clint*, and Loki was his slave, this was the greatest, the greatest secret of all, true masters are slaves, so he said it again, said his only truth,

_I love you,_

and in this moment, for a very short, beautiful moment, everything was certain.

Chapter End Notes

*wrrings hands* hope you liked it!
Clint had passed out.

Loki was drenched in sweat, and tears, and blood.

He breathed, alone, in the dark rooms, for maybe one hour. Except he was never alone. He would never be alone anymore. He had someone, in all the powerful, implacable meaning of the word.

He was exhausted. He had dug inside him, and seen what was to be seen; not the trivial desire for death—after all, he already knew that part of himself; he had killed countless times—but an absolute, burning love. It left him feeble, dizzy, and stunned, almost afraid of himself, just like he thought Clint’s murder would. But he did not want to kill him, just like he hadn’t wanted to break him from day one. Death was easy. Life was so much more complex and beautiful and terrifying to own. Loki didn’t know for sure if he was a monster or not; he could never know; but he knew he wasn’t Thanos, he wasn’t in love with death, and it left him weak with relief.

After a long while, he got up, and cleaned the room. Cleaned it entirely, sometimes with magic, sometimes with his bare hands, scraped off the dried blood, made the chains vanish, chased away the smell of tortures. When he was done, he lifted Clint from the cold floor and lay him, reverently, on the bed. He sat next to him and started healing him, patiently, with slight little touches of magic. He avoided the bloodied bites on his chest. They were already starting to heal, but Loki’s teeth had sunk deep; and if he did nothing, they would scar.

He would do nothing. He wanted scars. For the grace of memory. For this moment to live on, as long as Clint would.

Which meant Clint had to live.

Loki was not alone, but the only one who mattered was unconscious, so the demi-god could think without worrying about checking his features or controlling his expression. Clint had to live. There was a storm coming. Loki would stop it, and Clint would live.

The rest was optional.

When there was nothing left to heal, he trailed his fingers over Clint’s features, tracing them in the dark, closing his eyes to see with his fingertips, the full lips, the rough stubble, the line of the jaw, the curve of his neck.

He was whispering old words under his breath. He had learned them maybe eight hundred years
ago, as a child, and Thor had forgotten them in a matter of days, and yet, Loki remembered. The
words spilled off his lips effortlessly.

"Now, down, I lay you down to rest…"

Clint took a deeper breath and shifted slightly in his sleep, head lolling to the side.

“The sun goes down, far in the west.

“Lovers of the light be distressed

“By stars and moon we shall be blessed.

“Let us dance and sing with the beasts

“But the sun goes up in the east

“Lovers of the light be released,

“And us, dead; but happy, at least.”

Clint was sleeping soundly. Loki smiled, a weary, gentle smile.

“And me, dead.” He leaned forward to kiss Clint’s forehead. “But happy, at least.”

#

The next morning was but warmth.

Loki had not slept; he did not want to miss a second of this night of all nights. He was curled up
against Clint in the slave’s bed, in the neat chambers. Loki was not moving, and enjoying it
immensely; he had rarely, if ever, taken the chance to simply lie down and breathe. This was his
reward for last night. He felt at peace, for a precious moment. He knew it would not last, and he
cherished it all the more.

After a long while, he realized Clint was awake as well.

What if they stayed here? he thought lazily. What if they simply stayed here, breathing together,
unmoving? The dying universe would swallow them in a flower of darkness, and they would go
together.

“I don’t want to love you,” Clint whispered against his skin.

Loki did not move, but this time, it was because he was too stunned to react.

He realized he was simply too relaxed and mellow to feel any kind of shock; even when he tried to
grip Clint’s shoulder, his fingers only shifted minutely against his skin.

He felt like smiling, although he also felt tremendously tired. Of course Barton did not want to love
him. Something as foolish, as chaotic as love could only threaten the carefully built reasoning which
had led him there. Practical, always. He was practical.
Which fit Loki’s plan perfectly. Practical meant Barton would always survive, like he had survived until then. Loki just had to give him the chance, and he wanted to do this for him.

“I can make you,” he said, because this was what Barton wanted to hear, this was the reason he’d pushed Loki with such a hurtful comment, he was still testing him, always demanding more. “There is nothing of you beyond my control.”

It was true, now; yet it was not, because Loki knew he could never force Barton to love him, as it would contradict his wish to keep him whole, whole so there would always be something to break. But there was no use in details. Loki had many plans, and they all amounted to a single thing. Let him live. Let him live.

The rest, as said before, was optional.

Chapter End Notes

Breather chapter with Viking poetry, for your enjoyment.
“So,” Loki said, stretching himself.

He pushed the covers away and got up. “Let’s go.”

Barton blinked at him from the bed—he was studying the bite marks on his chest. “Sir?”

“Let’s go,” Loki repeated. “There are many things I have to tell you. But we do not have to stay within four walls anymore.”

Barton looked a little unsettled. Loki grinned, then came back on the bed. “Oh, what is this?” he said. “Would you rather stay in your cage?”

He closed in, rubbed the bridge of his nose up Barton’s jaw, then tilted his head and licked the lobe of his ear. He hovered there for a second, then breathed,

“Get up”

and he distinctly felt him shiver. The next second, Barton was up and standing with his hands clasped in his back. Loki grinned, then got up as well. He started walking around him, clothing him piece by piece. He gave a darker tone to the usual purple and black, then invoked the quiver and strapped it himself on Barton’s shoulders, slowly, before placing the bow between his hands.

“Now,” he said.

He dressed himself a flare of golden light—full armor. “Ever been to Niflheim?”

Barton snorted a little. “Not to my knowledge, sir.”

Loki grinned.

“You will profoundly dislike it.”

He grabbed his arm and took them both away.
They reappeared on a grey, sharp-ridged mountain ready to tear into the wide blue sky. Barton looked around; and while he was distracted, Loki closed his eyes and tacked into the neural link.

He had used it a lot towards the end of the training, but Barton had always been too—ah—otherwise stimulated at the time to feel it. Not to mention Loki usually tried to keep it discreet.

But not this time.

This time, he was brutal and graceless, tugging at Barton’s nerves from the inside, feeling in echo the ice-cold pain searing into his body. Barton gasped and stiffened; when the pain became too great, he fell on all fours and dug his fingers into the rocky ground; but he never complained and he never looked up.

Loki smiled, pushed a little more—he could feel the gravel between Barton’s fingers, feel his teeth clenching, his sweat budding, his breath halting, his eyes burning with tears of pain—and sent, for the first time, an actual message along Barton’s auditory nerves.

Do you have any idea what this is?

Barton stopped breathing, eyes snapping open in his confusion. Loki jabbed at him again and his eyes screwed back shut.

“I—”

Not a sound, Loki ordered. Answer me from the inside. He smirked. It's easy—follow the pain.

Barton’s voice rose hesitantly in Loki’s ears.

Sir?

Loki’s mouth went unexpectedly dry. To hear Barton so close, so full, from the inside, was a more intimate experience than he’d imagined. He quickly caught himself.

Good.

Telepathy? Barton asked, straining.

No, I am not in your mind.

Loki could distinctly feel Barton’s muscles relax. Of course—mind-control was a painful memory for them both.

Then...

I am in your body, Loki said. Our neural systems are linked. I can activate your auditory nerves from the inside and talk to you. And pull all the rest of your strings, in a very literal way—not to mention I can feel what you feel. That sharp rock digging in your left knee right now.

Oh, Barton said.

He was still panting and half-crying on the ground.

Oh, he repeated. Wow.

He winced. Shame it hurts so bad, uh?
It does not have to, Loki grinned, although Barton already knew that. But it’s fun.

He pulled and pushed and twisted and Barton bit back a scream.

Your training is over, but do not think for a second the pain will ever cease, the demi-god informed him. After all, this was our original agreement. He emitted a languid sigh. No killing, no maiming... How young and foolish we were.

Getting nostalgic, sir? Barton transmitted despite the ever increasing pain.

Loki grinned. Oh, he liked it when he was being cocky under torture.

Well, this is the end of an era, he admitted.

He suddenly released his entire hold at once and Barton slumped forward in the dust, panting, tears rolling down his cheeks, but still not making a sound. Loki felt pride flaring hot inside him. He had told Barton to stay silent—and he was being obeyed.

“You can speak now,” Loki said lightly. “Only use the link when I allow you to—or in case of emergencies. Understood?”

“Yessir,” Barton managed. He was shivering a little; to know that Loki could torture him to this extent, by simply wishing it, must be quite a shocking realization. Like being on a leash—or being on the rack—at any given time. Loki trusted their relationship enough by now to know that Barton, in his own twisted way, enjoyed that thought. Loki would have hated it with a burning passion; he’d gotten so close to this man, in every possible way, and yet his inner motives mostly remained a mystery to him.

Loki took a few steps, then suddenly sat on the rocky ground next to Barton, with a heaving sigh. The latter looked at him with surprised, still wet eyes. Loki glanced up at the sky, then back at him, smiling.

“You know this is it,” he told him. “This is your life, from now on.”

Barton was still curled up with pain; he unfolded a little, grey eyes fixed onto Loki’s. “Yes, sir.”

“And that does not bother you?” Loki asked, genuinely curious. “Not even a little?”

Barton smiled a bit.

“Quite the opposite, sir.”

Loki was fascinated. “So some people truly are born slaves,” he said, realizing that despite his speech in Germany, long ago, he had never really believed this—not without associating submission to weakness.

The archer gave him a look. “Yeah—so masters wouldn’t be pointless.”

Loki blinked, then laughed. Barton was still shivering with receding pain, but his little smile didn’t waver, either.

“So,” he said after a while. “Niflheim. Why am I supposed to hate it?”

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough,” Loki said, getting up on his feet and helping him up. “Let’s go.”
Barton was actually a lot less unsettled by the mines Loki thought. Somehow, he had always pictured his slave as someone who would dislike cramped spaces; but being underground did not overly disturb him.

The lava, the fire dwarves and the oceans of molten steel, on the other hand…

Barton stood straight and sullen next to his master who admired his composure, but tacking into the neural link, Loki could feel how hard his heart was beating, and the physical relief flowing through his body when they finally got out of the mountain.

“So how was it?” Loki grinned as they walked again under the wide sky.

Barton didn’t answer, but they both knew Loki hadn’t really wanted an answer anyway; he was happy just listening to the archer’s gasping breaths as he struggled to calm down. Oh, Loki would help him get over that shock tonight.

He pushed those thoughts away for now. “Open the package.”

Barton glanced at the bundle of cloth he was carrying, then crouched down to open it. Loki rather liked the dwarves. They were hard-working, relatively easy to fool, and most importantly, they only accepted gold as currency. And gold wasn’t hard to come by for an Asgardian sorcerer.

“Be careful,” he said. “You would not want to touch what’s inside.”

Barton’s shoulders stiffened, but he kept unlacing the ropes wrapped around the dark cloth, which he smoothed on the rocky ground to reveal…

He blinked, puzzled, then looked up at Loki. “Sir?”

“You can pick up one,” Loki said, sitting on a rock to get a closer look. “But do not touch the head.”

Barton carefully took an arrow, then turned it between his fingers. It was smooth and entirely black with a red glint along the shaft; only the head was glowing with a strange, black-and-white light—there was no other way to describe it. Barton tested its balance and weight, then looked up at Loki again, questioningly. The demi-god smiled.

“Dvalin’s arrows,” he said. “One of the few things I cannot create.”

“Why not?” Barton asked.

“Because I cannot comprehend them,” Loki said quietly. “We will discuss magic some other time. But for now, I would like you to test them.”

Barton promptly got up and unfolded his bow. “Want me to shoot anything in particular?”

“That rock over there,” Loki said.

The archer frowned—obviously, it was not a great challenge to him—but complied. He drew his bow, eyed the arrow itself for a second, then glanced at his target and opened his fingers.

Dvalin’s arrow hissed through the air like an angry snake and hit the rock—but not only the rock; it simply blew away an entire piece of the mountain, leaving a great sphere of nothingness, as though a
titan had bit off a perfectly round hole in the rocky hillside. The suction effect as the air rushed to invade the empty sphere made Loki’s coat flap fiercely in the wind, and almost forced Barton to take a step forward.

“Whoa,” he gasped, stumbling. “Whoa! What was that?”

“Dvalin’s arrows,” Loki repeated, grinning.

Barton stared at the polished crater for a long time. Then he turned to Loki. He still looked a bit shocked, but a shadow had come over his face which had nothing to do with surprise.

“Sir,” he said, hesitantly.

Loki’s fingers tightened together behind his back, but he nodded at him to go on.

“When you said you had plans,” Barton said, “I didn’t think you meant war.”

Oh, Barton was clever. And Loki wished he hadn’t meant war, either. He remembered his old dream, the Universe in his cupped hands. This was not what he wanted anymore—or not in the same way. The world cannot be owned, but it can be inhabited in agreement with one’s self, which is quite the same. Loki was never meant to achieve this. But when he looked at Clint, he thought he could, maybe—he could.

But now he wouldn’t have the time.

“Yes, we are at war,” he said. “Against…” Suddenly, he didn’t want Barton to hear his name. “…against the Chitauri.”


Loki snorted. “Of course not. You thought I was given an entire race for my army?”

Barton opened his mouth, closed it. Then he opened it again and said, “Given.”

It was carefully phrased not to sound like a question, but it was a question all the same. Loki nodded. “Given, Barton.”

He wondered whether Barton would push it, but he simply asked, “And what do they want?”

“Power,” Loki murmured.

He sighed. “He seeks power, always.”

He unclasped his hands and slowly walked to the edge of the great, smooth crater. He gazed at the polished walls, the layers of sliced stones, like a sectional view in a geology book. “Have you ever heard of the Infinity Gauntlet?”

“…No, sir.”

“Another object I cannot fathom—beyond my powers of creation,” Loki said. “It is very old—some say as old as the Universe itself, since it might very well be the device that created it.”

He paused, remembering.

“It used to be in Odin’s vaults, but it was stolen,” he said. “It can only function with six gems. The emerald allows the wielder to control souls. The orange gem allows the wielder to control time. The
amethyst allows the wielder to control space.”

He hesitated, then said, “That last one—it was hidden in Jotunheim. I tried to retrieve it, but the Other—the Chitauri king—was there. He stole it and used it to flee.”

Barton said nothing.

“The sapphire—is the gem for minds.” Loki took a deep breath. “There is a fragment of it in my scepter. You know what it does.”

Barton still said nothing and Loki realized he didn’t want to turn and see the look on his face. He kept staring at the crater.

“The yellow gem,” Loki went on, “would please your friends. It allows the wielder to bend the laws of physics. It is basically a wish-granting jewel.” He sighed. “And finally, the ruby is for power. It is the energy gem. If one ever managed to gather the gems and place them on the gauntlet, this person would be virtually omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.”

Silence.

Eventually, Barton asked, “And you want this gauntlet for yourself?”

Loki turned to face him, then. Barton’s eyes were neither approving nor disapproving; he was simply asking a question.

“No,” Loki said, strongly. “I do not want it. It is a foolish thing to have.” He smiled a little. “With infinite power comes infinite boredom.”

Barton smiled a little, and Loki was suddenly so relieved, without knowing why, that he felt a little dizzy. “I—” he said, trying to catch himself, “I do not want it. I want to stop someone from having it, but I do not want it for myself.”

“Yes,” Barton said quietly. “I believe you, sir.”

Loki still felt like he had to justify himself some more. He wasn’t used—he wasn’t used to be trusted. Not like this, not about things like this. Not so completely, so instantly, so blindly.

And, well, if Loki had needed a reason to be in love with Clint Barton, that was it. He suddenly wanted to get closer from him in some way, but now wasn’t the time and he forced himself to stay put.

“I—” he began again, “I am afraid our enemy already owns five gems. He lacks only the ruby.”

He suddenly felt terribly ashamed of himself. How could he ever let it happen? He had held the amethyst in his hands, for Hel’s sake. But he was weak—he was a complete sham, and even now, he knew he could never—

“Better hurry up, then,” Barton said calmly.

Loki’s train of thoughts came to a brutal halt.

He walked to Barton, who looked a little surprised; and then he framed his face and pulled him close and kissed him. Barton let him, simply let him, and yet for a brief moment, Loki felt again like Clint was the master and he was the slave; and the idea did not unsettle him. Because their trust remained unchanged.
He pulled back, but kept him close.

“Yes,” he breathed, eyes shut.

He wrapped his arms around him. “Yes. Better hurry up.”

Strangely enough, though, time was gentle with them. It gave Loki hope; the ruby was safe in Idunn’s house, which meant Thanos must be looking in vain for other sources of power. A dying star would have been perfect to power the gauntlet, but it was simply too big. Thanos needed something smaller with near-infinite power, and as it turned out, those were hard to come by.

Days turned into weeks, which turned into months. It was a strange time. Loki was so busy trying to make up for his unforgivable procrastination that he hardly had time to lay with Barton at first. When they did, Barton seemed to enjoy himself, but Loki couldn’t quite bring himself to this noiseless, exultant state of mind he’d encountered before. He was simply too worried, already trying to plan Thanos’s next move, berating himself for letting time fly. Barton looked as cool and serene as ever; sometimes, Loki envied him—to leave someone else entirely in charge, to unload this burden, if only for a second—but then the feeling of his responsibility gave him strength to continue. Even during his brief moment of glory as the king of Asgard, he had never really known true respect. The Warriors Three and Sif had disregarded his authority at once; Heimdall had attacked him; and Odin had simply let him fall.

Trust was new to Loki. He was beginning to realize that Barton trusted him with his own self, but also with everything else. Obviously, incredibly, Barton had decided in his heart that the creature named Loki Laufeyson could be trusted even to impede the end of the world.

This must be how Thor felt every time he picked up Mjölnir.

But Mjölnir was just a piece of metal; Loki’s actions were condoned not by the ambition of a father, but by the undying trust of a former enemy. And it filled him with a desperate, terrified gratefulness, which sometimes made him want to make Barton pass out with pleasure, and sometimes pushed him to torture his slave with the utmost cruelty, pushing and digging, until that dark feeling inside him —how dare you trust me; how dare you make me feel hope—was appeased. It was a strange fury, the fury of the sad when they discover happiness, and regret not having known it sooner. To Loki, it was devastating; the more he loved Barton, the more he made him scream for it, the more he punished him for not having been there from the beginning.

This was madness, of course; and once or twice, coming back to his senses, Loki was on the brink of apologizing—apologizing for the bloody lashes, for the aching muscles, for the tears of humiliation—but then Barton would thank him. He always did. And Loki would swallow down his excuses and hold him in a bone-crushing embrace, eyes screwed tightly shut. And he would vow, once again, that Barton would live.

Came Hel or high waters, Clint Barton would live.
When he finally understood, Loki felt ashamed of himself for having been so stupid and so blind.

“This is useless,” he said one day, slowly.

Barton looked up from his book. “Sir?”

“I am stupendously stupid and this is all useless,” he repeated.

He sprang up from his chair and started pacing the room. “The solstice of the Asgardian winter is coming. I am so stupid. Oh—how could I not see it!”

“What—does this have something to do with Idunn?”

Loki froze mid-pacing, then turned back to Barton. “How do you know?”

“I—I don’t know,” Barton said, puzzled. “I must have read it somewhere. Solstices at the House of Idunn. I remember that.”

“Yes,” Loki said, thoughts finally flowing in his mind. “Yes! Oh! I am a complete fool! The solstice party! Idunn opening the gates of her House!”

“I thought anyone could get in?” Barton asked.

“Yes,” Loki said, “Yes, but most of the time, they do not. You need a reason to visit Idunn; unless she invites you. And she invites the world twice a year—on the solstices.”

“You must know the place pretty well then,” Barton said.

Loki stopped again—he hadn’t realized he’d resumed his pacing. “I—” he said. “No. I do not. I only ever went….” He remembered the black eyes. “…once.”

Odin had never taken him as a child; and had Loki wanted to go as a grown man, he was persuaded an untimely circumstance would have conveniently kept him from reaching the House. He had never had any great interest in it, and this was why he was so unfamiliar with its customs.

“He will send the Other,” he murmured. “A Chitauri in the House—it can only go unnoticed on the solstices, when the atrium is teeming with guests. He will send the Other, and the Other will take the ruby and run—it will not matter, breaking Idunn’s law will not matter since—” he brutally cut himself off. For some reason, he had never told Barton the Universe was about to end, and he didn’t want to do it now.

“Barton,” he said. “Tell me everything you know about Idunn House, so I can fill in the blanks for you. And then—”

“Then?” Barton asked.

“And then we will go,” Loki said. “And we will win.” He swallowed. “We must win.”
The Bifrost was as beautiful as ever. Loki tried not to look down at the pulsing darkness, and walked to Heimdall with a steady gait. Barton followed, in his dark clothes, and having him at Loki’s right hand felt as natural and good as though he’d always been there.

The gatekeeper greeted them with a grave nod. Loki realized his encountering Idunn must have brought Heimdall to hold him in slightly lessened contempt. “Hello,” he said. “If it would please you to bring us to the House of Idunn.”

Heimdall almost said something—Loki knew why; a Jotun and a Midgardian in the House of Idunn. For the first time, he realized what an unlikely pair they were in every respect, and the thought almost made him smile. Eventually, Heimdall just shook his head and turned away to plant his sword in the lock of the bridge.

Loki suddenly remembered Barton had never used the Bifrost to travel—only Loki’s paths, more austere and discreet. Barton looked up at him, questioning.

“We are taking the Bifrost,” Loki said. “To use my ways of travel would be viewed as unbearably rude.”

“Okay,” Barton said. He didn’t look very reassured as the Bifrost gate started spinning on itself, gathering enough dark energy to propel them into the stars.

Loki smiled, then pulled Barton close. “Hold onto me.”

Barton’s hands gripped the lapels of his coat. Loki grinned at him, then pressed their foreheads together. “Now…”

The rush of fire boomed all around them and blasted them across the Universe like a supernova in motion. Barton’s grip on Loki’s coat didn’t falter, but he looked completely blown away in the dazzling colors washing over his face—the impossible speed turning them both to light—and Loki suddenly kissed him, because he could, and Barton answered with a surprising eagerness, and of course—adrenaline, danger, novelty, speed, it all turned him on, too. They were still in each other’s embrace when the light faltered and dropped them in the eternal night of the gardens of Idunn.

Barton pulled back, breathless, reeling a little in his master’s arms; Loki grinned all the more.

“That was fun,” he said.

“Yeah,” Barton panted. “Oh yeah. That was fun.”

Loki smiled, then let him go.

“Very well,” he said, looking at the great dark house with golden windows on the other side of the gates. “Like I said, I will not be able to perform any magic. Once we are inside, I want you to stay hidden and look for the Other. I will try to find Idunn and warn her…” His voice faltered. Would Idunn even pay attention to his words? Perhaps she would not believe someone would ever go as far as to insult the sanctity of her house. “…and warn her,” he repeated, in a more final tone.

Barton nodded, and off they went. Loki, once again, was acutely conscious of his silent presence by his side, and it was such a perfect counterpoint that he truly wondered how he had lived through so many years on his own.

The answer was, he hadn’t. He’d just survived.
“Exposed beams,” Barton said at once when they entered the House.

Loki glanced up; the timber framework was visible indeed. He looked back down and raised an eyebrow at Clint, who said, “I see better from a distance.”

Loki thought about it, then nodded. “Very well.” Keep me posted at all times, he went on through the neural link.

Will do, sir. And then Barton was gone—he climbed up the stairs, jumped and caught a beam to raise himself up on it effortlessly.

You know, sir, this new body is really cool, he said cheerfully.

But Loki knew this wasn’t about his body—not really. The sacrifice of the bilgesnipe had filled Barton with raw strength, raw energy. The agility was all his; and Loki realized he still hadn’t asked him about the circus. He hoped he would have the time—he really wanted to know.

I can’t see him, Barton said as Loki stepped down the atrium to get into the crowded hall. They’re all wearing glamor and shit.

It was true; most Asgardians and Elves, not to mention a great deal of Vanir, were wearing charms to enhance their natural beauty or hide their natural ugliness. The ceremony armors had been furbished anew, the helmets gleamed under the bright light of the floating fireballs, and nobody paid attention to Loki and his dark, worn armor. He glanced around, looking for the gait—the particular gait of a Chitauri, which couldn’t be hidden even by the best of spells.

I thought you said there was no magic allowed in Idunn House, Barton complained.

No major spells, Loki answered. He looked up, but couldn’t see Barton past the dazzling flames of the fireballs; he knew the archer was hidden in the shadows above, nesting on the heavy beams, like a true Hawk indeed.

When Loki looked down again, he saw him. Unmistakably. The disguise was very poor—a brown-haired Asgardian, too plain not to be hiding something worse—and the gait was very specific; too uneven and too quick at the same time, like an insect. But then Loki saw something which made his heart skip a beat—a red glow in the hand of the guest.

I see him, he said. This is what I thought. He came for the ruby.

Where is it? Barton answered at once, and from the distance of the neural link, Loki felt him pull out an arrow and notch it. He hoped Barton would have the good sense not to use one of Dvalin’s arrows in the sacred house.

Already in his hand, he answered. We must be quick.

He felt Barton’s fingers tense the string—

—and then he saw something gleam in the other hand of the Chitauri, a purple glow which stopped his heart again. The amethyst! He had kept the amethyst—

—the Other vanished on the spot, and the House screamed, Barton couldn’t hear it but the violated
magic literally tore up the background sounds and screamed from behind the veil of reality; all sorcerers in the room doubled over with their hands pressed against their ears. Loki was hit as well, but he'd expected it and his horror was too great for him to feel the pain. *After him!* he ordered.

*What—how?*

*You have the keys to my house, Barton, use them!*

Oh Loki was a fool, a tripled fool, he should have taught Barton magic, just a little, should have explained him—and he was close to break the rules and teleport out of Idunn House because if he didn’t the entire world was going to end anyway, but before he could decide himself, Barton fell from the ceiling to land smoothly among the confused guests, ran to the nearest door and vanished through the threshold.

He had done it—Loki had told him he could, so he hadn’t thought and simply *done it.*

Loki was so amazed he stayed still amidst the chaos, without thinking, without knowing what to do, until he heard Barton’s distant voice, saying, *Got it!*

And Loki felt the thrumming energy of the ruby pulse in his hand and through the neural link.

Norns. The *Other.* The Other was going to—

*Run!* Loki ordered in panic, and he obeyed his own order and spun on his heels to rush out of the hall, elbowing his way past the panicked guests to climb the steps leading to the atrium. He had to leave this place so Barton—Loki suddenly dove into the neural link and connected himself to Barton’s optic nerves.

He could see through his slave’s eyes—literally—and what he saw made him dizzy, because Barton was jumping through worlds with disconcerting ease, jumping from his house to Svartalfheim to his house to Muspellheim to his house to—and the Other was on his tail, the amethyst gleaming in his fist, and Loki suddenly stumbled and almost fell flat on his face because he had kept running without looking through his own eyes. He retrieved his own sight, panting, and realized he was almost out of the atrium.

He started running again, crossing the neat gardens he knew to be a mockery of the jungle on the other side of the house. *I am leaving Idunn House,* he called out to Barton. He jumped into the neural link for a second and saw bright colors—Barton was back on the Bifrost.

And the Other was here with him.

*I can see the gates, I will be here soon,* Loki said, breathless even in his mind, *run, Barton, jump again!*

What a fool, what a complete fool, was this how he was protecting Barton’s life, by sending him on his own against Thanos’s lieutenant? This was not part of the plan, but now he was almost—

—Loki crossed the gates and shouted to the skies, “HEIMDALL!”

But the Bifrost did not open; Loki cursed in all the languages he knew and finally did what he should have done the moment the Other had ran away—he broke the rules as well and transported himself to the Bifrost.

When he reappeared, he was struck with a pang of white-hot fear and anger, because the Other was here, fighting Heimdall, and he had almost pushed him into the abyss—and *Barton was still here*
Loki stopped thinking and impaled the Other from behind, like he had struck Phil Coulson a very long time ago, except this time he aimed for the heart—and an arrow whistled through the air and stuck itself in the Chitauri’s eye.

Loki was aghast. What the Hel was Barton thinking, he could not take on the Other, he could not, but then Barton was running again, running through the Bifrost gate and disappearing, and he was safe from the Other and it was all that mattered—said Other wrung himself free from the blade, shrieking and spluttering, but Loki would not let him use the amethyst again because he was going to kill him, and then he would have stolen two gems from Thanos and he would have won, simple as that, he would win, he could win.

He took a step back and struck the other across the face, in his blind spot; the Chitauri hissed and snarled all the more. “Jotun!” he shrieked, “Jotun! I killed you once, I can kill you again!”

Heimdall swung his giant sword and almost cut the alien’s arm off, but then the Other used the amethyst to reappear above him and push him out of the way; the disgusting creature fell down on Loki and the shock pinned the demi-god to the ground—a blade pushed inside his stomach, once, twice, but then he blasted the Chitauri away with a spell and thrust his spear through the chitinous shoulder, ripping the flesh open almost down to the wound in the middle of the chest. The Chitauri shrieked, shrieked and shrunk like a wounded spider; and suddenly, he vanished for good, leaving only a stain of green slimy blood on the beautiful colors of the Bifrost.

Loki scowled and threw his head back. Heimdall was near him, his grave voice full of concern. “Loki—”

“Don’t touch me,” Loki spat. He shouldn’t have been able to heal such a terrible wound, because shock tended to disrupt his faith in his own magic; but at the moment, he couldn’t even feel the pain over his fury towards Barton who had almost got himself killed and made Loki a liar again. Loki scowled, arched, and his flesh started knitting itself back together.

He got up, stumbling. He tacked into the neural link to see through Barton’s eyes. He was so dizzy and reeling that he almost didn’t recognize what he saw—Asgard?

But then, no. No, this was New York.

He could see Stark Tower in the distance.

What? he thought, as his blood slowly soaked his tunic underneath his armor, what?
Chapter End Notes

Well, well, well...
A hand grabbed his shoulder and Loki brutally fell back into his own eyes, visions of skyscrapers at night vanishing from sight.

“You need a healer,” Heimdall said.

Loki wrung himself free. “I said do not touch me. You are a gate keeper; go keep your damn gates. A Chitauri appeared on the Bifrost—should you not be warning Odin?”

Barton was talking, three worlds away; Loki tacked deeper into the neural link to hear. *Hey*, he was saying. *I won’t be around for long, so don’t bother coming for me, okay? I hope you’re all fine.*

A phone call, Loki understood. He was calling his friends. Three minutes on Midgard and he had already found a phone?

He walked away, limping with pain, and focused, throwing all his fury into his spell, calling his house to bend the universe in his path. Midgard…

Loki vanished from the Bifrost and reappeared in the middle of a busy street.

Bright lights flashed behind him, and he heard a loud noise—he’d almost gotten hit by a car which had ran into a trash can instead. The demi-god stumbled, but then straightened up and crossed the street to reach the sidewalk. It was late at night; only a few people passed by, and hurriedly ran away from his alien, bloody silhouette. He was in front of a bar—he could see Clint through the glass door. The archer was bent over a beer and talking into a small cellphone. Loki was still linked to him; he could hear what he was saying.

*I’m not sorry I kept you out of my shit, but I’m sorry I lied, and I’m sorry it had to end like this.*

Loki opened the door which tingled ridiculously as he walked inside. The patrons froze and one of them let his glass fall on the floor. Loki limped through the suddenly silent room, dripping blood on the floor as he went, seeing red. He heard Barton’s last sentence with his own ears.

“It’s not the end of me, though. If you’re worrying, don’t.”

Loki stopped right behind him. He was shivering with wrath.
“Having fun?” he said, so furious he could not even shout.

Barton froze and completely stopped breathing. Loki grabbed his neck and pulled him back, fingers digging into his throat. “Kindly return this phone to its rightful owner,” he hissed.

Barton complied in silence and Loki almost lifted him off his stool; he dragged him outside and, in a last effort, took them both away to the stone house.

#

The moment they stepped through the threshold, Loki’s rage burst free—he threw Barton on the floor and kicked him in the stomach, then kicked again, then crushed his crotch with his foot and squashed him. Only when Clint shouted did Loki realize what he was doing—beating him up out of anger. No—no—no. He was not in control and he had to stop.

He forced himself to retain his fury and grabbed Barton by the throat again to slam him against the wall. And then he looked at him.

It was ridiculous to be so angry; obviously, Barton was fine. Loki knew he was mostly angry at himself for risking his slave’s life; but he had told him to run, for Hel’s sake, not to shoot an arrow at one of the most dangerous beings of the universe. It had all been too sudden. And then Barton had gone to call his friends; and to see him so concerned about them, when Loki was wracked with terror about him, had been simply unbearable.

Loki forced himself to take a deep breath. “You are not injured,” he said, because he needed to hear it, to tell himself this.

Barton shook his head without a sound and Loki realized he was almost strangling him. Damn it. He released him and took a step back, enraged at himself for losing control like this, enraged at Barton for his carelessness—risking his life, not caring about himself, when Loki had nothing, nothing but him.

“What were you still doing on the Bifrost, Barton?” the demi-god said, trying to contain his anger.

“I—what?”

Loki was going to kill him—he slammed him against the wall again, only checking himself at the last minute. “I told you to run!” he snarled. “Why were you still there when I arrived? Why did you shoot? Did you think you could take on the Other by yourself?”

“No—no!” Barton protested.

Loki’s features quivered, and he minutely loosened his hold.

“He nearly threw me off the bridge, and when I climbed back, they were blocking the door! I was trying to shoot my way out!”

The door? Loki blinked. Why the Hel would he need a door?

Oh.

Oh.
Barton really knew nothing about magic. Magic was all about belief, and he had not understood he had mastered it—he *believed* Loki’s house was the thing which had carried him through the Universe. And it was, but it was a hub shaped into a house—it could have taken another form; it was basically a magic supply in which the user could tack instead of exhausting his own energy. There was no *need* to use actual doors, no need to actually walk inside the house. But Barton’s belief was conditioned by the act of crossing a threshold.

Loki sighed silently. Once again, it was his fault. He really had to teach Barton a thing or two about magic.

“Alright,” he mumbled, feeling ashamed at his own anger.

He let go of him and took a step back; Barton coughed, hoarse and loud, then managed to control his breathing again and fell silent.

“That’s all?” he asked eventually, in a hesitant voice.

Loki stared at him in total incomprehension. What more did he want? Did he expect Loki to apologize?

Well—maybe he should apologize, indeed. No matter how scared he’d been, his anger was unforgivable. His only job was to be in control; and he’d lost control again.

But then it dawned on Loki—Barton expected to be punished about the phone call. And although Loki felt a deep sadness—and also a deep irritation towards himself, because what did he expect? Barton was not going to forget about his friends simply because Loki wished it—his loyalty to his old life was what made him into the man Loki loved. No matter how hurtful it was to his selfish, possessive self.

“I never forbade you to contact your friends,” Loki muttered reluctantly.

Barton blinked at him. He straightened up slowly, gingerly, as though expecting Loki to be faking it, to lash out at him again; and a pang of horrible guilt twisted the demi-god’s stomach. Apologizing would not help regaining Clint’s trust; he had to explain himself, even though he hated phrasing what mattered out loud.

“It was chance that brought you to Midgard, Barton,” he said. “You did not reach it on purpose, and you did not seize the opportunity to cry for help.”

He turned away, feeling weary. “Had you done so,” he said, “you would be dead by now. I cannot tolerate a slave pretending to bow.”

This, at the very least, could be uttered without blushing. He had worked very hard to get rid of all pretense between him and Barton. But of course Barton was not faking. Of course he was honest. He’d always been honest.

“But we both know that this is not the case here, do we not?” Loki said.

He turned towards him again, and tried to smile. “Have a little faith.”

Barton stared at him. So much Loki stared feeling vaguely worried.

“You’re hurt,” the archer blurted.

*Uh?* Loki glanced down at himself and saw the blood soaking the cloth under his armor. “Oh,” he
Barton was worried. About him. Loki repressed a desperate laugh, because how had he even deserved that man, he would never understand. “No,” he lied, “the blood is not mine.”

His wounds were almost healed anyway; the pain almost gone.

He suddenly realized he was still holding his spear and still a little breathless from the battle, feeling like his blood was buzzing under his skin; and he was so relieved all of a sudden, because they were both alive, they had both made it, and they had—they had the ruby! Gods, he had forgotten about it!

Loki felt giddy and wanted to laugh. He leaned his spear on a chair and walked back to Clint. “Heimdall was wise enough to accept my help, but the Other ran away before we could settle things.”

He smiled. “Left me with a craving.”

Barton looked overly relieved as well. “Anything you want, sir. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean—I just wanted—I’m sorry.”

He was so desperate to make it up to Loki, even though he had done nothing wrong, really. Loki recognized those telltale symptoms only too well—he felt a drop coming, and he knew exactly how to prevent it. Not to mention it would do him good, as well.

“I don’t need your apologies,” he breathed. “Nor do I need your permission, Barton.”

Barton was waiting, though, and Loki gave him what he wanted—he grabbed his throat again, but this time he was in control, without any anger, only a dark delight at feeling Barton’s pulse quicken under his fingers. He leaned forward, very slowly, giving Barton time to predict his move. When he was almost kissing his ear, he whispered, “The ruby, if you will.”

Barton blinked, as though he had forgotten about it too; he pulled it out of his pocket and gave it to Loki. Energy thrummed through their fingers, and Loki wasn’t entirely sure it was caused by the gem.

He put it away; then he murmured, “I don’t think you realize what you did. You stole Idunn House’s most prized treasure and walked away unharmed. A feat never before accomplished.”

He smiled. “Heimdall testified, and his word is precious to all. People were already murmuring about you across the Realms; today granted you fame.” He did not know that, but it had to be—Barton had been seen stealing the jewel by the guests of Idunn at the Solstice Party. And Loki already knew how they were calling him. “The Hawk, as they say.”

He pressed Barton against the wall and his hand sneaked between their bodies to grip the archer’s balls; Barton could not move—he was secured; safe; safe even from Loki who had dominated his wrath. Barton’s training might be over, but Loki’s would never cease. He was still ashamed at his anger, but he could feel he had learned from it already—he would not give in to it again. Barton could be trusted. He could always be trusted. Loki must remember it—must learn to believe it.

He tightened his grip, and when Clint whined, Loki crushed his throat a bit harder as well, strangling the sound; and it was forceful, but it was also measured, controlled, and they were both enjoying it; and this was how pain between them was meant to be.

Loki felt his arousal flare, hot and demanding between his thighs. “I want,” he murmured, “to see you writhing at the end of a cane.”
Barton shivered; they both knew he hated canes about as much as Loki loved them. “I want to take you until you sob.” Yes—Loki wanted to hear him sob. To hear him let go.

Loki pressed closer, limbs against limbs, chest against chest. “And I will do both these things—but not as a punishment.” Barton knew this already, but he deserved to hear it spelled out. Loki’s voice dropped down a notch. “Merely because you are my slave, and it is my wish to hear my slave scream.”

Barton squirmed in his hold; Loki tightened his grip on his throat and squeezed his balls. “What was that, Barton? Do you think it unfair? Do you think you deserve a reward instead?”

It was a real question; and Loki was relieved to hear him answer, clear and sincere, “No, sir.”

“Why not?” he asked, curious.

This was important. He felt Barton swallow, then say, “Because I am your slave, sir.”

“So?”

“You don’t—you don’t reward a hammer for hitting a nail.”

Loki smiled in relief. Yes, they were on the same page. And Barton’s trust hadn’t wavered. He wanted—like he’d wanted from the beginning—to be used; because being used meant he was useful. Loki could understand the feeling.

“Now, isn’t that an accurate metaphor,” he breathed.

He squeezed Barton again and the archer threw his head back with a sound which sounded more like pleasure than like pain. “Thank—thank you, sir.”

He was hard against Loki’s hand. Loki released him, then let Barton’s clothes vanish; he took a step back and invoked a thin cane which he smacked against his palm, appreciating the sharp sound and the jolt of pain. Oh, yes, this would do perfectly.

Barton swallowed, but said nothing and turned around, arms extended and palms flat against the wall, spreading his legs apart. Loki was torn between his will to hurt him and his urge to worship him for giving himself—giving himself like this, lending his body as a canvas for Loki’s red writing. Who else was brave enough, selfless enough, loyal enough to do this? No, this was in no way a punishment. If Loki felt jealous of Barton’s love for his friends, then he was a fool, a petty fool who understood nothing to his own luck.

Loki brought the cane down across Barton’s buttocks with a sharp slap! Barton startled a little, but Loki had not hit hard. He wanted to do this right—to let it build up. He gave another few hits, drawing light red welts on Barton’s skin, until the archer started squirming again. “Please…”

Loki laughed under his breath. He had trained Barton to receive hardcore pain as a prelude to pleasure, and sometimes as pleasure itself; those light blows must be driving him crazy.

Well, good. Loki had found a new way to torture him.

“Impatient?” he said, hitting him even more gently. “How unfortunate.”

Barton’s shoulders tensed, but he said nothing. Cruelty through gentleness was absolutely delightful to Loki, and he was decided to explore it more. He covered Barton’s ass with welts until the skin
was uniformly red and flushed hot, and Barton was boiling with frustration. Oh, yes, this was fun.

Now. Loki raised his arm, then suddenly whacked him.

Clint buckled hard and shouted, barely holding himself up. Loki hit again, landed a few blows on his thighs as well, and it felt so good to finally give himself free rein, and if Barton hadn’t been busy screaming in pain, he might have voiced his relief as well. Loki hit, and hit, and hit, and hit, and with every blow, Barton’s arms trembled more violently, until he couldn’t keep them extended and pressed his chest against the wall. His last scream broke in the middle and, diving into the neural link—pain hot agony arousal—Loki felt a sob coil in his chest. He dropped the cane and crushed Barton against the wall from behind, tearing a cry of surprise out of him.

“No,” he murmured, and cruel gentleness was definitely working for him so he ruffled Barton’s hair and soothed, “Shh. It’s alright, Barton.”

He dug his nails into the archer’s raw ass, then murmured, kind and soft, “Don’t cry.” He felt himself throb hard. Oh, how he loved tormenting him in this way—almost more fun than the caning itself. “You are not allowed yet,” he grinned, dropping all pretense of kindness for a split second.

Barton almost sobbed again and Loki crushed him harder against the wall, chasing the air out of his lungs. “I am just getting started,” he threatened, although he might not last for long with how wickedly aroused he was, “do not ruin this for me.”

“No, sir,” Barton whined. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Loki almost laughed; he took a step back, and as it turned out, Barton couldn’t keep himself upright anymore—he slid down the wall and fell on all fours. His pink ass was beautiful.

He was wearing a leather collar pretty much at all times now; Loki picked up the cane, then clipped a chain to the O-ring. “Over here, Barton,” he said, walking away and nonchalantly jerking the chain.

Barton crawled after him; Loki let his clothes evaporate on the way, then sat in a chair, spread his legs and angled his hips. He was still holding the chain; he lifted Barton’s chin with a tap of the cane.

“Good. Now, let us do what you hate.”

He tugged on the chain, forcing Barton to get his head between Loki’s thighs; but when he understood what was being asked of him, the archer almost dove head-first into it—they both knew he actually adored this. Perhaps, Loki though as he leaned his head back, because this was one of the few things which managed to make him moan—“Hmm,” he moaned indeed when Barton’s tongue licked around his hole. The muscles in his thighs quivered and fluttered; Gods, this would be his undoing. Barton was so eager, too, so thankful, and Loki realized he was babbling out loud and shut himself up, but he couldn’t hold back another moan when Barton pushed his tongue inside and Gods, Gods, when had he gotten so good at this?

Barton’s hands on his hips were a surprise—Loki had forgotten that for once, he wasn’t shackled or tied up—but a very nice one. The strong, calloused hands braced around Loki’s sharp hips and dragged him down for Barton’s mouth to mold better between his thighs, and it was hot, and wet; his tongue pushed again, strong enough to breach the tight ring of muscles, and licked all around it, exploring the tight folds, sending chills all along Loki’s nerves. Loki almost whined, bit his lip; then suddenly, he made the cane swish and hit Barton’s ass again. It was a delight to feel him jolt and lose his rhythm; Loki’s cock jumped to full hardness, precome beading at the tip. He hit harder, then pressed behind Barton’s head with his other hand to push him deeper between his thighs.

“Focus,” he said, even though he was doing everything so Barton couldn’t focus. He grabbed his
hair and pulled him up; Barton whined, but then he felt Loki’s cock under his mouth, and licked and sucked at the base—buckling when he was hit again.

“Hush,” Loki said. “It is alright, Barton.” He hit again and heard him yowl in pain. “Hush, hush, you will be fine…” He hit him again, and once again, whispered, “Shh, Barton—be brave, it’ll be over soon enough.” It could have been over now, and Loki loved this, the mix of cruelty and kindness, he loved it.

He sighed in pleasure, then decided he had played enough and brought Clint even higher up to sheath his cock inside his throat. His slave moaned again, choked a little, and began sucking in earnest, but then Loki hit even harder and Barton lost his focus again, once more on the brink of sobbing. His small whines were driving Loki insane. Hurting him—he loved hurting him.

“Here,” he growled, “let me help” and he dropped the cane to straighten up and grab Barton’s head with both hands to fuck his face. Barton’s whines turned into helpless whimpers as Loki fucked his throat.

“Ah, much better,” he grinned, “You are so easily—” Gods, this was good “—distracted.”

Barton gagged and Loki pulled out, then slapped him hard when he saw tears welling in his eyes. “Not yet,” he ordered.

He made him turn and finally tied up his wrists in his back. He came down as well and knelt behind Barton, pushing on his shoulders to press his chest against the floor, ass up.

“Please, sir—” Barton moaned.

Loki gripped his abused ass, parted the cheeks, roughly lubed himself and lined up; the flesh resisted for a split second, then gave, hot and wet as he finally, finally breached Clint, feeling his tight, hot body envelop him and squeeze. Barton shivered and trembled and moaned through his clenched teeth when Loki bottomed out.

“Does it hurt?” he grinned.

“Yes,” Clint whined.

He was well on his way to his state of complete submission. Good. Loki himself was close to a noiseless mind; he hurt him a little more, dug his nails into the raw flesh, then started fucking him, very slow and very deep. Releasing his hips, he grabbed Barton’s shoulders and rubbed his trapezius, massaging him, and if he wasn’t wrong—yes: Barton jerked to escape it as though this was the worst torture of all. Gentleness. It was driving him crazy. Loki grinned, then kept fucking him, slow, so slow, but way past his prostate, so very deep that Barton moaned in discomfort each time. His eyes were glazed over and heavy-lidded.

“Falling asleep?” Loki said, pulling his hair.

He pushed, took him ruthlessly and yet still so slow, and clawed at his raw ass again. Barton started shaking with repressed spasms, biting his lip not to break down, driven insane by both torture and absence of torture.

“Oh, you can cry now,” Loki said, hoarse and breathy.

Barton whined, then suddenly he was sobbing, sobbing and moaning, “Please—” sobbing so hard he could barely speak, “Please, sir, just—just do—just take—please, I can’t—” He choked on a sob when Loki pushed deep and slow again, “Please, please, sir, mercy, stop, just—I’m ready, please,
I’m begging you, give it to me, I can’t—I can’t—"

No, Loki couldn’t, either, not anymore—he pinned Barton down and angled his hips to hit his prostate; and then he fucked him hard and fast, and Barton’s pleas broke down into wordless thanks, then in inarticulate moans of pleasure, cries of pleasure, shouts of pleasure—and he came, and he squeezed Loki so hard Loki couldn’t not come—and he let it burst through him with bliss, shuddering with relieved tension, and suddenly he was weary, and exhausted, in a very good way but still exhausted, and he pulled out and let himself rest against Barton’s hot, solid body, still quivering under him.

Barton sighed, and Loki sighed in echo, and they stayed there, simply breathing, in their shared warmth, in the smell of their shared pleasure, and in the heaviness of their common exhaustion.

Eventually, Barton started to shiver and Loki was the responsible one around here, after all; so he brought himself up, and helped Barton to sit. He ruffled his sweat-damp hair and Barton closed his eyes.

“Bath?” Loki suggested.

Barton nodded. “Yeah.” He swallowed, wobbling a little, then said, “yes, please, sir.”

Loki got up; Barton stood as well, but then stopped, as though he’d seen something or thought something. But then it passed, and he looked up at Loki, with a strange, strong gaze. Loki liked this—their nudity, and Barton’s absence of restraints save for his collar. His slave stood tall.

But he wasn’t going to stand for long, if his reeling was to be believed. Loki clasped a leash to his collar, then tugged gently. “Come.”

Barton looked like he was about to melt in a puddle of goo when they entered the steaming bath room. Loki led him into the water, then cleaned him; Barton stiffened a little at first, but the last strongholds of his will were not long to crumble; only when Loki felt him relax entirely under his touch did he unbuckle his collar to let him rest on his own for a while.

Loki cleaned himself quickly—having Barton do it was pleasant enough, but he had closed his eyes and the demi-god didn’t want to disturb him. This bit of rest was well-deserved. Loki himself felt very tired, but not in a way which would allow him to rest. He kept thinking about the Other.

The Chitauri had fled—and Loki had the ruby; so why wasn’t he happy? Why did he feel like he’d gotten cheated again?

He looked into the twirls of steam, frowning. Was this about Barton? He felt like it was, and yet he was almost sure he was at peace with the latest developments of their relationship. Yes, Barton loved his friends, but Loki would not be petty enough to obsess over it—he’d said he wanted Clint Barton, and Clint Barton never forgot his friends, so Loki would just have to let it go…

He closed his eyes with a small wince. Why was it bothering him? There was something else here, something else he was mistaking for personal feelings because of his paranoia regarding the archer. Barton had called his friends, very well—and how…

Loki reopened his eyes. How.

How had Barton ended up on Midgard?

The obvious answer was: the house had led him there because he unconsciously wanted to return. And yet—Loki would be insulting him, and himself too, if he started to believe Barton was secretly
mourning his old life to the point of willing himself back. Nostalgia wasn’t enough to direct the house’s spells—the magic room was extremely sensitive and continuously digging through their users’ subconscious, but the house as a whole was a tool waiting for explicit directions.

Then why Midgard?

Barton had been through Svartalfheim, Alfheim and Muspellheim during the chase—the chase… yes—wait—he was chasing the Other. Then he was being chased by the Other, but still… could it be?

“Midgard,” Loki whispered.

He remember Stark Tower in the distance. Not only Midgard, but New York. But Stark Tower. A place which had defied and defeated Thanos once. A powerful place…

The reactor? Loki thought, amazed. The ARC reactor? Could it be enough for the Gauntlet to work? He hadn’t even thought about it before, because of a long-internalized contempt for Midgard; but he’d learned by now, and maybe—maybe—

“Maybe you did not end there by chance,” he whispered.

Looking up, he saw that Barton looked unsettled—of course, he was afraid Loki thought it was his fault. The demi-god quickly shook his head. “My spell was following the Other, Barton,” he murmured, and yes, this had to be it, “Yes—yes, there is no other explanation.”

“Wait,” Barton said, barely breathing.

Loki blinked, then smiled. “You got it already, didn’t you?”

“The house took me to his final destination—he is targeting Earth.”

Gods, Loki loved this man.

So he gave him a gift. “Thanos is, yes,” he murmured.

He realized this was maybe the first time ever he had said that name out loud.

Barton stared at him. Eventually, he said, “That was him, wasn’t it?”

He came closer, and the calm water rippled around their bodies. “The man you met down there.”

Loki almost laughed—it would have been a very bitter laugh. “I would not call him a man. But, yes.”

Barton said nothing for a long while. And then he asked, “Were you forced?”

Loki didn’t move a muscle. Forced?

“Were you forced to attack us?”

Loki swallowed, suddenly very ill-at-ease.

The answer, in a sense, was yes—because Loki would have done anything, anything, to leave that dark place below the rainbow. He had never dreamed of ruling Midgard—why rule a people he despised? There was no glory to be found there. But then he had gotten there and worked so hard to repress Thanos’s memory that Earth’s conquest had become his own goal; all the more since it fitted his need of revenge against Thor so well. He had come a long way since then; he knew that had he
not met Thanos, the invasion would have never happened.

But this was not what Barton was asking. He was asking whether Loki was actually a hero—or at the very least, a good person. And Loki could not lie to him about this. A true hero would have died in the dark place below the rainbow rather than wreaking havoc on an innocent Realm. A good person would have embraced the memories of Thanos and stopped the invasion in time.

“No,” Loki answered at last. “I was not.”

He clenched his fists underwater. “I still do not regret what I did.” It was true; what had happened could not be changed, and he owed his present life to his wretched past.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Barton said.

His wry little laugh made Loki’s chest clench.

“But,” he said, because he was weak, he could not help it, “but—it was… messy. It was… inelegant.”

He could not say he regretted—he could not say he wished it hadn’t happened. He could, at the very least, say he wished it had happened otherwise.

Barton took a deep breath. “Well, I’m sure you have something very elegant in mind right now.”

Loki failed to understand what he meant for a second; and then he did, and he couldn’t help laughing a little. Oh, Barton trusted him to defeat Thanos, and thus Loki would have to let him down once more, no matter how many times he’d sworn it would never happen again.

“Sadly, no,” he said. “I have been looking for Thanos for way too long. I am unprepared, and he already has five gems; there is no time.” He sighed. “We can only face him and fight.”

“But we have the sixth gem!”

Loki invoked the ruby in his palm and stared at it. It was true; they had the ruby. The ruby was but power—in terms of magic, it was a faith enhancer. Even though Loki’s belief in his own abilities might waver, the ruby would keep his magic continued.

And couldn’t it be useful?

A plan started to form in his mind. A stupid plan. But then, he had always known it would come to this, hadn’t he? He had known from the first time he’d met Thanos—from the moment Thanos had broken him so effortlessly. The Titan loved Death, and to taunt him, Death took them all but him.

And Barton. Loki had sworn and this word he had and would keep. Barton would be safe.

And me, dead; but happy, at least.

Lovers of the light be released.

“He might come after us for it, indeed,” Loki murmured.

He closed his hand, as though he’d lost interest in the gem. “But the ruby is only for power; the roughest of all six. Thanos can have the Gauntlet functioning with another source of energy, if he finds one.”

“Like the Tesseract?” Barton said.
Loki didn’t answer. Barton closed his eyes, then pinched the bridge of his nose. Well, he had to know the truth—he had been sacrificed on Thanos’s altar, just like the rest of the world. If not for the Tesseract, Clint Barton’s life would have been very, very different.

“But it’s in Asgard, now,” the archer said after a while. “The Cube—it’s in Asgard.”

Loki nodded, somehow wearily. “Indeed; and heavily protected, which is why Thanos is targeting Midgard again instead.”

“But—what source of power is there on—”

Barton brutally cut himself off.

And then he looked desperately at Loki. “No,” he said, as though his master had the power to change it. He straightened up in the water. “We’re stopping him, aren’t we? We’re really going to fight him?”

“Yes,” Loki murmured, and he was so sorry. He would be risking Barton’s life again—

“Why?” Barton exclaimed. “Why would you want to protect the Earth?”

Loki stared at him in what must be a really dumb way. Then it clicked, and he almost laughed again. “This is what disturbs you?”

It was Barton’s turn to look puzzled, and Loki did laugh. “Not the fact that you will be fighting a Titan with nothing but a bow? Not the fact that I am sending us both to a certain death?”

And now Barton was staring at him with a raised eyebrow. “Why,” he asked, “would an order from you disturb me?”

Loki was so stunned he found nothing to say.

Well, he thought after a minute of mental gaping. Maybe now, I can die.

“I—,” he said, answering mechanically, “I don’t… want to protect Midgard.” This is my brother’s job, he almost added. “With the Gauntlet, Thanos threatens the entire Universe, and I am a part of it. I must fight, and Midgard happens to be the battlefield. That is all there is to it, really.”

Barton nodded, but he hadn’t listened; he was staring at Loki with a pained expression. And oh, Loki was a poor liar if Barton had already guessed he did not plan on surviving.

Loki got closer. “Barton,” he murmured, trying to think of something to say—something clever, something witty, something which could hide his weary despair. But words failed him, of course; silver tongue turned to lead. So he just leaned forward, and kissed him.

There was a still second in the calm warmth of the baths.

And then Loki suddenly felt a desperate urge rise into his blood—the urge to feel alive. Death was close, so close, just when he’d finally found a reason to live, and it was too unfair, so he refused it, called for life, wanted to feel heat pulsing in his body, so he pressed against Barton and kissed him, hungry for him, like he could never get enough. Barton kissed back, and it felt almost angry—of course, Barton was an incorrigible optimist, a very practical man, he wasn’t about to let despair get
the better of him, and he proved it by breaking the kiss to hiss, “For now, we’re alive.”

Their naked bodies were pressed flush together; Loki grabbed Clint’s hips and lifted him underwater. The archer wrapped his legs around him and stared him in the eye.

Loki smiled at him. “Show me,” he smiled.

Barton was hard again; he angled his hips for Loki to take him, but Loki realized it was not what he wanted. He spun them round so he was the one backed against the wall of the pool.

Clint’s eyes widened. He pressed closer, almost shaking despite the warmth of the baths.

“Sir,” he said, breathless, looking into his eyes. “Sir.”

“Yes,” Loki murmured, so low he could barely hear it.

It had been a long time, but he had never been more ready.

When Barton entered him, Loki pressed his face into his shoulder, and breathed in as he pushed slow and deep all the way in. He breathed out, clung to him, and let him set his own rhythm, let Barton take him, the sensations so different, so good, almost completely forgotten, and they kissed again, messy and open-mouthed, and for a short while—for a precious while—Loki forgot about death.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and commenting! Shit’s going down next chapter (and the next... and the next...)
“Alright,” Loki said, reopening his eyes.

He shook his head to clear off the last shreds of his vision. “The attack will begin in a few hours. He is using the Chitauri again.”

Barton gave a short nod. “Whales?” he asked.

“Yes. Five of them.”

They were both sitting cross-legged on the floor, in Loki’s Jotunheim room; this was where they had finished the night. The room was very cold, but Barton’s enhanced body could take it, especially wrapped around Loki under a thick blanket, and they had slept undisturbed.

Loki had cast a look upon Midgard, and saw that armored Chitauri vessels had changed their course to go towards Earth. They must have travelled for weeks without the Tesseract to transport them; but of course, Loki had been focusing on the Realms during his search, not on the void in between, so he had not seen them.

“You may have to use Dvalin’s arrows,” he said. “But this will not be your main task. Here.”

He gave Barton more arrows wrapped in a cloth. “Neural links.”

The arrowheads were gleaming blue, just like the sphere Barton had been force-fed many months ago. “I’ll need you to shoot them at the Avengers Tower,” Loki explained.

“The Tower?” Barton said in surprise as he made the new arrows click into his quiver next to Dvalin’s.

“Yes. Probably the upper floors; I expect Thanos to appear there.” Loki smiled, joyless. “He does like to be on top of things.”

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “So—it is quite simple. Shoot them all; once you are rid of the neural arrows, you can take down the whales.”

“Yes the neural arrows, sir?” Barton said. “If I may ask.”

“You may.” Loki sighed. “I am afraid it is not very elaborate. I saved Heimdall’s life on the Bifrost, so he owes me a favor; once I have Thanos near me, I will call for the Bifrost to open. Now—the Bifrost is almost sentient; it transports only the persons Heimdall means for it to transport. But if you
implant my neural system in the building, it will be read as a part of me, and the Bifrost will carry it all the way to the rainbow. With Thanos.”

Barton gaped a little. “You want to **teleport** Stark Tower?”

“Well,” Loki said, “ideally, the neural arrows should be implanted on Thanos; but I—he would probably notice it.” And Loki did not want, not even to save the world, to ever be linked in any way with that creature. “So the tower will have to do.”

“Okay,” Clint said. “You take him to the Bifrost, and then what?”

“And then I send him back to where he came from,” Loki said quietly.

This was not a lie—merely a hidden truth. To push Thanos into the chasm would amount to nothing. He **lived** there. Something else would happen; something Loki would not tell Clint. It was better for him not to know.

“Alright,” Clint said. “What about the Avengers?”

Loki looked at him, a bit surprised. “What **about** them?”

“Well—they’ll be there. They’ll probably… do stuff.”

Loki shrugged. “If they try to stop you, stop them. But I expect them to focus on the whales first. Unless they recognize you—yes, that might be distracting. Let’s not let that happen.”

The demi-god thought for a minute, then shaped a steel helmet of a gleaming silver, in the shape of a hawk’s head. Barton couldn’t help grinning when he saw it. “Asgardians and their helmets,” he said, taking in in his hands.

“They have been in fashion for three thousand years,” Loki smirked. “They do get useful.”

He stretched, then got up. “When we get there, do not talk to the Avengers and do not reveal your identity. Focus on your task.”

“Yes, sir,” Barton said, in a tone which clearly said **duh, of course I will.** Loki felt a smirk curl up the corner of his mouth. This small hint of cockiness was enough to awake his desire—to hurt him, to see him shiver, so delightfully broken—but there was no time.

“Alright—you will be needing an aircraft,” he said. “Let us leave the house.”

Barton got up after him, holding his helmet under his arm; and then Loki simply saw him, saw him right there, in his bedroom—his Jotunheim bedroom—so calm and so confident, unaware that Loki had lied to him, that their time together would soon be over; and suddenly, desperately, the demi-god just wanted to stay here, he wanted to go back into bed and curl up around Barton and wait for the world to end. He really did not care, if he could only spend the last minutes of it with this man in his arms.

But now was not the time for sentiment.
When they appeared on Midgard, everything looked deceptively calm. Barton straightened up on the rooftop and peered down; the city was eerily silent, and the streets were empty. Skies of lead weighed over them. It was strange to see him there, standing on the edge, in his black clothes and his dark silver helmet.

He looked confident, Loki realized. Barton had always been strong, but he had never loved himself. At some point during or after his training, he had grown into his own skin. Now he loomed over his old home, and he did look like something of a god. He had no doubts.

Loki was proud, and he was also saddened, because—he was about to betray Barton’s trust. Again. Again, he would be failing as a master. It was infuriating, to have reached such levels of trust and self-confidence, to have shaped Barton into perfection, only to break it, in a way he had never wanted to break anyone or anything. He wondered why he was hiding the truth from him—maybe because he still hoped to survive, somehow.

Nonsense. This was Thanos. Loki had escaped him once; there would be no more miracles. The miracle, he thought, was to have been able to live with Barton for a few months—and they had gotten so far together. Loki was amazed, and grateful, too grateful—he felt more and more lately that Barton had taken over; that somehow, Barton was the master, even though he was the one who writhed at the end of the whip and sobbed on the rack. Loki did not regret their time in the baths last night; but he still felt more strongly than ever what he had suspected many times already—that Barton was simply stronger; better; that Loki could never be the master he deserved.

Yet another reason to lie, and yet another reason to go.

The steel helmet turned to him. “Sir?”

Loki smiled. “You have come a long way,” he said.

He grabbed Barton collar and tugged him close, close enough to press his forehead against the cold metal forehead. He grinned, then whispered, “Do not disappoint me.”

“Never, sir,” Barton said in earnest.

He was devoted to Loki, in body and soul; and Loki could only think, then, that he loved this man; and maybe this was all he needed. Oddly, he thought of Idunn. Wise old witch. The apple had always been for him, indeed.

He released Barton, then looked up at the skies. “Here they are,” he said.

Three armored biomechanical ships were coming down towards the city, lowing long and grave under the grey skies. Two of them were actually already swimming between the buildings; a steel tail hit a thousand windows which shattered into a thousand thousands glass shards.

“Alright,” Loki said. “I must hide as long as Thanos has not arrived; take care of the Tower first. Then the whales.”

“Roger that, sir.”

And then Barton bowed to him, very deeply.

Loki was taken short; he could not react. The next second, the archer was gone on his aircraft, and Loki felt suddenly so desperate for him, he felt such a painful urge to call him back, that he dove into the neural link and connected himself to the optic and auditory nerves.
And then he was with him again, if for a short time. Barton flew towards Stark Tower and banked to avoid being seen by Iron Man, who darted out in the skies like a red-and-gold trail of bright paint on a grey canvas. Two Quinjets flew out as well and the roar of the Hulk sounded under the threatening skies, loud enough for Loki to hear it even through his own ears.

Barton was efficient as always. It only took him three minutes to shoot all the neural arrows into the top floors of the tower. Loki could feel it; those were extensions of himself, after all, and he felt concrete and stone each time an arrow embedded itself in concrete and stone. But mostly, he felt Barton’s beating heart, he felt his measured breath, he felt his muscles working under the skin, and this was goodbye and Clint didn’t even know it.

And then Clint flew away, having shot his last neural arrow; he went after an armored whale, and he somehow found himself in the way of the Black Widow who recognized him when he shot one of Dvalin’s arrows. Loki saw it all happen, but he did not care. He felt too weary to care. After all, Clint would go back to his friends very soon.

Loki suddenly faltered and lost the connection. He shook himself up and tacked into the link again. He followed Barton in mind as he leaped through space to take down another leviathan; and then he lost him again, but in a vaguer way—he could still feel him in the back of his mind, but he didn’t even have the courage to borrow Clint’s sight and hearing again.

But then, he knew that the time had come for him to be brave.

Did Thanos reek of death? Did Loki’s tortured soul remember the hand of his former master? He did not know—he only knew he was there, he was there, and Loki must go and face him.

He shook himself up and looked at Stark Tower in the distance. The lights were faltering. Yes—Thanos was here to drain the reactor. If only Loki had understood earlier.

He tightened his fist around the ruby, and then he teleported himself on top of the building and blasted the Titan in the face.

He had been terrified it would not work—terrified Thanos would not even flinch—but it did threw him across the roof and even tore a choking sound out of him. Loki’s taste for revenge flared briefly inside him, but his fear was too intense to let him feel much else.

And then Barton died.

Loki’s eyes widened and he felt such a shock that falling off the building would have proved gentler. What—? How—? Gods, Thanos was already shaking his head and getting up—but Barton—*but Barton*—

Loki should not have abandoned his own eyes and ears, not at such a crucial point, not with Thanos so close, but he did even worse than that—he abandoned his entire body and plunged deeper than ever into the neural link.

Dead. Dead, dead, dead, but still warm, but still—still alive, unconscious, the heart had stopped but it could start again, and Loki stung it from the inside, he pulled at Barton’s nerves in the rawest way, clawed and scratched and bit and pulled and twisted, and said, fighting to sound cold and clear and cutting, *Barton!*
Something moved. Loki did not know what, he was trapped in the dark in Barton’s warm flesh, so he pulled again, jerked Barton’s body from the inside, and yelled, Not yet, Barton!

The heart beat once, then stopped again. Pain was rising up into Barton’s entire body—what had happened? Loki had no idea, but he did not care at this moment. I said no, he said desperately.

The heart beat again, then once, then twice, and suddenly Barton breathed in and it was agony, and Loki could have cried in relief because agony meant life. He had no idea if he had actually played a part in reviving Barton, but he only knew his heart had started again, and he was so dizzy with relief it took him a long time to realize his own body was not doing so well.

He came back into himself just in time to see Thanos’s shadow before pure, liquid pain was poured into his bones and flesh.

He felt on his knees and screamed—couldn’t think; but pain was a blessing, because Barton was alive, and to have come so close to losing him made Loki even more determined to end this—to end it all forever.

I’m here, he heard through the link, through the haze of his lingering agony. Sorry, sir.

We have no time for this, Loki said, as dry as he could so as not to be as gentle as he felt. Have you set the trap?

He got up with trembling limbs. Thanos smirked at him, then turned away; he wouldn’t even deign to talk to him. Perhaps he would not even kill him—not before the whole Universe could be killed at once. The Gauntlet was gleaming on his right hand.

Barton, Loki said, because if he wanted to say goodbye—but then Barton said, Yessir—yes, I did. Loki had forgotten he’d asked him something; he could not even remember what he’d asked. He could only remember the plan.

Are you coming in? Barton asked, efficient and practical, and Loki clung to it, clung to this solid warmth he would miss so much in the abyss.

Rather getting out, he answered wryly.

I’ll go with you.

Loki almost laughed. No, he said.

And then he pulled himself out of the neural link, and before he could change his mind, before his selfish nature took over, he threw his head back and shouted, “HEIMDALL!”

Nothing happened. Thanos did not even turn. Loki blasted him again with the ruby; the Titan finally looked at him. He opened his mouth to speak—

—and the Bifrost opened.

Loki did not need to open his eyes to know that he was back on the rainbow with stars above and void beneath. He still opened them—just in time to see the top floors of Stark Tower falling from the sky.

The concrete smashed on the unbreakable glass, toppled over and slipped into nothingness. Loki’s
heart was beating like mad. Where was—?

“The runt,” someone said behind him.

Loki did not turn. He did not turn even when a body was thrown next to him, slowly sliding on the glass before coming to a halt with a hand dangling in the abyss. It was Heimdall, his golden eyes ajar, unseeing, but still surprised.

Sir? Barton’s voice suddenly said in Loki’s ear. And then, more hesitantly, Loki?

Loki’s eyes brutally filled with tears; he didn't answer and turned round, without bothering to hide them. Thanos’s purple skin was so dark he was almost invisible against the sky—like a starless void himself. He stepped heavily towards Loki.

“Asgard,” he said in his nightmare of a voice. “I remember Asgard.”

Loki still had one thing left to do—he raised his hand as if to cast a spell, then flung the ruby across space, with all his strength. It whistled past Thanos’s ear and hit the spinning lights of the Bifrost gate, which propelled the gem Norns knew where.

Loki let his arm fall back, and took a deep breath. There. Nothing left to do now, but suffer and die. The thought of it was almost soothing. Perhaps he was beginning to understand Barton’s will to submit. Only a bit too late.

Thanos seized him in his big hand, lifted him off the colored glass.

And then, slowly, he squeezed.

Loki arched and scowled and choked—and then his ribcage exploded and he distinctly felt nine of his ribs pierce through his lungs and heart and shred them to pieces. Stupidly, he thought of Coulson. He convulsed and choked; Thanos squeezed even harder, crumpling his torso like a dead leaf, and Loki’s broken ribs pierced through his skin and hit the leather of his armor. He opened a wide mouth, but he could not scream anymore. Had he still had the ruby, he might have healed himself; but the ruby was gone; and Loki’s faith had deserted him. There was no use. He had not a drop of magic left in him at the moment. After all, the plan was to die.

“What was the point of your death, little one?” Thanos asked. “Why were you in such a hurry? I will go back for this blue power, and all things shall join you in death. And thus Death will love me.” He grinned. “But what do you know about love?”

“I loved,” Loki said in a breathless whisper.

He could see it, see the thunderstorm gathering above Thanos’s head. Because the Titan had forgotten Odin, forgotten Heimdall whom he’d killed so carelessly, and forgotten Thor who was still in Asgard.

And for the first time in his life, Loki prayed to Odin.

Loki smiled. Thanos thought he was about to drop him into the abyss; but in truth, they would both fall. And the Universe—and Clint Barton—would be safe.

*Lovers of the light be released.*

*And me, dead...*

Loki closed his eyes, and thought of Barton, slowly flipping the pages of a book in the warm lights of his library.

*…but happy, at least.*

The skies tore open and solid thunder swallowed them in a blinding ray of immaculate death; and Loki’s smile died on his dead lips.

---

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and commenting! ^^
Now, down, I lay you down to rest

The sun goes down, far in the west.

Lovers of the light be distressed

By stars and moon we shall be blessed.

Let us dance and sing with the beasts

But the sun goes up in the east

Lovers of the light be released,

And us, dead; but happy, at least.

But Loki was not dead.

He was not dead, and if he was not dead, then Thanos had not died either. And then all was lost.

Loki could feel his blood float all around him, slow drops slowly falling down the abyss. His mind was a soundless scream of horror. He could not breathe, and he could not tell whether it was because he literally had no lungs, or because the darkness had filled him like black water and smothered him whole.

He wished for death, then. He wished for death as hard as he could, because he could not stay, could not stay only to die with the rest of it all, he wanted to go first, he wanted to go ahead, he just wanted to go.

If he could only die.

The darkness was not letting go, and he knew it.

Loki opened his eyes, then. He could not have told why. He just did.

Barton was there, stretched out towards him, beautiful against the star-filled darkness, reaching for Loki’s hand. Loki was thankful for this vision.

Then Barton closed in and his hand wrapped around Loki’s—solid and warm.

And then Loki stopped being thankful, and unspeakable horror washed through him, because this was no vision, this was really Barton, with the aircraft Loki had built for him mere hours ago.

And Barton had fallen with him into the abyss.

Barton tried to pull him up. Loki was suddenly dazed with self-loathing. Why hadn’t Barton saved himself—why, because Loki had taught him not to, of course! Because he had trained him to disrespect his own body and to disrespect his own life! How could Loki lie to himself to the point of enslaving a man—of stripping him bare of self-respect—and think it was somehow right? Oh, God of Lies. God of Lies. Monster—demon—scum. He had destroyed the only thing he had ever loved and it was all his fault. As always. As always. Odin, you should have let me die. You have been too kind. Odin, kill me, I am begging you. Father—father! if I ever was your son, kill me, please, I implore you to kill me!

But Loki was a coward, and a wretch, and he deserved nothing. Barton tried to pull him up again; and Loki closed his eyes, trying to twist free from his grasp, but he only managed to get pulled up, and up, and up, until he felt Barton’s solid arm wrap around him.

It’s useless, Loki thought, stunned with shock. Useless. Nothing can fly in the chasm.

Barton’s aircraft could.

No, it can’t. Why could it?

Why could it? Why could it? Why could it?

Barton’s aircraft sputtered.


Barton’s aircraft sputtered again—why should it not stop flying—and it died.

Death, thought Loki, and the abyss swallowed them both.

He was in the bath and Barton was taking him.
For now, we are alive, he said.

The engines restarted.

Loki did not move. He had pressed his face into Barton’s chest. He was dying. But the engines had restarted, despite Loki’s conviction that they couldn’t, the engines had restarted and they were flying upwards.

Barton was doing it. Barton was the one doing it all.

How Loki had been wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, so wrong, from the beginning. Oh, this man was no slave. He was a god. He was a god able to talk the whole abyss into obeying his mortal will.

Loki was glad to die. He was glad to die in this man’s arms. This was the just order of things. This was his punishment. Barton was flying towards the light by sheer force of will, and Loki, dark, small, runt little Loki, was withering in his arms and dying, and things were as things should be.

To think Loki had—

All those times he had hurt him. Enjoying it. Petty. Despicable. He wanted to vomit his own self out his body, he wanted to die.

Gentle colors came down on Loki’s face, like a sweet blessing, or a warm, tender kiss. He looked up and wished Barton would let him fall.

“Almost there,” Clint said. “Come on!”

The Bifrost. Barton had brought them all the way back to the Bifrost.

“Let me fall,” Loki breathed—but no breath, no sound came out, because he had no lungs. “Please let me fall.”

Barton was not listening to his pleas. He grabbed the edge of the Bifrost and heaved them both up as the aircraft died again and fell back down into the vertiginous abyss. Loki saw it fall—a piece of metal in the nothingness—and then he rolled on his back on the shimmering glass, under the stars, and as he came out of the darkness, he suddenly felt pain again.
“We made it,” Clint was saying. “We made it.”

He helped Loki to sit up and Loki was in such agony he could not even scream.

“Hey, are you alright?”

Loki looked at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he tasted blood in the back of his throat, and he blacked out.

He’d hoped he would never wake up again, but this world cared not for his hopes.

Loki arched and gulped in a lungful of air—his lungs were working again—and suddenly everything was pain and he screamed, and he screamed, and he screamed until strong warm hands came out of nowhere and pinned him down on the mattress.

“Brother,” a breathless man said, “brother.”

“Hold him down,” a woman ordered, and then nauseating white-hot agony pieced through Loki’s spine and he buckled against the unmoving hold and the pain was so great he passed out again.

And the pain was so great he was roused again.

“Please,” he gasped, as if pleading could—was this his punishment, for all the suffering he’d inflicted? Was this—strong fingers laced with his and tightened in a crushing grip, and the man said, “Hold onto me—hold onto me,” and Loki did, lost and terrified and hurting so damn much.

“Loki, what have you done,” the woman murmured in a low, horrified voice.

“What is it, mother?” the man asked, anxiously.

“His whole body is in shreds. Has been for a long time.”

“How?” was the anguished question, and Loki understood nothing, he only knew he was in pain and he could not think beyond.

“I will see to this later. For now—”

Agony again and Loki passed out.

When he woke up, he was wrapped in strong, warm arms, sticky with blood—his blood, he realized. A big hand was stroking his hair, in an awkward, mechanical gesture, and he was softly being rocked forwards and backwards, like a very small child, like a little brother.

“Thor, you have to let him rest,” said a gentle voice.

“I will,” Thor answered, voice muffled by Loki’s hair. “I will. Just—”
“Mother?” Loki stammered hazily, disbelievingly.

Thor stiffened like he’d been stung. Loki said again, in a small, miserable, tearful voice, “Mother?”

Thor let go of him and Frigga sat on the edge of the bed to wrap her youngest son in her arms.

Loki clutched at her like a lost child, eyes wide, haunted; he could not close them, as though a nightmare was waiting on the edge of unconsciousness, lurking behind his eyelids; so he kept them open and realized he was trembling, trembling so hard it was a wonder he wasn’t rattling Frigga herself. His shudders felt so violent to him, but in truth he must be shaking very feebly, very deeply but so very weakly she could hardly feel it.

“You’re safe,” she whispered. “You’re home, Loki.”

“I have no home,” Loki said in a strangled voice. “I have no home.”

His own house was never a home—and Asgard—and Barton—it had all been a lie, a delusion, from the beginning, and every single aspect of his life was rotten and corrupt and he could not go on anymore.

“Loki, you’re hurt,” Frigga said. “You’re so badly hurt. Not only from today—you have very old wounds in your bones.”

Loki felt it then—perhaps because Frigga had spelled it out; but in the chaotic turmoil of pain assaulting his entire body, he felt a particular pain stand out and it was his thumb—the thumb he had broken while he was torturing Barton, weeks ago.

“But I healed myself,” he protested miserably.

“It didn’t hold,” Frigga murmured. “It didn’t take.”

“I didn’t want it to hold,” he stammered, and he was only talking about today, of course, but then he realized he was not—he realized he had never cared for himself enough to cement his healing, because magic was all about belief and he doubted so damn much he wasn’t even good at what he was best.

Frigga held him tighter. “Close your eyes. I will heal you, my son.”

“I am not—” Loki said, shaking with hysterical shock, “I am not—”

“You are,” she murmured.

He felt himself go limp and oblivion blew his mind like a candle, yet again.

#

A warm pull stirred him in his sleep, the feeling that someone was looking for him, and coming for him.

Then it passed, and he sunk into slumber again.
He woke up for good hours later. It took him a long, long while to understand why he was staring at a golden ceiling, why he was bare-chested under the fresh sheets, and why he wasn’t feeling any pain.

He felt empty. He just felt hollow and small, and miserable.

“Clint,” he rasped.

Something moved at his left hand. “I’m here, sir.”

Loki stopped breathing. He slowly turned his head to the side, and Barton was there, indeed. Loki briefly wondered whether this wasn’t all a dream, because Barton was clothed like an Asgardian slave—not with Loki’s black, mean clothes, but with soft brown suede which didn’t suit him.

But who was Loki to decide what suited or did not suit him. He looked away.

“Where are we?” he asked, although he knew damn well where.

“In the palace. Your mother treated you.”

Loki remembered confusedly. Blood and pain and a soft embrace. *Loki, what have you done.*

“She is not my mother,” he mumbled.

“Yes, she is.”

Loki closed his eyes, mortified.

“So I failed,” he said.


*I failed as a master—from the beginning. I am not fit to be one and you are not fit to be a slave. You are strong, and I am weak.*

*I failed as a sorcerer—my magic falters and withers within me because I cannot even trust myself with myself.*

*I failed as a son—a brother—a lover. I failed. I failed even to die.*

“Thanos did not die,” he said instead, because he failed even at failing.

He sighed out. “He will be back sooner or later. Odin did not strike hard enough. This old *fool* cannot be trusted even in what he does best.” But it wasn’t Odin’s fault. It was all Loki’s failure.

“I think Thor held him back,” Barton murmured. “I think he did everything he could to spare you.”

Loki was even more distressed. “I should have expected it from this oaf—could he not see I was dying anyway?”

“So that was the plan?”

Barton’s cold, sharp tone took Loki by surprise.
He reopened his eyes and turned his head to look at him.

“You told me we might die in this fight,” Barton said, dry and angry. “But dying was actually the plan.”

Loki could not help it—he could not help his damn pride, his stupid ego he yearned to reduce to nothingness once and for all. “Are you questioning me, Barton?”

And suddenly he was really angry—he was absolutely furious, because maybe he had failed but Norns knew he had tried, he had tried so damn hard, and it had all been for nothing, it had all been for nothing, and it was not—it was not—it was not fair.

“Did you have maybe a brilliant idea that would allow us to defeat a Titan while preserving our own lives? Did you think maybe you knew him better than I did?”

He half-expected Barton to answer something along the line of ‘yes, of course, we could have used this or that’ because at this point, Loki’s failure seemed absolutely limitless. But as it turned out, it was not limitless in the direction he’d imagined, because all Barton said was, disappointed and resentful, “You left me behind.”

Loki blinked at him. “What?”

“You left me behind to live, while you ran to your glorious death!” Barton snapped. “Am I some fucking lame sidekick? Am I a whimpering princess you ditch when things get too serious?”

Oh.

Loki could not bear it. He just could not bear it. Barton was so strong and yet Loki had had the stupidity to treat him as fragile. And—a glorious death? Gods, maybe it was. Maybe Loki had wanted to die out of laziness—so as not to work to be loved. Maybe he had failed even more than he could conceive, and he could not bear it.

Barton, though, was on a roll. “Even if dying’s the fucking plan, will you be so kind to make me a goddamn part of it? Don’t you know how it feels when you’re set aside by the ones you—”

He cut himself off. Loki was dumbstruck. Was it—? Had—? Barton would have rather liked to die with him?

The feeling of failure deserted Loki, only to be replaced by terrible, burning shame. He had broken this man. He had brainwashed him into thinking himself a slave. And now Barton had truly lost all sense of self-preservation, and it was Loki’s fault, it was all his damn fault.

“Do you have a death wish?” he asked in a weary voice.

“No,” Barton said angrily.

_Gods, how I have harmed you. How I have blinded you._

“Do you?” Barton accused.

Loki smiled, so faintly and wryly it might not have been there at all. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Time to do the only thing he was truly good at—lie.

“I will not be fully healed before a week,” he lied indeed. “I want you to use that time.”

Since he was a mockery of a master, since Barton believed it, Loki could use it at his advantage.

“Going back,” Loki said. “Go back to Midgard. Go back to your friends.”

Barton blinked, then looked indignant. “Are you—are you testing me?” He choked on his words, then uttered, “After everything we’ve been through?”

Time to act the part. Loki took a deep breath. “No. I am giving you an order and you will not question me.”

Barton stiffened. Yes, he would obey. He would go back. And once he was back, he would realize how deluded he’d been—how far he had fallen. He would escape Loki’s hold in mind after having been pushed out of it in body; and all would be well.

But then Clint leaned in and kissed him.

Loki did not react—stayed numb and unmoving. He was too stunned or too hollow. Clint pressed against his lips insistently, as if to make a point, then pulled back, looking very displeased; and he walked out of the room.

Loki stayed there, staring at the ceiling.

A tear rolled down his cheek, then another one. He tried to find solace in the knowledge that Clint was gone; that he was free, and that Loki could never hurt him again. But his tears kept rolling down, welling in his unseeing eyes, and he wept in that strange manner, unmoveing and unblinking, until he was simply too exhausted to be awake any longer.

Chapter End Notes

And on this joyous note, I announce you that next chapter will be late - by about half a day. Thanks for reading and commenting!
At long last, Loki awoke from a dreamless, bottomless slumber, and knew he would not fall asleep again. The heavy curtains had been opened, and the beautiful, clear daylight of Asgard was flowing in, lighting up golden specks of dancing dust in the air.

Loki slowly straightened up. He felt empty, but he was still vaguely surprised to wake up among red velvet and golden columns instead of the cold, bare grey walls of his house. The sky was almost unbearably blue outside the window.

For a single, stupid second, Loki felt like he had never left.

He promptly shook it off and called his languidness back. He didn’t want to move, but on the other hand, he couldn’t stay. He didn’t belong in the palace anymore—speaking of which, why weren’t there any guards at the door? Why wasn’t he back in his cell at all?

He clenched his teeth, then dragged himself up on his feet, wobbling. He felt no actual pain, but the memory of a terrible agony was enough to make him reel. He was naked from the waist up; there was a faint scar in the middle of his stomach, and he knew he could never erase it. He was actually surprised it was the only one marring his pale skin.

Loki took a few steps towards the window and instantly knew he could not go back to his house—not now. He was too weak and too hollow and too uncertain to cast the simplest spell. He had lost even his magic.

No, he realized, as he dug into himself. No, there was something left. A warm, pulsing point in his stomach—the neural link.

Without thinking, without realizing how terrible an idea it was, he closed his eyes and dove into it.

“You’re alive,” a woman was saying with tears in her voice.

The Black Widow. Loki dove deeper, hooked himself up to Clint’s skin, to Clint’s eyes, wore his skin for a second. It was dark where he was; a bedroom. Clint’s bedroom—Loki recognized the exposed beams. Natasha Romanov was there, and looking at him with a deep emotion she failed to conceal. “You’re alive,” she repeated.

Barton leaned forward and they fell into each other’s arms. Holding so tight.

Loki jerked out of the link as though he’d been burned; he stayed still for a minute, heavily breathing, then hid his face into his hands, screwing his eyes shut.
“Brother?”

Loki startled, but didn’t turn round. He slowly dropped his hands and looked over his shoulder.

Thor was here, looking strangely small without his cape and his armor. Loki hadn’t seen him wearing a tunic in… Gods, he couldn’t remember.

Thor stepped inside, but then stopped. “I—” he said. “It’s good to see you so—” he stopped again.

This was weird—Thor never sought his words. He always spoke with decision and ostentation everywhere he went.

“I have something to say,” he managed eventually.

Loki said nothing. Thor stared at him, blinking anxiously, and the silence between them grew into a thick, heavy wall of embarrassment. Loki was too tired to feel anything about it.

“Well,” he said eventually, “say it, then.”

Thor opened his mouth; then he closed it and shook his head, before crossing the room in three strides to wrap Loki in a tight embrace.

Loki startled again, dumbstruck. For a second of stiffness, he had no idea what to do. Forgive Thor? Let go of his anger, of his bitterness, as though it had been nothing? His pride wouldn’t let him. But he had been through so much lately; he had changed, and he had discovered many things, and he simply wasn’t strong enough to hate anyone at the moment.

So he closed his eyes and didn’t fight it. And as he hesitantly returned Thor’s embrace, he became suddenly aware that he’d longed to do this, for years, he remembered that he’d desperately called for Thor as he fell into the abyss that first time, and he held him all the tighter.

“Loki,” Thor said in a muffled, tearful voice. “Little brother. I’m—”

“No apologies,” Loki murmured. “They suit you ill. And I have never been one for heartfelt forgiveness.”

Thor huffed a laugh, then released him just enough to look at him. “Are we to fight forever then, brother?”

“I believe it is our duty and our fate,” Loki said, but he smiled, warily; and when Thor cupped his jaw, rubbing his thumb along it bone like he used to, Loki didn’t fight it either.

“I’ll be glad to fight you,” Thor said. “For it will mean you still live.”

“So you want me to live,” Loki said dreamily.

“Of course—of course I do.”

Loki’s skin suddenly decayed into a deep, cold blue.

Thor stiffened. Loki took a deep breath, but held his gaze with red, burning eyes. He had no idea why he was doing this—his mind was blank, his thoughts silent. He was acting out of pure instinct. Thor gazed at him, his expression unreadable.
“Do you want me to live still?” Loki asked.

Thor’s features softened, and he leaned forward to kiss Loki’s forehead.

“Little brother,” he repeated, fondly, then he hugged him again. “Until the end of days.”

Sudden tears burned Loki’s eyes, and he was glad to feel them freeze into ice before they could roll down his cheeks. He stepped out of Thor’s embrace and let his white skin envelop him again.

“You do not have to hide it,” Thor said. “I will not be ashamed to walk by your side.”

“So this is it?” Loki murmured, feeling very weary. “You will just forgive me whole, thanks to your all-encompassing heart of gold?”

Thor snorted. “No,” he said. “You are right—we shall fight still. For you are the most annoying, cunning, vain, mischievous, arrogant little nuisance the Nine Realms ever had the misfortune to spawn. And we were never at peace even before my exile.” He shrugged. “But this is a promise I can hope to keep, brother: I will fight you for what you do—not for what you are.”

Loki let out a little laugh. “You have no idea what I am.”

“Oh, Barton gave me a few leads.”

Loki suddenly felt ice cold, and it had nothing to do with his recent transformation. “Barton?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “Did you know that you had a new nickname? The Falconer.”

Loki said nothing.

“He seems… incredibly loyal to you,” Thor said in a cautious tone. “You have trained him—and trained him well.”

“He is brainwashed,” Loki said wearily. He shook his head. “I sent him back anyway. I had enough.”

“What?” Thor exclaimed.

Loki blinked, taken aback by his brother’s shock.

“How could you do this?” Thor yelled.

“What?” Loki echoed, frowning. “Was that not what you wanted—all this time?”

“That was before I talked to him,” Thor said. “Loki, he wanted to tell his teammates he was dead. He was ready to abandon his entire life for you. He tried so hard to abide by our laws while you were unconscious—so as not to displease you. And you dismissed him?”

Loki couldn’t believe it. For once, he was doing the right thing, and this was what he got in return?

“I gave him his freedom!” he protested.

“Were you not the one saying humans were made to be ruled?”

“What—how can—” Loki was literally choking on his indignation. “You fought me—you deemed me insane and poisoned for those words—and now you throw them back to my face? In Hel’s name, Thor! How can you be less consistent than me?”
“This is not a matter of consistence,” Thor said. “This is sabotage. You were happy and—”

“No,” Loki yelled, “I was not!”

There was a silence, while they stared at each other, panting.

“I was not,” Loki repeated, lower. “I can never be. Because it is in my nature to hurt what I love. And I hurt him so much—how he screamed, Thor—and I adored every second of it…”

“You love him,” Thor said, sounding slightly surprised.

Loki blinked. “I—what?”

“You just said it yourself. Your nature is to hurt what you love.” Thor tilted his head on the side.

“You are in love with your slave.”

That’s fucked up, sir, Barton’s smirking voice said in Loki’s mind.

It caused him an immense pain he unsuccessfully tried to fight back. “I—” he choked, “no. He is not my slave anymore—he never was. I was deluded.” He shook his head. “Let us discuss it no more. He is back—he is back where he belongs.”

“Loki,” Thor sighed, but then strangely, he added nothing.

Loki blinked, suspicious. Thor stared back.

“So,” he said innocently, after a second of awkward silence. “What shall you do now?”

“I don’t know,” Loki winced.

He shook his head. “I… I have to leave.”

“Stay,” Thor said quietly. “You haven’t been home in so long.”

Loki shook his head again. “This is not my home.”

“I am king,” Thor said. “This is your home.”

The demi-god looked up. “King?”

“Odin All-Father sacrificed all his strength to take Thanos down,” Thor said. “He fell asleep. I am king for the time being.”

So this was why he wasn’t in a cell, Loki mused. He was shocked to realize what a relief it was. Suddenly, it felt as though a terrible weight had been taken off his shoulders, and he felt himself shiver uncontrollably as his body relaxed by a tiny fraction.

“Brother,” Thor said, not unkindly, “you have been punished for your crimes. And you saved the Nine Realms from the Titan—on your own.”

“I wasn’t on my own,” Loki said before he could help it—then he clenched his jaw and briskly shook his head for the third time.

Thor, oddly enough, didn’t seize the opportunity to bring up Barton again. He was being unsettlingly sensitive. “It matters not,” he said. “Under my ruling at the very least, you are forgiven, and free to come and go as you please. You grew up here, for a thousand years; and I have sinned as well in my
time. Let it be remembered.”

He clasped Loki’s shoulder. “You deserve a bit of peace, brother. Please—think about it.”

“There can be no peace,” Loki said. “Thanos will come back.”

“So he will,” Thor said. “But we have retrieved the Gauntlet.”

Loki blinked up at him. “You did?”

“It was Odin’s primary purpose,” Thor said quietly. “We have scattered the gems. The Gauntlet is locked away. You won, brother.”

Loki’s eyes fluttered shut. Thor squeezed him one last time. “So rest—rest, now.”

He was walking away when Loki opened his mouth—to say something about Sif and the Warriors Three, and how they might react to his presence; or to ask about Frigga; or anything else, really.

But what he said was:

“Mjölnir is a lie.”

Thor froze. He turned back, slowly.

“What?”

“I—” Loki stammered, suddenly panicked, “no. Forget it. I said nothing.”

Gods, Thor must be thinking he was lying—trying to manipulate him—why had Loki even thought saying this might be a good idea?

But it was too late. Thor was staring at the hammer on his belt, with thoughtful eyes. Loki wanted to tell him again that he should forget it, but by insisting that Thor thought nothing of it, Loki might come off as even more treacherous. Norns—he did not know how to sound sincere anymore. He had never known.

“You know,” Thor said eventually. “I had considered this possibility.”

Loki looked up. Thor seemed very serene. “That is not to say I believe you—and that is not to say I don’t. Either way, it matters not. Mjölnir is—” he sought his words for a minute. “Mjölnir is my reminder. My safeguard. Perhaps it is only symbolic—I do not care to know; it changes nothing.”

He eyed Loki. “And I would advise you not to be so quick to dismiss your safeguard, brother.”

Then he walked away for good.

* *

Loki walked out in the gardens, at loss. The sun felt good on his skin; he hadn’t enjoyed it in a long while. He thought of the fields outside the palace, and of the small wooden shack opening on his grey world of stone. He had no desire to go back.
He trod among the flowers and the trees, among the calm mirrors of the pools, and remembered Idunn’s orchard. He had protested, *I was raised in the midst of warm life*, and she had answered, *No. You are no different.* And she was, after all, the goddess of truth; or so she was to him, anyway. Loki knew a touch of his fingers would be enough to freeze the rose bushes, but he didn’t do it and let the warm life live on, alone in its midst, with his core of ice.

And he knew he could not stay—he could never stay. To sink into the laziness of Thor’s shadow—until Odin woke up; and then what? No, Loki had nothing left but his freedom, be it a freedom of stone and darkness.

But this place was so peaceful.

Each step evoked a thousand memories. Not all of them pleasant; but all of them sunny. There was so much obscurity in the Universe; Asgard was but an isle of light, a speck of dust in the infinite darkness. To what end? Thanos was not dead—he could not die; he would be back; and everything Loki had fought for would be lost.

He had already lost what mattered most, anyway.

His own despondency infuriated him, but he felt so hollow he could not bring himself to shake it off. He sat on a marble bench, and closed his eyes. The sun was hot on the top of his head.

But not as hot as the pin-point of heat inside his stomach.

Loki’s eyes snapped open when he realized what it was. Before he could push it away, he heard Barton, very close from his ear.

*You idiot,* he said.

The sun had lost its warmth and the garden its colors. Loki was frozen—petrified—breathless. Barton pulled harder on the link—*burning* Loki’s stomach—and his words became more distinct. *Hey. I know you’re listening.*

Loki willed himself not to answer, but he couldn’t stop hearing it—Norns, he couldn’t. He was pathetic, but Barton was very strong and tugged at the link all the more. *Guess what—I wasn’t done yelling at you after all. Yes, I jumped to save you; sorry I’m not the suicidal pet you always dreamed of.*

Loki winced and raked his trembling fingers through his black hair. He weakly tried to shut it off—he didn’t want to hear Barton ranting about how ungrateful Loki was, not acknowledging the tremendous generosity of his former slave rescuing his very torturer from the abyss. He didn’t want—but the link tightened again and Barton hissed, *Still not done. But hey—doesn’t it surprise you that I can do this? Work a—a fucking magical link, like I was always trained for it?*

Loki stopped, breathless, even though he had done nothing but sit on a bench under the warm sun, really. What? Yes—Barton was using the link by himself, but he’d always been able to—this was nothing compared to pulling them out of the chasm. No one had ever…

Loki’s thoughts slowed down.

*No one* had ever come back from the abyss. It was impossible. No one had the will. And magic was all about will.

*You think I got this knowledge by thinking? By reasoning? You thought you were the only one to panic in that fucking black hole?*
Barton’s anger was too real, too strong, and Loki couldn’t bear it. It hurt.

If you pulled your head out of your ass for five fucking minutes, Barton went on, almost yelling, you’d realize that what I did—I couldn’t have done it for anyone else. I’m human—I’m not supposed to bend the laws of reality. You think I only did it out of common sense? Can’t you see that I—

Loki brutally pushed him away and jumped on his feet. He had not managed to destroy the link—he was too weak, too undecided, you lack conviction—but at least Barton was silent now; in a brief burst of panic, Loki’s magic had peaked up again. It hurt too much. It hurt too much. Loki wanted to forget it—to forget everything about it, forever.

Of course, he thought about nothing else during the whole day.


What had he been trying to say? Loki thought, his mind dull and slow.

He was lying on his back, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling. He had come back into his room and stayed inside; now it was night, and he was still in the same position. Even though Odin wasn’t there to push him into a cell, Loki could lock himself up on his own.

What had Barton been trying to say? That he was stronger than Loki—that his will was stronger, his conviction, better? Loki already knew all that. But it wasn’t the only thing Barton had said.

I couldn’t have done it for anyone else.

For me, Loki thought, dully. He did it for me? As a slave does for his master?

But he was brainwashed. He had to be. He had convinced himself that he wanted—but no one could be a willing slave. No one! And especially not Barton. He was so strong. He was so…

But Loki wanted him strong.

Didn’t he?

From the beginning, he’d tried to keep him that way. This was the way he’d reasoned—he hadn’t wanted a broken, miserable thing to own. He had wanted a strong hero for a slave, only to flatter his disastrous ego. But Barton was saying the opposite—saying that he was strong only for Loki. Which made no sense. No sense at all…

Gods, Loki was tired, tired of thinking and running in circles, lost in the swamp of his own desires, his own prejudices, and his own doubts. At the beginning—it seemed so far away now—he had trusted his gut. Barton had come to him to be hurt, and Loki had been delighted at the prospect; the archer was no more than an object at the time. Another mortal to trifle with.

How things changed.

Loki only realized he’d slowly slipped down the link again when he heard Clint’s voice, soft and slow in his ear.

And yes, he was weak, so damn weak, because he closed his eyes to hear it better.
I’ve only been here for two days.

Someone else answered him—an abrasive, straightforward voice; Stark.

Yet you’ve already figured it out. Haven’t you? When you walked through that door yesterday, you looked completely... fucked up. Lost. I don’t know. And now, you look like you own the world and I’m pretty sure you do. I think you figured out the answer to whatever Loki’s problem was. I think he’s coming back for you and I think he’s coming back soon.

What? Loki thought vaguely, frowning, but Stark wasn’t done.

So can I try something? he asked.

There was no answer from Clint. Loki delved deeper, reached into the nerves running underneath his skin, and he felt it.

A kiss.

Stark’s kiss. And not any kiss—a possessive kiss, a dominant kiss, and he was holding Clint’s hands behind his back and Clint was letting him.

Loki felt like the hollowness into his chest had burst open into a howling chasm.

He clenched at the sheets and tried very hard not to—not to—this was what he wanted. For Clint to—to—to escape him. To fulfill his needs in a more healthy way. He just wanted—this was good—he had to—

No.

No, no, no, no way in goddamn Hel. He had not—Loki had not struggled so hard for—for Stark to take Barton, just walk in and take him, as though the entire world could have things easy except for Loki Laufeyson, no, he had fought for this, he had fought himself and he had earned the right to be acknowledged—he would not be dismissed like—like some whore—some forgotten lover—he was Barton’s master, he was Barton’s master, and if Clint could forget it so easily then—then—then—

—then, in the name of Hel, Loki would remind him of his place. He would not—he would not be dismissed—he was just scared, he was scared of himself as he’d always been, and this was what Thor had tried to tell him earlier, but he hadn’t pressed the matter because he knew Loki would not hear it. And for Thor to be wiser than him infuriated Loki all the more. And he forgot he was supposed to let go and he forgot he lacked conviction and he forgot he had no magic and no will—because in a heartbeat, he was on his feet, and shrouding himself in golden lights to reach Midgard.
At long last!
Loki reappeared on the top floor of Stark Tower and reeled a little in the dark. His burst of fury had literally propelled him across the Realms, but now he felt wobbly again and confused in his anger, lost and wounded, breathless, on the brink of collapse. What was he even hoping to—

"You took your time," said a smooth voice.

Loki froze, then blinked up.

"Jarvis?"

"Why, yes. I see you learned my name after all."

Loki was still a bit breathless; he sucked in a breath, then suddenly found himself laughing, alone in the dark with this ironic ghost scolding him for his negligence.

"Really," he asked. "What are you?"

"Now is not the time to focus on me," Jarvis said. "I do hope you intend to set things in order."

"Order," Loki said ruefully. "I have never been very good at order."

He leaned against the wall. "You were there," he said. "From the beginning, you were there."

"I was."

"Then tell me. Tell me what to do. I can trust a disembodied mind not to be led astray—tell me what to believe."

"I take no orders from you," Jarvis replied.

But his voice was gentle, and the doors leading to the roof opened on their own volition.

The night air ruffled Loki’s hair, and he heard Stark’s voice with his own ears. The billionaire was sitting on the roof, facing Clint. Loki couldn’t believe he’d left him only two days ago. It had felt like two years.

"Hope your boyfriend isn’t going to kill me over this," Stark was saying.

"You should hope indeed," Loki hissed.
Both men froze and turned to him. Loki only had eyes for Barton.

“Hey,” Stark said, sounding hesitant. “Space Cow. Now would be the time when I ring the alarm and threaten you and stuff.”

“An old tradition indeed,” Loki said through gritted teeth.

He was staring at Barton and Barton was staring back and he had no shame. He looked calm. Very calm.

“Well, you know what?” Stark said. “I’m not going to. Hear that, Jarvis? Leave the man alone.”

“Is this wise, sir?” Jarvis asked from the inside of the building, and Loki could have laughed at the AI’s unashamed pretense, had he not been so busy staring at Barton.

The archer was sitting on the edge of the roof, wearing Midgardian clothes Loki had not crafted for him, free from all restraints, and Loki’s blood flared red under his skin. This was simply intolerable. Two days—only two days and already—oh, but he could fix this. He knew the way. Loki knew him—knew every crevice of his body by now. He knew what made him melt and what made him shatter. He knew exactly how to reduce him to a quivering mess in only a few seconds. He wanted to beat him, to break him, to take him in every way possible, and to put him in his place until Barton was begging for the honor to lick Loki’s boot, back where he belonged—at Loki’s feet, his pet, his plaything, his slave.

Stark was still speaking; Loki had not heard a word he’d said.

“Leave,” he ordered.

Stark was wise enough to obey, and the next second, Loki and Clint were alone on the roof.

Loki was shaking with rage—all the more since Barton looked absolutely unfazed. Yes, Loki had sent him home, but deep inside, he’d always thought that Barton would beg to come back—he’d taken him for granted, and to realize this made him hate himself all the more. Petty, petty, petty, and Gods oh Gods, how he wanted to hurt this man, to torture him into obedience and then torture him some more. But he’d lost him—he would always lose everything in the end, with no one else to blame but himself.

“Well,” he hissed between his teeth. “I see your friends welcomed you with open arms.”

Barton didn’t move. He was so damn calm.

“Why are you here, sir?” he asked.

Loki would have killed him then—killed him on the spot for saying this—but he’d called him sir. Loki closed his eyes, took a deep breath, opened them.

“You said a week,” Barton went on.

Gods, Barton disgusted him. Loki had come back to Asgard and felt like but an outcast. Barton, though—Barton—

“It must be nice,” Loki spat. “Such certainty.” Suddenly sour, he added, “There is no other place in all of the Nine Realms which would be so kind to a Jotun’s slave.”

Barton didn’t even acknowledge the insult as an insult, which, for a mysterious reason, only angered
Loki more.

“Why are you here?” Barton repeated.

Loki was so seething he actually answered the question. “To settle this,” he hissed. “Once and for all!”

“Glad to hear it,” Barton said, still very calm as he straightened up. Loki couldn’t stand it. All this time, he’d thought—he’d thought he was necessary to this man. And now…

“You were mine,” he said, and a sob of rage got stuck in his throat, “you were mine!”

Barton looked a bit unsettled then. Perhaps he’d felt the extent of Loki’s despair—perhaps he’d realized the vertiginous chasm behind him looked more and more inviting to his furious master.

“No,” he said, his voice suddenly a bit hoarse. “It's okay. It’s over now.”

How could he—how could he say it so flatly—the nerve—!

“What did you say?” Loki exploded.

“I said it’s over,” Clint said. Then he did a weird shrugging gesture and added, low, “sorry it took so long. You win.”

Loki froze in absolute incomprehension.

He felt himself recoil, the memory of his wounds suddenly wearing him down as though he’d been loaded with a terrible burden. Barton was still staring at him, but there was an openness now to his expression—like he was waiting for Loki to do something.

“I—win?” Loki repeated, in altered voice.

“You win,” Barton said, sounding almost impatient, as though Loki was being slow on the uptake—“Game over, moving on, what’s next?”

“I win,” Loki said again, throat dry. “What do I—what do you mean?”

What was this? He’d come here so full of fury—why was he asking Barton to show him the way now? Had he really sunk that low—was he really that pathetic?

“Come on,” Clint grinned, and that cocky grin was enough for Loki’s desire to rise despite everything—he was conditioned as well, trained as well, damn it—“You did hear me talking to that mirror, right?”

He turned to look at the sun—Loki hadn’t even noticed it was rising.

“I was so lost,” Clint murmured, “when I got here yesterday. I asked them if I could come home. But—this isn’t home.” He turned to Loki. “Not anymore.”

Or so he said. But the Widow—but Stark—

“Your friends,” Loki began, but Clint cut him off.

“There’s nothing left to say; they saw all of me. I did everything I could; I reached out as far as I could. Now, it’s up to them.”
No, Loki didn’t understand, or maybe he refused to understand, just like he’d wanted to refuse Thor’s kindness only a day ago. So Barton pitied him at last and set things clear. “Sir,” he said. “Remember the end of my training?”

The Mad Hours. Oh—Loki could still taste his blood on his teeth. Barton had been his, then, body and soul. “I certainly do,” he breathed.

“Remember what you told me that morning?”

He remembered Clint telling him he didn’t love him. He remembered telling him Loki could force him to do it.

“You win,” Clint said simply.

And all Loki could think was, _NO_.

His last attempt to deceive himself, maybe—or to contain the raw _want_ building up inside him ever since he’d let Barton go. Only two days, and he was starving. Clint was feeling it. He was responding. He opened his mouth to say something.

Loki did not allow it.

He stepped forward and gripped his hair so _hard_ he almost tore it off, and he crushed his mouth on Barton’s, shoved him back against the edge and _devoured_ him, kissing him hard, as violently as it could be done, pressing Barton’s back into the sharp concrete edge, and pushing him above the void beneath until he was the only thing keeping his slave from falling to his death; and he kissed him hard again, bit his tongue and choked him until he felt Barton struggle against him and moan as though he was starved too, as though he’d waited for this, as though he wanted this as bad as Loki.

And Loki could not stand it. All his doubts—his lack of faith—his lack of conviction—it all culminated in a last attempt to crush him down. “I _win_,” he spat, sour and poisoned and sneering, everything he hated about himself—his worst traits—echoing in his voice, “You just expect me to believe you? You think I will be satisfied with having my victory handed over to me?”

And he was absolutely able to do this—to refuse everything he’d ever wanted out of damn pride. This was maybe his greatest flaw. But of course, Barton saw through him, Barton knew exactly what to say. “Take it, then,” he said, breathless, pupils absolutely _blown_, “Claim it. Show me you won.”

Loki was tempted to let him go—to let him plummet to his death. Kill him—kill him; and kill all his doubts with him.

But there was a challenge in Barton’s voice Loki couldn’t ignore. He briskly shoved Barton on his knees at his feet, then teleported them both into the coldness of his house. And then—the second the silence of stone enveloped them—Barton melted on the spot; all tension left his body, as though he’d waited—yearned—as though this place was the one he called home.

Loki stared at him, breathless. He really couldn’t think—his mind was a spiral of white noise, and he just needed to hurt something—to tear something apart so he could gather himself together.

“Strip,” he let out, and Barton had never been so efficient before when it came to bare himself. He unbuckled something from his thigh, and when Loki saw what it was, his entire self flamed with need. A _knife_.

Loki picked it up, hypnotized by the gleaming edge, then looked at Barton. The archer looked genuinely hopeful—almost too eager. He wanted Loki. He really wanted Loki. This was not an
illusion—he was not brainwashed—he had been given a choice, a last choice.

And he’d chosen the knife.

Loki could barely breathe. He suddenly gripped Barton’s hair again and dragged him to the bedpost, not caring that he couldn’t stand or even crawl. He tied him with his hands above his head so as to expose his back. It looked like a blank canvas for Loki to write the final page of his book of doubts. The brand mark was still there. It was so old—and yet, it had always been true to itself. Barton was Loki’s property. He was branded with his name.

Loki jerked Barton’s head back and put the tip on the blade against his throat. Barton closed his eyes. Loki knew he could kill him—he was allowed to; Barton wouldn’t complain.

*Shall we test that?*

“I win,” Loki sneered, and he pushed the knife into Barton’s throat.

Clint didn’t stiffen—didn’t even flinch.

He just went *extremely* still, and exhaled slowly, calmly. Loki kept the knife inside his neck—he’d missed the jugular by a quarter of an inch. Barton was so *calm*, even as his warm blood trickled down the blade. Did he really understand? Was he really giving his *life* away? Or had he known that Loki wouldn’t do it?

“Almost,” Loki said, in a very low voice. “Maybe one day, Barton.”

Barton swallowed, and Loki noticed he’d tugged at his bonds so hard they’d dug into his skin. Not so indifferent after all.

“Death,” Barton said, hoarsely. “Death is boring.”

Yes. This was precisely Loki’s conclusion from the Mad Hours—to kill him, and then what? Nothing left but a dead body which would rot in a few days. Nothing left of Clint Barton; and Loki loved Clint Barton. How could he ever kill him?

“You are right,” he said, with a faint laugh.

He *twisted* Barton’s hair and tore a cry out of him. “Then let’s have *fun*.”

He removed the blade, then dug the tip of the knife at the base of Clint’s nape and sliced him all the way down his spine.

Barton’s scream was perfect. It rang in the room, an expression of pure unadulterated agony as he tugged at his bonds and writhed in a mad attempt to escape the pain. Still fighting it—this was one of the reasons Loki loved him. Never breaking, so there would always be something to break.

Loki sat behind him and got to work. He traced another line, parallel to the first, and this was the path Loki had followed—from Hel to Midgard to Asgard again, from the chasm to the stars. Clint choked out another perfect sound, a halting whine which sounded like a sob—only too violent to ever be one; as though his agony had been jerked out of him in an uncontrollable burst of noise.

“Shh,” Loki grinned, kissing his cheek. “You are supposed to be liking this, Barton.”

And there would be much more to like *very* soon. Barton already looked like he was on the verge of breaking. He was trying to hold back his pain, shaking with spasms, with aborted sobs—and when
Loki cut him again. Barton beautifully gave in to the pain once more, not trying to hide his utter agony and his panicking helplessness.

Yes, Barton carried their tree. From Hel to Earth to Asgard, and from there—any path could be taken; so Loki drew the branches, one after the other, carefully slicing them into the flesh, delighted by the brightness of Clint’s blood and by his helpless, frantic whimpers.

“Can you see?” he murmured, drawing more and more branches. “Can you feel it? Tell me what it is.” He dug the point it and twisted, eliciting a desperate struggling and choking sobs. “What is it?” he insisted, fierce.

“A—a tree,” Barton gasped. “A tree!”

He was naked, and panicked, and in so much pain, and yet he had focused enough to answer Loki’s question—yes; Loki liked him broken; Loki liked him owned. And Barton was doomed. He would always, always be Loki’s property, marked in any possible way, and defeated body and soul.

He was strong, yes; he was extremely strong. And Loki did not even have to be stronger. He only had to be good at what he was doing. He was allowed to fail in other ways; Barton would forgive him. He would never leave, simply because he had no choice. He would always be there.

“It needs leaves,” Loki whispered. “Are you ready?”

Barton did a tremendous effort to calm his sobs. “Yeah,” he gasped. “Yes, sir. Hit me.”

Loki realized, suddenly, how selfish he’d been—sending Barton away because of his own doubts and fears, instead of sorting it all out with him. Barton had been so scared—so scared that he was tremendously relieved to be hurt again. Anything, as long as he was back.

For this, Loki turned Clint’s head and gave him a kiss—a soft, passionate kiss, to thank him. When Loki pulled back, Clint sucked his fingers, with small whimpers, eager to please. Loki received it with a quiet, regal pleasure.

He pressed his forehead against Clint’s neck. Clint jumped when Loki’s hair brushed the raw cuts in his back. “Do you know how they call me now?” Loki murmured. “The Falconer.”

He kissed Clint’s neck. Then he said, “This is going to hurt,” and he dug the knife in, drawing small, perfect leaves at the end of a branch. Clint tensed violently, but breathed deeply and evenly.

“Alright?” Loki asked, curious.

Clint laughed, a small, shaky sound. “Yeah,” he said, “go on, sir, please, go—” and then Loki cut him again, twisting the tip of the knife in small circles with artistic movements of his wrist to draw a dozen, two dozen, three dozen more leaves, and Clint tried to contain his scream as he writhed in his bonds.

“Scream,” Loki said.

He was about to draw the most important. He wanted to hear his slave suffer through it. “Scream for me.”

And he cut out his own figure in Barton’s lower back. Barton screamed for him indeed, gasping and sobbing as the very image of his master was marked into his flesh forever. He was in so much pain, and Loki needed so much to see him hurting, that he tugged on the neural link and let Barton’s beautiful agony bloom into his own nerves as he cut out the other figure in his right shoulder blade—
a tiny hawk on the higher branch. Barton was whining endlessly and crying with pain, but his breathing, however halting, was very deep, and he was not trembling only with agony. He was enduring it for his master, in an effort to be good, and to sate the hunger of his owner.

The design was done. Loki unstrapped Barton’s wrists from the bedpost, then unceremoniously threw him on his stomach on the mattress, before unbuckling his belt. When he understood what he was about to do, Barton squirmed weakly on the already bloodied sheets, and flinched bodily when Loki’s hands grabbed his ass to part the cheeks.

“Please,” he implored. “I can’t—it’s too much—I can’t.”

Loki almost laughed. He knew Barton so well by now. Always testing, pushing. How many times had he begged with his mouth for Loki to stop, and begged with his eyes for Loki to carry on? This was their final trial, and Loki would be merciless. As it befitted them both.

He was very, very hard, too—had grown fully erect during the torture. Barton weakly thrashed again when he felt the head of Loki’s cock lining up. “Please, sir.”

“Please?” Loki smirked.

He pushed in. Oh, Barton was fighting it—clenching so tight with pain and fear—all the better. Loki pushed in another inches. “Please?” he challenged again.

He slowly pushed in, opened him, took him and the archer buckled in his hold and cried out, a long, hoarse moan that ended up in an inarticulate sound of pure pleasure. The bright red of his blood was wonderful on his back, and Loki started thrusting more relentlessly, holding down Barton’s convulsing body to lick the blood off the tiny figure of the hawk.

“Please,” Barton moaned, in a veiled, hoarse voice, “please, please, please—ah—yes!”

And—yes—Loki gave it to him.

* *

“Hey,” Barton breathed, hours later. “You win.”

Loki smiled, eyes still closed.

“Yes?” he asked.

Clint pressed against him.

“Yes.”

Loki took a deep breath, then slipped out of Barton’s hold and rolled on the side. He groped in the sheets for a minute, then found what he was looking for.

He lied back down next to Clint, brushed his face, then kissed him hard. Clint sank into it, exhausted and warm.

“I need you to do something for me,” Loki murmured when they parted.
He rolled on his back, hair spilling on the pillows, then tugged Clint on top of him. The archer awkwardly straddled him, breathing deep through the pain still flaming on his back, and looking very puzzled to find himself on top.

His eyes got even wider when Loki slipped the knife into his hand.

“Sir?” he said under his breath.

Loki grinned at him, arching a little to expose his chest. “Yes,” he said, bracing into the pillows. He had never been so certain of what he wanted.

Clint didn’t ask twice. He licked his lips, then put the tip of the blade on Loki’s chest, and drew a straight, bright line all the way up to his collarbone. Loki took a deep, fluttering breath, and exhaled as his hands clenched around the pillows. The pain was icy and burning and perfect.

“Again,” he ordered in a clear voice.

While Barton busied himself with a second line, Loki smeared the blood rolling down his chest from the first cut and looked at his red fingers. He gave them to Clint, who sucked on them without a missing beat. Loki still had the taste of the archer’s blood in the back of his own throat.

The blade dug in again, and Loki took a sharp, sudden breath, clutching at the sheets. The grey eyes locked with his.

“Am I hurting you, sir?” Barton asked, cutting yet another line.

“Yes,” Loki exhaled, eyes unfocused. He swallowed, then added, “I think I see, now. How you could like it.”

“It’s not the pain I like, sir,” Barton said quietly.

No, of course not. It wasn’t what Loki liked either. It was the fact that they could give it to each other, the fact that they could hurt and be hurt without harming and be harmed—the fact that their bond could turn a horrific ordeal into a show of trust and love.

Now this, this was magic.

Barton cut Loki again; Loki grabbed his wrist, making him freeze for a second, and made him go deeper. He blocked his breath and managed not to make a sound, but Gods, it hurt. So much. It was delightful. He wrapped his other hand behind Barton’s head, and made him lean forward; Clint obediently licked the blood rolling down his chest, and Loki watched him, heavy-lidded.

“Mmh,” Loki drawled, his vision hazier and hazier. “Mine—forever.”

When Barton straightened up, mouth and teeth smeared with red, blood still dripping from the tiny wound in his throat, Loki exhaled, chest heaving with pain, covered in sweat, then smiled at him. “Maybe,” he said, “maybe this time I won’t forget.”

“You won’t forget, sir,” Barton said with certitude.

Their hands wrapped together around the handle of the knife, fingers lacing in an intricate pattern. The blade slowly turned—who was doing it?—until the tip was above Barton’s heart. It pushed, drew a line, just enough to break the skin, and blood dripped down to mingle with Loki’s, very red against the whiteness of his butchered chest. Barton leaned down again and they kissed, hot and
breathless, then rolled into the sheets, in each other’s blood and sweat. When they parted, Loki felt
drunk, lost in pain and pleasure, dazzled as if by a tremendous light.

“To think,” he breathed, “of what we once were.”

Chapter End Notes

You can, if you’d like, consider this an ending.

However, this fic will go further than its twin. Expect about ten chapters more. There’ll
be a bit of plot to tie up all the loose ends—but mostly, I intend to write all the brutal,
cruel, violent, twisted porn which didn’t fit in the forty chapters before.
“There it is,” Barton said.

He crouched down and picked up the small, red gem which rolled in his palm.

When he looked up at Loki, the wind of Alfheim ruffled his hair, and the tall, green grass danced all around his dark, leather-clad figure.

“I can’t believe it just fell there and nobody found it,” he went on, coming back to Loki.

“Yes,” Loki sighed dreamily. “For once, we were lucky.”

“You gonna keep it?”

Barton gave him the gem; Loki stared at it for a second, then shook his head, smiling. “No, not this time. It will be safer in Idunn’s vaults.”

Barton raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t we both banned from her house?”

“We are,” Loki grinned. “But maybe she can make an exception this time.”

The wind whistled around them again. Loki could feel the ruby thrum in his palm.

“You know nothing about magic,” he told Barton. “Don’t you?”

“Nothing more than what you taught me.”

Loki tilted his head on the side. “And what have I taught you?”

“That you just gotta make the universe listen.”

“Does it listen to you?”

Barton shrugged. “I can’t believe it does. But when we were falling—since I guess that’s why you’re asking—it wasn’t about me. It was about you. I was just the vessel. That’s how I did it.”


“Nothing,” Loki said, still smiling. “Sometimes I can’t help but wonder at your very existence.”

Barton blinked rapidly. He glanced down, then away.
“Uh, wow, sir,” he said. “That was almost cheesy.”

“Cheesy,” Loki said under his breath.

He stepped closer and wrapped a tender hand behind Barton’s neck. His other hand sneaked down— and gripped his crotch, tight. Barton stilled and took a deep breath. Loki tugged him closer.

“You will regret cheesy,” he said, very low.

Barton glanced at him, with that mix of tension and arousal he always had; then he closed his eyes when Loki crushed their mouths together. Loki kissed him, long and deep, standing there in the windy fields of Alfheim. Eventually, he let go of him, and grinned.

“Let’s go.”


They were already banished, so Loki didn’t bother with the Bifrost—he teleported Barton and himself in front of Idunn’s gates. Night had fallen over her Realm as ever, and the tame gardens, so unlike the wild jungle on the other side of the manor, whispered under the breeze. Fireflies blinked between the branches.

Barton opened his mouth to say something, but Loki cut him off. “Behave.”

Barton instantly straightened up and fell silent. As Loki walked inside, the archer followed one step behind, mute and obedient. That was when Loki knew how well he’d trained him—when, for all his snarky comments and general cockiness, Barton obeyed without a word when Loki had a certain tone of voice.

It was strange, walking along the narrow path leading to the manor with Barton a silent shadow by his side. The wounds he’d inflicted on Loki’s chest were not even fully healed yet—Loki felt like letting them scar. Maybe not all of them, but at least one cut, to remember.

When they stepped inside the house, Loki felt strangely nostalgic. This place was nothing like home, and he had only visited it twice, but he felt strongly linked to it. As soon as they crossed the threshold, Loki stopped. He glanced at Barton, then down; the archer obeyed without a sound, kneeling by his side, with his eyes downcast. Loki exhaled silently, then waited.

They stayed there for a little less than three hours. Loki sometimes shifted his stance from one foot to the other, but that was it; as for Barton, he wasn’t moving, wasn’t looking up, wasn’t showing any sign of impatience or incomprehension. Tacking into the neural link, Loki found him very serene.

Sometimes he couldn’t pin-point the moments when Barton would fall into his submissive mindset, but he was pleasantly surprised each time. He wanted to reward him in some way, but he couldn’t move, either; and although he was in no way submissive, he waited, without a word.

Eventually, a dry, rough voice said, “You’ve got some nerve.”

Loki looked up; Idunn was at the top of one of the marble flight of stairs descending from the treasure vault. He smiled. “My lady,” he said. “What a genuine pleasure.”

Her black eyes glared daggers at him. She was ageless as ever, looking like a bird of prey—an
angry, fierce bird of prey. Her eyes swiped over Barton’s kneeling form, then back up as Loki.

“What do you want?” she said.

“Nothing more than return what’s rightfully yours,” Loki said elegantly. “I believe it was stolen.”

He opened his palm to present her the ruby.

Idunn’s eyes widened; and then she laughed, dry and short. “Really,” she said. “You are the most amusing creature I’ve met in a thousand years, boy.”

Loki grinned. “I try.”

“More importantly,” she said, going down the stairs to casually pluck the gem from his hand. “How did you manage to feed one of my apples to a Midgardian? He is Midgardian,” she added.

“He is,” Loki approved. “I have my ways.”

Idunn seized Barton’s chin and made him look up; it was quite rude of her to act in this way without asking Loki’s permission first, but she was a rude woman, and he wasn’t about to protest. Barton glanced at him without a word, and Loki suddenly realized the archer was absolutely terrified.

It’s fine, he told him through the link.

Barton swallowed painfully, but relaxed by a fraction. Idunn inspected him without a word and didn’t try talking to him; Loki guessed she considered Barton as little more than a fetus—who knew how old this woman was, while Barton hadn’t even reached fifty years.

“Hmm,” she said. “Must have been a piece of work.”

She released him. Barton took a silent breath, his eyes a little too bright; Loki realized this was the first time he’d been treated according to his status by an outsider. The thought aroused him a little.

“Now, if you’re done lying,” Idunn snapped. “You can come back in a few hundred years.”

Loki grinned at her. “Thank you,” he said, “for your great leniency.”

She had already turned away. Loki grinned all the more, then spun on his heels and sauntered out of the manor, giddy with his success—he’d retrieved Idunn’s hospitality. He guessed many extenuating circumstances had helped with that, but still; it was no small feat.

Barton had followed, of course; as they crossed the gardens, Loki noticed the archer still looked pretty shaken. Grinning, he gripped the O-ring of his collar and brought him close. “Was that humiliating?” he murmured.

Barton didn’t answer.

“This is what you are here,” Loki breathed. “Property.”

He tugged him closer. “Furniture.”

Barton shivered; it was enough for Loki’s cock to twitch in his pants.

“I’d take you right now,” he whispered, “but we are still on Idunn’s domain.”

He released him and turned away again. “Come now.”
When he saw Thor on the other side of the gates, Loki’s first impulse was to be irritated; but then he remembered, with mild surprise, that they had reconciled. Somewhat.

“Brother,” Thor said, a bit hesitant.

Loki gave him a thin smile. “Brother,” he answered, and when Thor smiled back, he felt it had been worth it, no matter how much anger and resentment he still harbored towards them all. Thor glanced at Barton, but said nothing, and Loki was kind enough not to check what Barton’s reaction had been.

“So,” Loki said. “Why are you here? Has Odin woken up?”

“No, he has not. Our mother sent me—you stole away so quickly last time.”

Loki pursed his lips, then looked away.

“Thor,” he said, low. “It can never be like before.”

Thor swallowed, then nodded. “I know,” he said. “But—just for tonight.”

Loki sighed, and Norns, he was too sentimental but—one night, just one night. “Very well,” he said. “Your funeral.”

As it turned out, tonight was a banquet night. It felt strange that the court should rejoice in the absence of its king, but rumor had it he would soon wake up, and Asgardians were always prompt to celebrate. Perhaps today was a holiday; Loki did not remember and, frankly, did not care.

To be completely honest, he was just curious to see the reaction of the court. Half-way to the dining room, Thor was called away on royal duty, and Loki was left alone in the hallways—under the constant watch of the guards. He gave them a derisive wave.

“Alright,” he said, turning away. “Let us go change.”

“Change?” Clint asked.

This was the first thing he’d said since they’d left Idunn’s gardens.

“Yes,” Loki said, turning to him. “According to protocol.”

Clint quirked a smile at him. “Does this mean you’ll be wearing your helmet?”

Loki grinned. “No,” he said. “I find it quite cumbersome, these days.”

Truth be told, it reminded Loki of Manhattan, and he didn’t want to risk triggering this memory in Barton’s mind.
“And… what will I wear?” Barton asked, uncertain. “If I’m allowed to ask, sir.”

“Hmm,” Loki said as they stepped inside his old rooms. “Why don’t you try asking the real questions?”

He suddenly slammed Barton against the wall and grabbed his collar again.

“You want to know,” he breathed, two inches from his face, “whether you will be bound and muzzled in public. Stripped naked, perhaps.” He pulled on the collar. “Whipped before we go, to decorate your back and ass. Put on a leash for me to walk you around like a dog—on all fours, why not.”

Barton’s breath hitched, and he hardened a little against Loki’s thigh.

“You would hate this,” Loki purred. “And yet you couldn’t keep from being hard. For all the court to see.”

Barton was obscenely hard right now, as a matter of fact. Loki slowly rubbed his stiff length through his pants, grinning.

“Now, I can be generous,” he said. “I’ll spare you the humiliation.”

He unlaced Barton’s pants and got on his knees in front of him. Barton froze and kept very still, staring at the ceiling with baited breath.

Loki smirked, then invoked a metal chastity ring and locked it tight around Barton’s cock and balls. The archer startled, then whined and scowled when Loki tightened the cage even more, clasping rings all the way up Barton’s length and locking them in place to press his hard cock against his stomach. Getting back up on his feet, he laced Barton’s pants shut again with a smug smile.

“You—” Barton began, panting in pain, but he cut himself off.

“Yes?” Loki said. “Finish that thought.”

Barton winced again.

“It’s an order,” Loki grinned.

“You…” Barton panted. “You asshole.”

Loki’s sadistic smile widened. “Well now,” he said. “This calls for punishment. I believe you’re going to sleep in something else than a bed, tonight.”

He tilted his head as if to kiss Barton’s cheek. “You may spend the meal trying to guess what,” he whispered in his ear.

Barton shuddered, and bit his lip to hold in more insults as his erection strained even more in the metal cage. Loki licked his cheek with the tip of his tongue, then stepped back and changed his own clothes—he actually stayed in his usual armor, except that the green parts turned blue.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and was surprised to find himself liking the results of his whim so much. The blue leather was only a shade darker than his eyes; and he really felt like he had changed, somehow. These new clothes fitted him. He knew, better than anyone, how a change in appearance could reflect a deeper transformation.

He turned back to Clint, and grinned. “Also,” he said, “I am afraid this is going to be a very
unpleasant night for you. You are a slave in this court—worth less than the roasted turkey on the table. But if I catch you expressing any kind of discomfort, you'll find yourself having a lot more of it to express.”

Barton took a deep breath. “Understood, sir.”

“Good,” Loki smiled.

Then he slapped him hard. Barton’s head jerked on the side, but all he did was briefly close his eyes under the force of the blow, and lick his lips before letting his shoulders relax again.

“Good,” Loki repeated, very pleased. “Now, let us go. The feast awaits.”

“Brother,” Thor welcomed him as he met them in the hallway. He glanced at Barton, then nodded. “Clint.”

Barton politely nodded back, without a word. His face was perfectly blank and devoid of emotions but, tacking into the neural link, Loki could feel the red pain pulsing in his crotch from the chastity cage. Oh, he should have locked it even more tightly.

“So,” Loki said as they walked. “Has the court been warned of my return?”

“They have,” Thor said. He hesitated, then added, “Sif and the Warriors Three were not pleased.”

“What a surprise,” Loki said.

They managed to keep their conversation civil enough as they walked, but truth was, all Loki wanted to do was tease Thor for not being a well-loved king—see how he liked it. But Loki was the reason Thor’s subjects were displeased with him, so he couldn’t decently give way to his silvertongue. It irritated him—as though Thor had made it so Loki couldn’t mock him. It was ridiculous, he knew, but his jealousy and anger were deep-rooted, and he should be happy enough they weren’t bursting out of him.

Then they reached the banquet room, and Frigga rose from her seat to welcome her youngest son. Loki was relieved to find he could enjoy her embrace without having to bury any more rancor. They talked for a little while, then he had to walk the whole length of the table to reach his seat, and many of the guests turned to him or tried not to; he was not surprised to find that most of them were equally interested in Barton. The Hawk, he heard in a whisper, but he couldn’t pin-point who had said that.

When he reached his seat and Barton silently knelt next to him, a ripple went through the crowd—never before had a defeated enemy knelt next to Loki’s chair; a few of them had knelt next to Hogun, Fandral, and Volstagg in the past; many had bowed in defeat in the golden shade of Thor. The lady Sif, too, had made a point in flaunting her victories; but even then, the reaction of the court hadn’t been so violent. People simply couldn’t stop staring at Barton; Loki heard whispers of Jotun and repulsive and must do something, and he tensed instinctively.

What’s their problem? Barton’s sullen, bored voice said in his ear.

Loki froze, then almost laughed. He hadn’t given Barton permission to use the link, but Barton was
very good at knowing when he was needed.

_They don’t think a Jotun should be entitled to sit among them; much less having the honor of keeping spoils of war_, he explained.

_I count as spoils of war?_ Barton asked, sounding a little surprised.

_You fall in that category. You weren’t raised as a slave; I had to break you._

_Oh. Well, you did, didn’t you? I don’t see what they’re whining about._

Loki smiled a little, then slipped his hand under the table to grab Barton’s hair and twist it cruelly. Barton clenched his jaw a little and fought not to have his head jerked back, but that was all.

_I will make you scream before the end of the meal_, Loki said.

Barton gave him a quick glance from his kneeling position. _Not a chance, sir._

Loki outright grinned and released him. At this very moment, Fandral sat heavily on Loki’s right, and Sif on his left.

Loki leaned back in his seat and sipped a bit of wine. “Why,” he mused, “do I suddenly feel like I am getting ambushed?”

“Perhaps you are getting perceptive at last,” Fandral said with a smile as charming as it was false.

Loki smiled back. “You’ve always known how to make me feel at home.” He drank a bit more wine. “Which is one of the reasons I cannot wait to leave this place.”

“Why did you even come?” Sif asked disdainfully.

Loki put on his most innocent mask. “Why, I was invited. Family matters.” He tilted his head on the side. “Are you still mad at me for trying to murder you? I saved your life from Thanos, a month ago. Does it not even things out?”

“Now, let’s be serious here,” Fandral said, rolling his eyes a little. “You did not save anyone’s life but yours.”

Barton stiffened so suddenly Fandral noticed it—he was kneeling at Loki’s right hand, and thus between his chair and Fandral’s.

Loki smirked a little. “Down,” he said mindlessly.

Barton relaxed again, but Loki could see the hands he’d crossed behind his back, and the fingers of his left hand were twitching. He wanted his bow. Loki was stupidly happy to see him so angry.

“And this,” Fandral sniffed. “A Midgardian slave, Loki? I did not think even you could sink so low.”

“Midgard’s a lovely Realm,” Loki said, slicing his meat.

“Midgard is off limits,” Sif hissed. “There is no honor in defeating such a helpless kind.”

Barton took a deep breath and said, _Okay, I don’t like her either._ Loki had to hide his smile.

“Are you really so petty that you would chain one of them down and call it a victory?” Fandral asked, raising an eyebrow.
Loki turned his head to look him in the eyes for the first time. “Yes,” he said calmly. “This is my victory.”

He looked at his plate again and tore off a piece of bread. “Honestly, I fail to see where the problem is. You have both claimed spoils of war in your time. The problem isn’t with me—it is with you, assuming that Midgardians are helpless animals I just had to squash under my foot. And if such is the case, why should I be blamed for attempting to rule them?”

He gave the bread and meat to Barton. “Eat,” he said calmly.

Barton ate out of Loki’s hand, briefly licking his palm as he did. When he was done, he mumbled, “Thank you, sir,” and fell silent again.

Looking up, Loki saw that Sif looked disgusted. “You are enjoying this,” she said. “Humbling creatures weaker than you. How very small you must feel, if such filthy scraps of power make you think better of yourself!”

“Sif,” Loki said lightly, “I did not come here to be insulted, and the only one debasing my slave here is you.” He grinned at her. “Do you not believe me? We can meet in the training room after dinner. I could show you a few things.”

Sif crossed her arms.

“Let’s make a bet,” Loki insisted. “You’ve always been fond of bets.”

Sif sneered. “Very well,” she said. “If I win, you will set your slave free and publicly acknowledge your cowardice.”

“And if I win,” Loki grinned, “you’ll give me Ichaival.”

Sif blinked at him. “Ichaival?” she repeated. “It’s not mine to give!”

“That’s unfortunate,” Loki said lightly.

She narrowed her eyes. “Is this how you’re backing out of this bet? By asking for an impossible prize?”

“I am glad to hear you assuming that I’d win,” Loki grinned.

Sif brutally got up. “All right—done,” she spat.

“Sif—” Fandral protested.

“I can promise him the damn moon as well,” she hissed, “since he will not win.”

She spun on her heels, and strode away. Fandral sighed, then got up to follow her. Before he went, he nodded gravely at Barton. “Fear not,” he told Barton. “You will soon be returned to your home.”

The two warriors got up and went back to their seats. Barton rolled his eyes. Wow, thank fuck blondie’s got my back.

They are genuinely trying to help you, Loki pointed out, amused.

They think I’m a goddamn muck worm.

Loki laughed a little. You can prove them wrong after dinner. For now…
He grabbed his silver fork and *stabbed* Barton in his left shoulder so suddenly that the archer couldn’t help crying out. Loki looked up to catch Sif’s gaze; she’d heard Barton yell and stared at him, pale with anger.

The demi-god raised his glass at her with a nasty smirk.

“Told you I would make you scream,” he said quietly, putting the bloodied fork back in place.

He waited till Barton had gotten his breath back, then gave him a bit of wine to drink.

It would be an interesting night.

Chapter End Notes

Aah, visiting the family.
The training room was exactly like Loki remembered it, large and long with a low ceiling. He'd fought here often, and more often refused to fight. Shields and spears were lining up against the wall; the glistening swords were put away in the racks, and the faint sound of bubbling water echoed off the marble walls—there was a spring in a corner for the warriors to refresh themselves. Loki was the one who'd put it there; he'd been mocked for it back then, but no one had removed it, even after he'd turned the water to vinegar one day as revenge.

He padded into the dark room; Barton followed silently. Loki thought for a while, then turned to him.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s put you at your ease.”

He snapped his fingers, removing the chastity cage instantaneously. Barton had hidden his suffering perfectly, but when the cage disappeared, he couldn’t hold back a silent sigh of relief.

“This you can thank Sif for,” Loki mocked.

Barton licked his lips, eyes shut. Then he looked up at Loki. “Permission to speak?”

This meant he was about to get personal. Loki raised an eyebrow. “Go ahead.”

“Do they know you’re fucking me? No—wait, not what I meant—is what we’re doing alright in their book?”

Loki smiled.

“Nothing we do will ever be ‘alright’,” he said. “Because you are a Midgardian—inferior in their book—and I am Jotun, the lowest of all.”

“They all know that?”

“Oh, Odin was delighted to tell them, I’m sure, after the reveal of my felony, three years ago.”

He turned away and padded across the room. “Furthermore, it has always been a fairly well-known fact that I do not care about my lovers’ gender. I got away with it as a prince, but now that I am an outcast, there is nothing left to preserve my reputation.” He turned to Barton. “So, yes, people will assume I am bedding you. And torturing you—and humiliating you for the sole purpose of my own sick enjoyment.” He grinned. “Unthinkable, isn’t it?”

Barton huffed a mirthless laugh through his nose. Loki stepped closer.
“I promised you an uncomfortable night,” he breathed. “And I will keep that promise. Has your imagination run wild?”

Barton didn’t answer, but his Adam apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. Obviously, it had.

“I could tie you with your arms up and your legs spread apart above a plate of red embers,” Loki murmured. “That’s what we do to war prisoners. At first they laugh and thank us for warming up their balls. They don’t realize right away how unbearable the heat is. But they slowly, gradually do.” He got closer. “And then they aren’t laughing anymore.”

Barton was decidedly looking away; Loki grinned, and caught his slave’s jaw, making him turn his head. “Would you like that?”

Barton kept averting his eyes. Loki gave him a little slap and caught his jaw again, forcing him to keep his head straight. “Look at me. Would you like that?”

“Let him go,” an icy voice said.

Loki looked up and grinned at Sif, without releasing Barton’s jaw. “Defendress of the weak,” he said. “How very timely.”

“I cannot believe such a serpent lived by our side for so many years,” Fandral growled, stepping inside the room behind her and throwing his coat on the bench.

“Is that all?” Loki said, ignoring him to glance around. “What have you done with Volstagg? And Hogun?”

“Hogun returned to Vanaheim,” Sif said, “and Volstagg is still eating. Truth be told, Fandral himself need not even be here.”

“But I wanted to watch,” Fandral smiled.

Loki finally let Barton go, brutally enough that Sif wrinkled her nose in distaste. She dropped her own coat, then shucked off her tunic, revealing a black cloth wrapped tight around her torso to hold her breasts in place. “Shirt off,” she told him. “We will fight loyally, without the aid of weapons or magic.”

“Agreed,” Loki said.

He sat on a bench and laced his hands, without undressing himself. Sif raised an eyebrow at him. “What are you waiting f—”

She cut herself off when Barton stepped in front of Loki and calmly took off his own shirt.

Sif blinked at him, then scoffed at Loki. “You cannot meant it.”

“Oh, but I do,” Loki told her, grinning. “Here you are assuming that Barton is defenseless. Well, see for yourself.”

“I can’t fight a Midgardian,” she snorted. “I would kill him.”

“I managed not to kill him,” Loki said quietly.

Sif glanced at Barton again and, this time, noticed the scars studding his torso. Barton stared back at her, but she didn’t realize how irritated he was, and it made Loki smile.
“What have you done to him?” Fandral said in a low voice—he was in the other side of the room, and he could see Barton’s scarred back, and the faint marks left by the whippings.

“What, I trained him,” Loki said. “Slaves submit, or they are broken—this cannot possibly be news to you. And Barton happens to require severe and frequent discipline.”

“You sick, sad man,” Sif hissed.

“So will you fight him or not?” Loki asked, annoyed.

“No,” she said haughtily. “I will not beat up a defenseless pet for your enjoyment.”

“Hey, lady,” Barton said angrily. “Call me a defenseless pet again and I’ll be the one starting this fight.”

Sif gaped at him. Loki couldn’t help chuckling a little. Honestly, he’d thought Barton would snap at her much sooner.

“Yeah, surprise, it speaks,” Barton went on dryly. “Look, it’s nice of you to defend my honor and all, but that should include acknowledging my fucking presence. You can’t do one and not the other.”

Fandral snorted. “Are you sure you trained him, Loki?”

Barton gave him a venomous glare. “So now I’m not tamed enough for you, uh? Do me a favor and stop pretending you give two shits about me already. All you want is get back at Loki one way or the other.”

Loki was entertained to no end. This was even better than he’d imagined.

“That is not true,” Sif said, bristling. “We do intend to rescue you.”

“Rescue him, then,” Loki grinned.

They all turned to him. He gave her a mocking nod and added, “If he’ll let you.”

Sif snorted, then settled in a fighting stance in front of Barton. “You asked for this, idiotic creature,” she said.

Barton smirked dangerously. “Damn right I did.”

Loki stared in enthralment. He wasn’t entirely sure Barton could win this—Sif was over a thousand years old, after all, and particularly vicious in her fighting style; but Barton was clever, and strong, and well-trained. And she underestimated him.

Indeed, Sif gave a lazy blow—she still thought she was dealing with a breakable mortal. Barton had the decency to prove her wrong at once by dodging it and flipping her down onto the hard ground.

“That’s one,” he said, walking away to reposition himself.

Fandral didn’t seem able to close his mouth. Sif propped herself up on her elbows, wide-eyed. She glanced at Loki. “What have you done to him?” she asked, and she didn’t mean the same thing as Fandral did a minute ago.

Loki just smiled.
"Sif," Fandral said in a low voice. "This must be a trap of some sort."

Sif growled, then got back up. She stared at Barton with hard eyes; he glanced back, tense, but very calm. None of them intended to make this last; Sif wasn’t here to entertain Loki, and Clint had no interest in dragging this out. True fights, Loki had found, often lasted less than a minute anyway. It was the case this time; Sif jabbed at Barton who ducked and pushed on his hands to spring up and catch Sif’s throat between his thighs; he locked his legs and almost broke her neck as their tangled bodies heavily fell back down on the floor. Sif struggled wildly and grabbed Barton’s wrist.


Barton’s nostrils flared in pain, but he didn’t move; when Sif broke his wrist, he clenched his teeth and didn’t make a sound. And he didn’t release his hold. Sif struggled all the harder, but there was nowhere to go and eventually, she slapped the floor in submission.

He uncrossed his legs, slowly breathing through the pain of his snapped wrist.

“Could have been cleaner, Barton,” Loki said in a low voice.

“Yes, sir,” he breathed. “Apologies, sir.”

Loki was actually delightfully surprised—Barton hadn’t fought like himself; he’d fought like Natasha Romanov. It was immensely clever—he’d guessed, or maybe known from Thor’s stories, that Sif struggled to impose herself as a woman in a male fighters’ world, and would expect a male adversary to fight like any of them. Clint had fought like a woman—a fighter used to be underestimated—and now he’d won.

Sif looked like she’d realized it, too. She sat up, never looking away from him when she wouldn’t even cross his gaze before.

“Why would you do this,” she asked, bewildered. “I could have set you free.”

“You can’t free me,” Barton said dryly. “Nobody can.”

He got up. “Look—thanks, really. But I don’t need your help.”

Fandral moved on his bench and Barton instantly snapped at him. Then he smiled. “I still got one wrist left,” he said nonchalantly. “You wanna go too?”

Fandral swiftly got up, then looked at Loki, as if expecting him to give Barton the order. Loki was delighted to see him so wary—so afraid. Barton looked quite eerie in his dark clothes, standing alone, with a black bruise slowly darkening on his broken wrist, and a dangerous look in his storm-grey eyes.

“This is a spell,” Fandral murmured. “You made him into your weapon.”

Barton laughed at him. “Dude, I know more about that magic than you do.” He tilted his head on the side. “So, you trying to free me too, or what?”

“No,” Fandral said stiffly. “You made your point.”

Barton took a step forward. “Are you sure? ‘Cause I could—”

“Barton,” Loki said under his breath.

Barton instantly forgot then both; he crossed the room and quietly sank to his knees next to Loki.
Fandral let out a disbelieving exclamation. “This is absurd.”

He couldn’t understand. He looked at Loki, at Barton, then at Loki again. Loki could almost hear him think. He simply couldn’t conceive how such a strong, worthy warrior could be enslaved—or why would anyone agree to suffer at Loki’s hand.

Frankly, Loki didn’t even blame him—it had taken him a long time to understand.

He got up, then gripped Barton’s hair and jerked his head back. His slave tensed, but said nothing. Loki coldly looked down at him, then up again at Sif and Fandral, who looked appalled at Clint’s lack of reaction. They knew he could fight back. Why didn’t he?


He brutally released him, and smirked. “Something you were obviously unable to achieve.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Dearest Sif, I believe I’ve won our bet.”

She paled, then flushed. “Ichaival is not mine to give—and you know it.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at her. “Then I shall tell Thor—our king—that you challenged one of his guests to a foolish bet that could have resulted in the death of his brother-in-arms. Will he still like you then, I wonder.”

Sif turned very red. “You little—”

“But that will not even matter,” Loki cut off, “since you agreed to the bet, and are therefore bound by honor. Breaking that vow would be enough to lose your reputation as a warrior. Of course, Odin would overlook it were he awake; but sadly, that is not the case.”

Loki grinned at her. She took a deep breath, nostrils flaring, then walked across the room and brutally opened one of the great wooden chests. She pulled out what looked like a bundle of cloth, and threw it to Loki, who received it in his arms and smiled again. “You have my thanks.”

“You have my curses,” she spat at him. “And you,” she told Barton, “since you are bowing to this wicked monster, I can only assume you are wicked yourself.”

“Sore loser,” Barton muttered, without looking at her or moving from his prostrated position.

Loki chuckled. Sif looked absolutely outraged; she clenched her fists and briskly walked away, followed by a very stunned Fandral.

“What a joke,” Barton said under his breath. “These guys really used to be your friends?”

“No,” Loki said, still grinning, “they were Thor’s.”

He turned to Barton.

“Let me see your wrist.”

Clint looked up at him, surprised. “I thought I was in for a rough night, sir,” he said as he complied.

“You are,” Loki said with a slow smirk, “but this injury is not a part of it.”

He let warm magic seep from his pale fingers into the skin, and the pulsing pain, which he could feel through the neural link, vanished like a bad dream.
“Thank you, sir,” Barton murmured.

His eyes fell upon Ichaival under the cloth, but he didn’t ask. Loki grinned, and didn’t tell. He let go of his wrist. “I am tired,” he said. “And I think I have taken my pick as to your punishment. Let’s go back to my rooms.”

Barton looked nervous as they stepped inside Loki’s chambers. The place was not exactly quite like Loki’s memories—seeing as he had been thought dead twice, not to mention his betrayal of the crown and the reveal of his shameful nature, the rooms had slowly begun to be emptied of the books he’d liked and the clothes he’d owned. None of it mattered; he hadn’t worn regular clothes in ages, and the books he cared most about were secure in his secret house. Truth be told, he’d stopped living in these rooms long before his first death.

He still liked the idea of taking the last great step of Barton’s enslavement in the very place where he’d lost his virginity. A way of coming full circle. Barton was probably unaware of Loki's final intent, and it was just as well.

“Clothes off,” the demi-god ordered.

While Barton bared himself, Loki invoked the device he’d crafted in his mind during the meal. It was a coffin—long and shining black on the dining table, padded inside with soft leather. It was not airtight, but it certainly looked like it was. A human silhouette, like a stick figure, was outlined at the bottom with copper ribbons, which formed round plates where his thighs, feet, back and neck would rest.

Barton turned very pale. Loki saw him tense, and said calmly, “Take one step back and I’ll make you regret it.”

Barton froze, swallowing painfully. “Good,” Loki said with a dark smile, slowly tapping his foot on the floor. “Now climb in. Quickly, or you’ll get a whipping first.”

Barton slowly, reluctantly approached the dining table, and climbed on it, warily eyeing the copper ribbons shining at the bottom of the padded leather box; he gingerly brushed them with his fingers, then swallowed again and lay down inside the coffin. It was slightly too small and the padded leather already hugged him all over; after Loki closed the lid, it would press on his chest and throat and mouth, forcing him to breathe through his nose. The lid was also decorated with copper disks, which would press over his groin and nipples, a cold reminder.

“Till dawn, Barton,” Loki grinned. “Good night.”

And he slowly pressed the lid shut, then locked it firmly into place. He closed his eyes and tacked into the neural link. Barton could not move an inch. The padded insides of the coffin made it feel as though it was molded after his body, hugging his arms, his legs, his torso. He was breathing fast, panicked, heart hammering in his chest, which was for the best even though he didn’t know it yet, and the copper plates were unbearably cold against his cock, nipples, neck, back, thighs, and soles of his feet. He struggled against the lid, moaned a little, but the leather pressed his lips shut and weighed on his chest, forcing him to take shallow breaths through his nose only. He could hear them loud in his own ears. It was so dark; his eyes were wide open, and—Loki pulled out, satisfied. He
undressed himself, knocked on the lid to signal Barton that he was going to sleep, and turned off the lights.

He closed his eyes and snuggled in his comfortable bed, enjoying the freedom of his own limbs even more after those constricting, suffocating feelings he’d gotten from Barton. He tacked into the neural link again, just so he could hear Barton’s heartbeat. Still drumming.

Loki waited patiently.

Eventually, Barton began to calm down; and the more he calmed down, the easier he breathed, and the more his heart rate slowed down. Loki waited for it to fall under the fatal threshold. Barton, he’d found, had a slow heart which beat about seventy times per minute—and could fall down to a dramatic forty when he was deep down the calm waters of his submission. Loki had fixed the threshold at seventy-five beats per minute.

Barton calmed down, and Loki counted. Eighty. Seventy-nine. Seventy-eight. Seventy-seven, seventy-six…

Seventy-five.

Electricity jolted through the copper plates and burst through Barton’s body, and he couldn’t writhe and couldn’t scream but Norns, did he try, while his heart rate skyrocketed again. Loki sighed in pleasure, then rolled on the side in his bed, ecstatic.

And then he started counting again. Barton was at a hundred and twenty—he stayed there for almost an entire minute, and then, slowly, ninety, eighty, and the fatal countdown again, except this time the bar had been raised to seventy-six beats per minute—it jumped up every time Barton triggered the electric shock. Loki wondered how much time it would take for him to figure it out.

Eighty. Seventy-eight.

Seventy-six. Barton convulsed as much as he could, and uselessly fought the unyielding walls trapping him in their suffocating embrace as the current shocked him in his thighs and groin and neck and nipples and feet and lower back.

Loki grinned. Threshold upped to seventy-seven.

This was going to be a good night.

Barton didn’t know it, but the Asgardian days were very long at this time of the year, and Sif’s bet had taken them late into the night; he was to stay in the coffin till dawn, but till dawn meant he would only spend a grand total of two hours in his padded cage.

If Loki felt like it, he could leave him there longer, but after only forty minutes, it became obvious that he would have to release his slave as soon as the sun crossed the horizon.

Barton had upped the threshold to eighty-eight beats per minutes by then; sometimes his heart rate only sort of startled—going up then right back down, due to, well, the shock of it—so in a series of short jolts, the threshold could be raised by half a dozen beats or so at once. Barton had understood
that the electricity was linked to his heart rate, and tried his best to maintain it, but the threshold was simply too high by now, and his perverse will to give in, the feeling of his own helplessness—it all kept pulling his heart rate down until the torture started again. He was crying—had been for some time, Loki could feel it; and he could hear his muffled whines in the silence of the room. After an hour and a half, Barton’s panic and pain, which made his heart restlessly pound against his ribs, allowed him a brief respite from the shocks; but the threshold was stuck to a perfect hundred beats per minute, and Barton couldn’t help triggering it again, a hundred and one, and again, a hundred and two, and again, a hundred and three.

For the last five minutes, he was shocked almost continuously, howling against the leather muffling him, sobbing and suffocating in the claustrophobic lock of the coffin.

Loki left him in Hel for an extra minute, then sat up and stretched. He walked to the coffin, cut the electricity, and unlocked the lid.

Barton gasped for air and started breathing in erratic, chaotic sobs, tears flowing down his face, almost literally bathed in his sweat—a detail which meant the current had been running over his entire body towards the end.

“Shh,” Loki soothed, rubbing his forehead. “It’s alright. It’s over.”

He reached down and scooped him up and out of the coffin, very slowly. Barton clung to him, unable to speak, shuddering so violently it almost looked he was still convulsing from the shocks. Loki lay him down on the bed, then settled down behind and wrapped him in his arms. He noticed then that the drops rolling down Barton’s skin were sticky and white on his stomach and thighs—he’d come about five times judging by the quantity of it.

Loki smiled a little, then produced a thick, soft towel and ran it all over his body to dry it, over the bruises left by the copper circles, over the red patches of skin which had chafed against the padded leather of the coffin, and over Barton’s tear-streaked face. By the time he was done, Barton’s breath had almost worryingly slowed down; his eyes were ajar and glassy, and he was slumped against Loki, limp and motionless. His body, which had been forced into a strung-up state during two hours, was now powering down, and Barton’s quietness was proportional to his earlier panic. He looked almost dead, but when Loki tried to get up just so he could fetch the cover he’d flung to the ground a minute earlier, Barton whimpered miserably and clung at his sleeve to stop him. Loki smiled again, and just invoked a plump quilt—Barton loved quilts, which amused him—to cover them both; he wrapped Barton in his arms again and held him close, carding his hand through his hair, letting him bury his face in the crook of Loki’s neck.

“I am here,” the demi-god murmured. “You are fine. It’s over, Barton.”

Barton just held him tighter and heaved a deep sigh, lacing their legs together underneath the quilt. He was still shivering, but Loki rubbed his neck and jaw, pressing his lips on his forehead, until he calmed down. When he started breathing a bit more evenly, Loki took a flask of spring water on the nightstand, and made him drink; Barton was highly dehydrated and drank almost the entire flask with obvious gratitude.

“More?” Loki murmured, and when Barton shook his head, the demi-god finished the water himself, then settled under the quilt with him and closed his eyes.

There was a long, long silence. The frail light of dawn flickered through the window; Loki distractedly let the coffin vanish in a puff of golden dust. He hadn’t come, himself, but the brutal torture he’d put Barton through had sated him in ways no orgasm ever could.
After an hour, Loki craned his neck and kissed Barton, a soft, close-mouthed kiss.

“Now,” he said in a breath.

He hesitated one last second, then asked, “Tell me about the circus.”

Barton stopped breathing. For a second, he looked like he would refuse to answer.

“Barton, I’ll just put you back in the coffin,” Loki said gently. “You know I will.”

Barton shivered violently at that and clung at Loki’s tunic. “No—please—”


Clint nestled even further in his arms.

“I was the Swordsman’s apprentice,” he mumbled in a defeated voice. “I discovered he and Barney were stealing money. They took me out of town and beat me up—left me for dead.”

Hence the injuries he’d described during the first interrogation. Loki waited. Barton had withheld this story ever since they’d met; there must be something more to it. Loki didn’t ask, he just waited indeed, and Barton hid his face into his chest. “Barney Barton,” he said, “he’s my big brother.”

Loki blinked—in a terribly clear pang of memory, like a rush of cold wind, he remembered Thor slamming Mjölnir against his throat, remembered his promise to kill him as a favor.

He looked at Barton, a bit wide-eyed. “You have a brother,” he murmured, a little shocked. Then he understood. “And you were afraid to tell me.”

“I’m so sorry, sir,” Barton murmured, but Loki held him tight, tight enough to cut his breath a little. Barton had been about to tense; the lock of Loki’s arms made him tranquil again.

“Did you ever meet him again after that time?” Loki asked.

“Yes, sir,” Barton muttered. “He’d come to me. Ask me for help. Money. For a place to sleep, sometimes. He never had it easy.”

Loki looked at him, although Barton kept his eyes resolutely closed. “And you gave him all those things, didn’t you? Every time.”

“He’s my brother,” Barton said, very low.

*He’s the scum of your realm,* Loki guessed. *But you are so generous.* Kind enough to let himself be prey to his loveless sibling—for what else is there to do, when you are not good enough to be loved even by your own brother? Oh, Loki knew the feeling, and now he knew why Barton had wanted to hide it.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Barton repeated again. “Please think nothing of it. Those are my problems.”

Loki gripped his hair and jerked his head back, making him gasp. “*Your* problems, Barton?”

He huffed through his nose. “Nothing’s yours. It’s all mine. *You* are mine—even single part and aspect of you.”

Loki knew there still were bits and pieces of his old independence stuck into him, like nails in the flesh—and all they did was harm him; Barton truly wasn’t made to be free, because he had no sense
of measure when it came to selflessness. He would have cut himself into pieces so everyone could have their share. He needed someone to be selfish for him—he needed to be focused on a single target, like the archer he was; and this was precisely Loki’s role. To be his target. Loki Laufeyson had no qualms being an egoist, and he could be selfish for the two of them. He would endorse the sin of taking Barton entirely for himself; and hence he would relieve the archer of his guilt, by forcing him to serve Loki and Loki only, instead of wearing himself down trying to please the entire world.

“You think you can still keep things to yourself,” Loki scoffed. “Your official training might be over, but you still have much to learn. I’ll gut you open, Barton,” he tightened his hold, “I’ll gut you like a fish, I’ll expose your darkest corners to the light, and I’ll take everything for myself. You don’t get to decide what to hide—what to keep to yourself. Oh, it will take a long time—years—to tear you apart completely, but you’ve got nowhere to run, have you?”

Barton panted a little. Loki kissed him hard. “I’ll work you over,” he promised against his skin. “I broke you already; now I’ll shatter you.”

He smiled. “And you’ll give me everything,” he said, “since what you won’t give, I’ll take anyway. It’s all mine, Barton.” He lowered his voice. “You shall not deal with anything on your own—ever again.”

“Yes sir,” Barton exhaled, out of breath again. He clung to Loki and murmured, “I—you—” he sounded like he was on the verge of tears. “Thank you, sir.”

For that, Loki kissed him again.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. ^^
“LOKI!”

The door slammed open so violently a picture on the wall fell down.

Loki opened one eye. Thor was standing in the doorway, blue energy sizzling around him, fists clenched, tall and formidable in his godly wrath. Loki closed his eye.

“And a good morning to you, too,” he mumbled, sinking down the bed.

“Wha’ s’ happening, sir?” Barton slurred against him.

“Nothing,” Loki said. “Go back to sleep.”

“Loki—” Thor took a deep breath, then slammed the wall in his frustration. Loki grinned a little under the covers—his brother wasn’t quite used to Barton being his sex slave yet, even though he honorably tried. Understandable, and very funny. “Loki, send your slave to the kitchens,” Thor said, pinching his nose and speaking fast. “We must talk.”

“Can’t,” Loki said sleepily.

He invoked black cuffs under the quilt, shackling his wrist to Barton’s, and lifted their hands up to show him. “We are manacled together and I lost the key.”

“Loki, this is not a damn game!”

“Only because you’re not playing,” Loki yawned, letting their hands fall back on the pillow. “Have you no pity? We’ll probably have to stay shackled together for months. The complications! The embarrassment! The—”

Mjölnir whizzed past their heads and crashed into the wall just above them. Loki rolled his eyes, then poked his head out from under the quilt. “Alright, what is it?”

“What do you think?” Thor said, pointing indignantly at Ichaival wrapped in its cloth on a chair.

Oh. Loki had almost forgotten about it. He grinned, and let his head fall back. “Well, it is right there. Take it.”

“You know damn well that I can’t!”

So Barton’s victory against Sif counted as fair game. Ichaival was rightfully Loki’s, and the spells of Odin forbade Thor to touch it, just like they forbade Loki to lift Mjölnir.
“Well, that’s unfortunate,” Loki said, yawning again. “But what can you do? I won the bet.”

“Barton won the bet.”

“Barton’s my slave,” Loki said a bit dryly. “Do people go around complaining that Mjölnir wins your battles for you? Besides, the bet was about him.”

“Loki, this is Odin’s most beloved treasure. I know you resent him, but I did not invite you here for you to humiliate him.”

“Then you shouldn’t have invited me at all.”

Barton was wide awake now. Loki sighed, then made the cuffs vanish and got up, letting the covers fall off. He dressed himself, but left Barton nude, exposing the dark bruises of the coffin electrodes; Loki grinned a little as Thor looked away.

“Get out,” Thor huffed under his breath. “This was a mistake. Leave, this instant.”

Loki took Ichaival in his arms, and smiled at Thor yet again. “Consider it a fair warning, brother. I have wallowed in self-pity since I was born; I do intend to have a bit of fun as of now.”

Thor glared daggers at him—so much that Loki’s hair cracked with electricity—but there was truly nothing he could do. He had let Loki in; and Loki had won his bet.


He grabbed Barton’s arm and leaped through to his house.

* *

“Was your entire youth like this?” Barton asked as they got home.

“Pretty much,” Loki smiled, in an excellent mood.

He tossed him Ichaival. “Take it. It’s for you.”

Barton blinked at him, but said nothing and slowly knelt down to unwrap the cloth.

He was speechless for a while.

“Sir,” he breathed. “Is this…”

“This is Odin’s bow,” Loki said. “The string is made of silver, the quiver never runs out of arrows, and each arrow can split into ten more when it is shot. You’ll have to train quite a lot to get used to it, I believe.”

Ichaival was a magnificent, sleek, dark, wooden bow, almost as tall as Barton himself. Runes were carved in the gleaming wood Clint looked up at him. Loki realized, then, that he’d never really made a present to anyone ever before—not like this.

Judging by Barton’s face, he wasn’t used to receive any, either.
He swallowed thickly. “Thank you.” Then he smiled a little. “So you got me that enchanted quiver after all, uh.”

Loki grinned at him. “Come. Let us try it.”

He took Barton to the magic room, and let the door fade away behind them. The grey room shone dully around them. Barton looked down at the bow, then aimed into nothingness, and shot.

A silver arrow dashed through the air—and split into ten arrows, which each split into ten more; and the silver shards ricocheted around them like sunlight shattering on the surface of a restless lake, never hitting them, a solid rain whistling past them until it died down and stopped, every single last arrow stuck in the wall to form a perfectly geometrical grid.

Barton lowered Ichaival, eyes wide.

“Holy shit,” he said hoarsely.

He looked almost dizzy.

Loki smirked at him. “The wonders of the universe.”

“This is a god’s bow,” Barton said, shocked.

He turned to Loki. He was only realizing now the unimaginable price of this present. “And you’re giving it to me. To me.”

“In a few hundred years, you will probably marked down as the god of archers anyway,” Loki shrugged. Then he grinned. “And the god of slaves.”

“I’m not a god,” Barton murmured.

“Neither am I.”

Barton was left speechless at that; then he scoffed with laughter, and looked around. The arrows gleamed quietly around them. They started vanishing into smoke one by one.

“I think it is more than time you begin your magic training,” Loki went on. “I should have taught you long ago.”

Barton turned to him again. “So it can be taught? Even to me?”

“Anything can be taught.”

“But who taught you?”

Loki started remembering—Norns, no—but too late; the magic room had taken the well-known memory to blow it into shape. He sighed with irritation, then let it happen. Why the Hel not.

“Mother!” his younger self squeaked as he ran to Frigga. “I do not understand.”

Barton gaped at the dark-haired little boy; he glanced at Loki, then at the memory, then at Loki again. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Loki said stiffly, suddenly uncomfortable.

Barton smiled in the corner of his mouth. “How old were you?”
Loki shrugged. “I don’t remember. Seventy-something.”

Barton blinked at him. “Seventy-something.”

Loki snorted and said, “Just watch.”

“But Mother, this doesn’t mean anything,” the child kept on complaining.

“Trust it to be listening, Loki. It is here for you to take. Look.”

A blue flame flared bright in her palm, then vanished.

Loki’s younger self gaped at her hand. “How did you do that? I want to know how you did that!”

“Yup, that is you,” Clint grinned.

“I believed I could do it,” Frigga simply said.

“But Mother,” little Loki protested, “what if I believed I could destroy the world?”

Loki froze. He had forgotten about that part.

“Do you believe it?” she answered calmly. “Do you even know what the world is? Can you conceive it, Loki, can you understand it in its every details, throughout the Nine Realms and beyond?”

“No one can,” the child claimed.

“But can you see a flame?” Frigga murmured, bringing her son closer. “Can you feel it? It’s hot. It’s going to burn your fingertips if you’re too close…”

Loki let the memory fade away. Barton glanced at him. “So, your mother, uh.”

Loki sighed. “She is my mother,” he admitted quietly. “And she’s always showed me kindness when no one else would. Still—she knew what I was. She never told me.”

Barton said nothing. There was an awkward silence. And then—to Barton’s obvious astonishment—a memory of his own took shape in the magic room.

It was a cramped room with a tiny child huddled in a little bed, under a patched-up counterpane. A blond-haired woman hovered over him and leaned down to kiss his cheek. The image was blurry, too bright and too dark at the same time. The child was really small, and Loki recognized nothing of Clint in him. But obviously, this was him, and the woman was his mother—the memory triggered by Loki’s own.

“How old were you?” the demi-god asked, squinting.

“Sir,” Barton said too quickly. “Sir—please—sir—stop it, please, I don’t know what I did but I’m sorry—please!”

Loki glanced away from the memory in surprise, and saw that Barton was ghastly pale and shaking all over.

“Barton?” he said, worried. “I am not doing this—it’s you. Wish it away.”

“Me?” Barton said, still a bloodless white.
“Clint,” Loki said in a hard tone, “wish it away.”

The memory vanished.

Clint exhaled deeply. Loki frowned at him. He had never really asked Barton about his family. He’d thought his brother was the only shard left to extract.

 Obviously, he’d been wrong.

“Very well,” he said, low. “That’ll be our next interrogation, too.”

Barton spun towards him. “Sir—please—there’s no need. Please.”

“That is not your call to make,” Loki said coldly.

Barton looked like he was about to cry. “She died,” he gasped. “Alright? This just now was my last memory of her—the next day she—because of—”

He took a deep breath and plunged his face in his hands. He calmed down, then straightened up. “I don’t like talking about that stuff, sir,” he said stiffly.

“I can tell,” Loki said.

There was a silence.

“Please,” Barton mumbled again. “Let it go. Just—it’s not important.”

“Barton, tell me what I told you yesterday.”

Barton paled a little. “You… you told me you would gut me open.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Did I make it sound like it would be pleasant?”

Barton’s face fell. Loki invoked a metal stool and sat on it, joining his fingers. “A flame,” he said softly.

Clint startled. “What?”

“Give me a flame,” he said. “Go on.”

“I don’t…” Barton swallowed, taken short by this turn of events. “Sir, I don’t know how.”

Loki patiently explained him again. Barton tried his best, but he couldn’t do it.

Loki did it then—invoked a single flame dancing on the edge of his fingers. He stared at it, then said pensively, “Remind me—what is the punishment inflicted on the war prisoners in Asgard?”

Barton swallowed. “…Legs spread apart above a plate of embers.”

“Sounds fitting,” Loki said.

He shut off the flame, then calmly looked up. “Let’s go to the torture rooms.”

“Sir,” Clint began.

“Barton, I told you you’d end up giving me everything,” Loki said quietly. “I intend to take another step down that road. I’ll break you this time, like I did all the times before.”
Barton kept his lips tightly shut. Loki smiled a little. “Always putting up a fight.” He grabbed his neck and brutally pushed him forward. “Come now.”

Barton’s fists were clenching in the manacles holding his wrists up; he was nude, of course, his body already glistening with sweat. Loki had blindfolded him, but left his mouth free.

Barton’s legs were not restrained. He had to struggle to hold them wide apart enough for his inner thighs to stay away from the burning edges of the round copper brazier glowering under him. It could have been easy, had his feet touched the floor; but the chains were holding him just too high for that. At the beginning, he bit his lip, and bravely endured the heat slowly uncoiling under his groin, heating up his sensitive skin.

Then it started to be too hot.

His thighs were quivering with his efforts to keep them spread wide open; at times, he relented a little, and Loki could hear the low sizzle of his flesh connecting with the branding metal. Barton jerked back into place then, taut in his restraints, sweat rolling down his back and shoulders. His inner thighs were already marked with a dozen of parallel little brown burns.

Loki had a book on his lap and turned a page from time to time so Barton would hear it; but he wasn’t reading at all. He was watching.

Barton had more and more trouble keeping his legs apart after the first hour. But the torture of the smoldering embers was the worst. After a few more minutes, he began letting out little whines through gritted teeth, which spiked up every time he slipped and earned a new burn on his thighs. His balls and cock were not being burned—but it felt like it, because he was way too close from the fire, and Loki was careful to keep the heat just on the wrong side of unbearable.

Barton opened his mouth several times to beg for it to stop, but always thought twice and shut up. The last time he did it, Loki noticed that he’d managed to wriggle back a little so the brazier wouldn’t be exactly between his legs—making it easier for him to hold them apart.

Loki got up and walked to him with a fluid gait. He slapped him hard without any warning. Barton let out a choked sound which turned into a hiss when Loki gripped his hair.

“Try that again,” he breathed, “and I’ll drown you in the baths.”

With his foot, he pushed the pedestal so the round brazier would be exactly under Barton’s groin again. Barton started to shake; but he kept his jaws clenched, and still said nothing.

A line had been crossed, though. Barton kept squirming and wiggling, panting, whining pathetically at times under the constant torture of the heat and the added predicament of the burning edges of the brazier. He couldn’t stay still—his wrists were tightly locked in the manacles, and he wasn’t going anywhere; but Norns, did he move. His body was bathed in sweat now, his muscles glistening in the red light of the embers. He gasped, open-mouthed, then tensed in his chains, willed himself to take it, before making a mistake again and jerking at the sudden hiss of hot metal against his damaged flesh. Blisters were starting to form on his inner thighs, making him pant in pain.

He whined something which almost resembled a word, then dropped his head. Loki silently enjoyed
the hard lines of his bunching muscles, his rippling thighs, his fluttering abs, his glistening body stretched out and on display. He liked the sweat now trickling down Barton’s back and flat stomach. The burns and blisters on his inner thighs were beautiful, just like the flickering, red light bathing his body.

“Fuck,” Barton cried out at last, and his voice broke, “please—God, please, sir, I’m sorry. I’ll tell—I’ll you everything you want to know. Please.”

“Good,” Loki said.

He flipped a page. “You can start by spending another two hours here.”

“Two hours?” Barton panted.

“My mistake—I meant three,” Loki said.

Barton’s mouth snapped shut. Loki grinned, then got up. He felt himself pulse with that dark, vicious power which he loved most. He walked to Barton and caressed his jaw. “Barton, you give what I want you to give. You take what I want you to take. I thought we were clear on that.”

Before Clint could answer, Loki pushed a thick rubber ball gag in his mouth; he buckled the leather strap behind his head, tight, tight until Barton let out a muffled moan, nostrils fluttering.

“A true shame I have to remind you of those things,” Loki concluded. “The training never really ends, after all.” He ran a hand up his sweaty thigh, then pinched it over a blister; Barton jerked and let out little pleading sounds.

“Three hours, Barton,” Loki grinned.

He walked away, then sat back in his chair to enjoy the show.

*B*

Barton could not close his legs to protect his cock and balls from the unbearable heat, but it caused him so much pain that he tried anyway. The gag was making him drool, but Loki wasn’t about to wipe it off.

Barton broke long before the three hours were over; he started sobbing, and pleading, and then he wasn’t even pleading anymore, just trembling with pain and exertion. Loki got up, then, and softly brushed his slippery back, his tight ass, his clenched abs; at first, Barton leaned into his touch with a delirious hope, but when he understood that he wasn’t being freed, he sobbed all the harder. Loki just grinned a little and tasted the sweat on his skin; to know how deeply Loki was enjoying his suffering only made Barton break faster. He wanted to faint, to escape the torture in some way, but he was unable to actually go limp—he had to hold his thighs apart. He couldn’t do this anymore, he obviously couldn’t, but there was nothing else he could do. Loki kept touching him during the last hour of the torture, pinching him, slapping him, tormenting him as Barton suffered and jerked in his chains.

Eventually, the time was up; Loki removed the brazier and brutally let Barton fall on the floor. He let the gag unbuckle itself—Barton’s jaw must me unimaginably sore.
Loki grinned. “I was right about what I told Sif—*severe and frequent discipline*, Barton. This is the only way to handle you properly.”

He sat back on his chair, then tapped his foot. “Over here.”

Barton crawled to him, drained with agony. Loki grabbed his hair and tugged him between his thighs. Barton was still blindfolded, but he moaned anyway, knowing what was coming, before Loki’s cock pushed past his lips and sheathed itself in his throat.

Loki came extremely quickly—no wonder after such a build-up. Barton swallowed it all, of course, then he took a gasping breath, pushed his forehead against Loki’s thigh, and didn’t move.

They stayed like this for long minutes.

“Not the best of childhoods, was it,” the demi-god said in a low voice.

Barton shook his head. “No, sir.”

“I will not let it go,” Loki warned him. “But like I said yesterday, we have time. I will find your pace.”

Barton nodded.

Loki smiled a little. “You look exhausted.”

“Dunno how the war prisoners did it,” Barton mumbled.

“They didn’t,” Loki grinned. “None of them lasted more than fifteen minutes.”

Barton froze, then pushed his face into Loki’s thigh again, teeth gritted. Loki laughed under his breath, then said, “Come on—there is a cold bath waiting for you.”

*“What was your brother’s name?”*  
“Barney.”

Barton took a deep breath. He was heavily chained this time, and he’d spent nearly four hours getting ploughed by a fucking machine, until he almost passed out. He was limp and trembling with overstimulation, and yet, Loki could feel a steely reticence beneath the words he pushed past his quivering lips.

“What was your father’s name?”

“Harold.”

He was still drenched in sweat, but there had been no actual pain. Loki did not need to hurt him to take him apart. A good fucking always helped, though; and the thick chains immobilizing him were welcome as well.

“What was your mother’s name?”
Barton said nothing. Loki backhanded him so hard he split Barton’s lip in a jangle of chains and left him reeling.

“Barton,” he said in an even, warning tone. “Answer the question.”

Clint started shuddering. Loki knew, then, that he was thinking of what he’d look like to his family at the moment—chained down, naked, and enslaved. Forced to expose his bare body and bare soul. No parent ever intended that sort of future for their children.

“Edith,” Clint gasped, and his tears started rolling.

He knew they were far from being done. He wanted to get away. Loki wouldn’t let him.

He cupped his jaw and kissed him, tasting salt and blood.

“So tell me. What would your brother think of you right now?”

Barton gasped for air. He was already on the brink of panic. Loki tensed the chains holding him—Barton was kneeling with his ankles chained together, and his wrists shackled behind his back; additional chains were locked around his elbows and knees, and spreading them apart. A last one was clasped to his collar and retracting into the wall behind him. He wasn’t going anywhere.

Loki wrapped his arms around him, adding the lock of his own embrace to the cold embrace of the chains. Barton was still shaking and panting, holding back his tears; Loki kissed him, and they rolled down again.

“Answer the question,” Loki said, slowly tightening the grip of his fingers.

“He would—” Clint gasped. “He’d say I had it coming.”

“Hmm. And would he be right?”

Barton unconsciously tried to jerk away. Loki pinned him to the wall, chasing the air out of his lungs.

“Going somewhere?” he purred in his ear.

He tightened his grip even more, until he was almost breaking the bones and piercing the flesh with his nails. Barton let out a hiss through his clenched teeth, and stilled, breathing fast. Loki willed the chains to quarter him even more; he couldn’t move an inch, knees spread, head held back.

Loki kissed him and pushed his tongue in his split lip, tasting blood and living flesh. Barton whined frantically and Loki let him go, staying very close, licking his own lips with his bloodied tongue.

“Answer me.”

“I—” Barton panted. He was shuddering, his face clenched in a scowl. “I don’t know.”

Loki grabbed his throat. “I don’t have time for this nonsense,” he said. “Did you have this coming?”

“Maybe—fuck, maybe, yes,” Barton gasped. “I’ve—I’ve—I’ve always been like that, haven’t I? I was always going to end up like this.”

Only a few months ago, Loki would have never dared pushing Barton so far. This was not even
subspace at this point—this was a controlled drop. Barton’s words were just spilling out, chaotic and broken like sobs. “Made to be ruled—to be everyone’s bitch, it’s always been—with Barney, with Coulson, and everyone in between—always needed orders, someone to steer the car, to show me the way, even when it was the bad one, the worst one, fuck, yes, I had it coming…”

“What,” Loki said, “You always did everything Barney asked of you?”

“Yes, shit, yeah, he came to me so many times, he needed so much stuff, and I just had to help him—I had—I just—”

“He tried to kill you,” Loki reminded him. “Because you opposed him. When it mattered—you disobeyed him.”

Clint shut up.

“You are not weak, Barton. You submit to men deserving of submission—like Coulson; or you do what is right, what is kind—like helping out your brother, even though he is undeserving. You always know the right course of action. You always know what to ask and which orders to obey. This is why you were so valued as a weapon—as a soldier—all your life.”

He pressed flush against him. “This is why I value you. You are mine alone now, Clint Barton. Was this bound to happen?—no. You could have lived free. But I wanted you.” His lips brushed his ear. “And the rest does not matter anymore now. You’ll never get away. You are what I say you are.”

He licked his split lip, then bit it, making him jerk.

“Next question,” he breathed in his ear.

Loki spent the night with him afterwards.

He didn’t restrain Barton, but he curled around him and held him close; he had a feeling nightmares were on the way.

He was right.

Every time Barton woke up with a startle, Loki tightened his embrace, and kissed his forehead, and whispered to him that he was safe, he was okay, everything was taken care of, and there was nothing required of him but rest.

At the fifth or sixth nightmare, Clint started talking—the words gushed out of him like blood out of a wound; everything Loki hadn’t extracted during the torture earlier—he spoke of his mother, of the orphanage, of loneliness and anxiety, of the fear of not being good enough, of never fitting, and how he was so sorry to bother Loki with all that, sorry, sorry, sorry, and Loki held him closer than ever, until he was all done.

“No,” he whispered then. “You are what I say you are.”

And started telling him what he was, with slow, murmured words; and then with his hands, and with his mouth, until Clint could breathe free again.
This time, he slept soundly, for almost twelve hours straight. Loki didn’t sleep; but he didn’t let go, either.

★

“Hey, sir,” Barton said, nearly a month later.

They were in the library; Loki looked up from his book.

Clint had a small golden flame dancing in his palm. He smiled at Loki, eyes crinkling.

“I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Porn and feels, man.
It was almost funny to realize it, but the daily, domestic details of their life together hadn’t been given much thought. The first time Barton had expressed the wish to relieve himself, Loki had simply showed him the way to the small, slope-floored room inside which flowed the little stream which would carry all filth away. Loki had vaguely entertained the thought of torturing Barton in this way —making him drink and drink until his insides felt ready to burst, and denying him until he soiled himself; that resonated with a lot of his desires, but clashed with the general cleanliness of his manners. He preferred the purity of blood to the stench of urine, and he was pretty sure Barton wouldn’t have appreciated this kind of debasement either—not that he appreciated what he was subjected to on regular basis, either, but even humiliation comes in multiple shades and forms, of which they were both well aware.

Besides, Loki’s love of control amounted to the freedom of following his own whims and urges; it did not mean he was Hel-bent on managing every aspect of Barton’s daily life. As a matter of fact, this aspect of control left him slightly disdainful; surely, a master which kept such a tight leash on his slave must be wary of losing that control he struggled so hard to keep. As a result of that line of thought, Barton still didn’t have to ask permission to eat, or use the bathroom, or walk around in the house, unless Loki ordered him otherwise. He still had picked up a few mannerisms along the way, such as drawing Loki’s chair before his own, and the demi-god was all the more happier with it since he’d never explicitly ordered Barton to behave in this way—it had come to him naturally, just like the ‘sir’ constantly falling off his lips, albeit with a sly grin most of the time.

(When he was suffering on the rack, though, breathless and drenched in sweat as Loki made him take more and more and more, ‘sir’ turned into something sacred; a prayer to a god who took a nasty pleasure in delaying his answers. Loki loved the sound of that ‘sir’ then, the sharpness and shortness of the word, like a breath, like a moan; and he loved it even when Barton wasn’t in pain, because it reminded him that he owned this man, even during the casual times when an outside observer couldn’t have told the slave from the master.)

So—yes; Barton washed himself, and relieved himself, and shaved himself when he felt the need, and Loki left it to him most of the time.

Today, though, was different.

Loki liked kissing Barton hard in the mornings—hard enough to feel the stubble on his cheeks, the raspy, rough feeling of his skin. Barton made quick work of it every time—evidently, he’d learned to shave himself with a sharp knife long before Loki ripped him away from his homeworld. Loki had freed him from his night restraints, and Barton had picked up the blade to head towards the
bathroom, but then Loki had instinctively said, “No,” before he even realized what he planned to do.

Barton stopped and turned to him. “Sir?”

Loki was already grinning. He crooked his finger and said, “Come back here.”

Barton didn’t miss a beat and came back to the bed on which Loki was still sitting; he’d been left to sleep in the torture chambers that night, in nothing but his underwear. Loki decided even the underwear was too much.

“Get rid of that,” he said, “and give me the knife.”

Barton stiffened a little—oh, he knew what Loki could do with a knife. He still pushed down his black boxers—Loki liked the Midgardian feeling of it, and he knew how stupidly comforting proper, familiar underwear could feel; he made good use of that knowledge. When Barton handed him the knife, Loki smirked at him, then slowly got up until he could look down at him. Another silly thing he loved was how much taller than Barton he was. Nothing like the basics to assert one’s dominance.

“We’re going to need a bench,” he breathed.

The bench he created was cold metal and bolted into the floor; Loki made Barton straddle it, openly smiling at his shiver when his naked skin pressed into the ice cold steel. Loki chained his wrists together in front of him and locked the chain around the bench; then he straddled it as well to sit in front of him.

“I never had to shave,” he said pensively, studying the knife.

He’d always thought he was simply less hairy than Thor, but as it turned out, lack of body hair was another symptom of his Jotun nature. He guessed he should be thankful he had hair at all—which was one of the reasons he’d always been reluctant to cut his dark locks after the reveal of his true nature.

He looked up from the blade and grinned at Barton. “I’ll have to practice on you.”

He twirled the knife between his fingers, then caught Barton’s jaw in a tight grip, and made him raise his chin. Barton stayed very still, breathing evenly. Loki pressed the cold blade against his throat—and purposely let it slip. The resulting cut was hair-thin and just deep enough for one drop of blood to bud on the skin like crimson morning dew—and for Barton to start and pull on his chains with a loud clang.

Loki grinned at him. Barton had gotten better at hiding it, but he was still so nervous.

“My bad,” Loki told him. “I still have to get the hang of it.”

Barton gave him a look, but said nothing and took a deep breath, obviously more angry at himself than he was at Loki. The demi-god pressed the blade against his throat—and purposely let it slip. The resulting cut was hair-thin and just deep enough for one drop of blood to bud on the skin like crimson morning dew—and for Barton to start and pull on his chains with a loud clang.

Loki grinned at him. Barton had gotten better at hiding it, but he was still so nervous.

“My bad,” Loki told him. “I still have to get the hang of it.”

Barton gave him a look, but said nothing and took a deep breath, obviously more angry at himself than he was at Loki. The demi-god pressed the blade against his skin again.

“Sir,” Barton blurted, and then snapped his mouth shut—oh, he always talked too much for his own good. Loki gave a lenient smile. “Yes?”

Barton was reluctant, but he had no choice now. “You might want to use—shaving cream or something,” he said quickly.

Loki outright grinned. “Why, thank you, Barton. I had no idea. Even though I conjured up tremendous quantities of it for your regular use, I thought you just ate it. It was actually for your face!
How enlightening.”

Barton closed his eyes.

“No, no,” Loki urged, “this is fascinating. Tell me more. Is there anything else I should do beforehand?”

Loki could see Barton’s efforts not to squirm, and hear how he berated himself for saying anything in the first place, instead of letting him have his way. “Sir…”

“Tell me,” Loki snarled, almost crushing his jaw in a bruising grip.

Barton held very still. “You’d have to wash the skin first,” he uttered. “Or use hot towels or something.”

“Hm,” Loki said, tilting his head on the side as he narrowed his eyes. The knife was still pressed against Barton’s throat. “Interesting. And why go through all this trouble?”

“Otherwise it’d be…”

Barton shut up again. Loki pressed the blade into his skin. “Yes?”

“Irritating. You’d scrape me. You might cut me. It’d hurt and bleed.”

“It would hurt and bleed,” Loki repeated, grinning almost beatifically. “My, how unfortunate.”

He briskly jerked Barton’s head on the side, without removing the blade or letting go of his jaw. “Tough luck, Barton,” he breathed, his voice icy again. “You’re getting it dry.”

And then he got to work. The blade was extremely sharp, so sharp even Loki could not see its edge, and as a matter of fact, it was very effective even without any soap or cream. Even though it did scrape a little, the pain was so laughable in comparison to what Barton had endured before that they quickly fell into a more serene state of mind. For Loki, the game was all about feeling the pulse of Barton’s jugular under the blade, toying with the idea of letting the knife do its deadly job, and pushing the murderous urge away with a slow delight, until it came back again. For Barton, it was pretty much the same, albeit from the other end of the knife—knowing that he could die at the hands of his master, and trusting that he wouldn’t.

Eventually, it was done, and Loki let go of his jaw—he’d been a bit too rough in his grip, and fingers-shaped bruises were already starting to form along the bone. Loki caressed Barton’s smooth skin; the archer’s bound wrists raised a little, ready to be freed.

And then Loki grinned. “I am far from being done, Barton.”

He dropped his hand to grip his slave’s bare thigh and unkindly kneaded it. Barton was not a hairy man—as a matter of fact, his chest was entirely hairless—but Loki could still feel thin body hair under his sensitive fingertips.

Loki waited for Barton to realize where this was all heading; when he saw that dawning moment on his face, he grabbed his neck and kissed him hard, brutal and rough. Barton was already breathless when he was released. Loki unlocked the chain wrapped around the bench and holding his wrists down, and let it fly up to bolt itself in the ceiling; it retracted into the stone, and extended Barton’s arms up and above his head, exposing his armpits. Loki rubbed his thumb in the short hair there, and tugged at it a little.
Then he invoked a white piece of cloth.

“Hot towels, you said?” he repeated.

Barton’s eyes widened in realization just before Loki let the burning wet cloth fall on his naked thigh; the soaked towel stuck to the skin like a blood-thirsty leech and Barton clenched his teeth not to yell. When Loki inflicted the same treatment to his other thigh, though, he couldn’t help whining frantically, chains tensing like a whip over his head when he suddenly tugged at them. It was really too hot.

“Keep your feet flat on the ground,” Loki said dispassionately. “If I have to shackle your ankles as well, you’ll be spending the rest of the day in the cage.”

Barton moaned between his clenched teeth and did his best to stop the muscles in his thighs from quivering; but Loki changed the cloth almost instantly—they got colder very quickly—and the renewed, unbearable heat was enough for Barton’s breath to quicken and come out in short, gasping bursts. Loki prodded one of his erect nipples with the tip of the knife, then leaned forward and got to work on his armpits. This area was a lot trickier, but by tensing the skin and with a lot of patience, he scraped them hairless and smooth, albeit very red and tingling and burning—nothing comparable to the torture of the scalding pieces of cloth wrapped around Barton’s thighs, which Loki kept changing every minute or so. As a result, the whole process was excruciatingly slow.

When the towels were finally removed for good, Barton almost gasped in relief. Loki just grinned without a word, then put his cold hand on the crimson skin; the heat had left it very smooth already, and the sharp blade did wonders on it. Loki loved the feeling of a hairless skin under his fingers; he did Barton’s calves as well, without resorting to the hot cloth again, which was obviously a great relief to him.

“Very well,” Loki said. “Now.”

He poked Barton’s groin with the tip of the blade. “You will have to lie down for this one.”

He set the chains in motion, and Barton was slowly lowered down on his back on the cold bench, in an awkward position—his feet still flat on the ground, his arms still held up in the air. Loki leaned forward as if to kiss him, and locked a heavy metal collar around his neck, which he bolted into the bench. Barton tried to swallow in it, breathing fast.

Loki sat back again, then put a hand on the base of his dick, slowly rubbing his pelvis, scraping and pulling at the frizzly hair there. He would not need a hot towel for this part.

He would use one anyway.

When the burning cloth fell between his thighs—when Loki’s fingers adjusted it and unnecessarily, cruelly wrapped it around his cock, Barton screamed and bucked up, but he was pinned down into place by the steel collar. Loki patiently waited for him to surrender to the pain; it took quite some time, but eventually, Barton’s repressed thrashing and helpless squirming morphed into violent shudders and quiet, pitiful whines, as tears freely flowed down his face. Loki implacably maintained the burning cloth wrapped around his cock all that time. Barton had been at half-mast from the moment the humiliation had started, but plain torture always got him rock hard.

Loki removed the towel and got to work on his pubes, without forgetting his inner thighs, paying very specific attention to the area where his thigh met his groin. Luckily for him, Barton’s balls were hairless. Loki still poked and prodded and scraped them until he had Barton struggling not to close his legs. His breath had gotten very deep after the burning cloth had been removed; he’d started
shivering uncontrollably in his restraints, and squirming slowly on the bench, hips bucking up at times, in a—maybe unconscious—desire for Loki to get closer, to get his hands on him rather than this soulless blade.

Loki unbolted the steel collar—but left it in place—and pulled the chains up, allowing Barton to sit up again, then let the chains down so his slave could rest his wrists on the bench in front of him. Loki braced an arm around him and softly rubbed Clint’s back while he pushed his face into his master’s tunic and took deep, shaky breaths.

Loki carded his fingers through his short hair. Then he whispered in his ear: “For the last part, you’ll have to be on your stomach.”

Barton stiffened; then he understood, and Loki held him tighter, the soothing one-armed hug turning into an implacable grip. “Shh,” he said playfully. “I won’t use more than five towels.”

Barton tensed even more at that, then just slumped when he realized he couldn’t, wouldn’t escape it. He let himself be manhandled into the new position and shackled again without putting up any resistance. He was indeed on his stomach now, helplessly shuddering against the metal—Loki was careful to keep the bench ice cold; he loved using his magic in those petty ways—with his wrists cuffed to the metal legs on each side of his head; his hard cock was uncomfortably pressed against the cold steel, and his knees touched the ground on each side of the bench. Said bench was slightly wider than his pelvis, which forced him to spread his thighs to straddle it, exposing his ass and yes, he did have hair there. Loki pushed his fingers inside the crack, circling the tight rim. Then he invoked a new towel.

Barton screamed at once when the burning cloth was pressed in the cleft. Loki had made it extra hot, but he was delighted at the unexpected violence of his reaction. Barton couldn’t help trying to get away, but there was nowhere to go—Loki’s free hand, the one which wasn’t pressing the burning towel against his rim, was holding his hip in a punishing grip, slamming him back down on the bench every time he pushed on his knees to buck up. Barton had grown strong, but Loki was still stronger. He waited for the cloth to get cold, then used the other four indeed, with slow, cruel delight—and then an extra one, because he couldn’t get tired of Barton’s shouting and keening, and he loved being false to his word for the little things.

Finally, he got to work with the knife, and to his surprise, it was this part which finally got Barton to sob—the humiliation was too great; he sobbed bitterly, angrily, with his face pressed into the metal, as Loki disposed of his body as he pleased, slow and meticulous, to the point of using tweezers at the end.

When Barton was finally hairless, Loki kept his hips pinned on the bench and fucked him, rough and dry. By the time he was done, Barton was limp in his shackles, still crying softly, disheveled and impossibly turned on, almost rubbing on the cold metal slick with precome.

“Sir,” he gasped, his whole body resonating with pain and pleasure, clenching with heat and humiliation. “Please, sir—can I come, sir—please.”

Slightly sweating and panting with post-orgasmic ecstasy, Loki leaned forward and undid his shackles with a flick of his fingers; then he got up from the bench and slapped his thigh.

“No,” he said nonchalantly. “Now get dressed.”
Chapter End Notes

Hehe. Thanks for reading!
Truth be told, Loki hated magic.

More precisely, he hated magic countering his own. He hated those places which had been broken and torn into listening to only one soul instead of leaving their cosmic energy at anyone’s disposal. Countries—realms—should not be enslaved; but almost all of them were.

Such as Jotunheim, which sometimes bent even to the unconscious desires of the Jotnar. Or Alfheim, which catered to the every need of the Elves. Other places—the void beneath the rainbow; the dusty lands of Svartalfheim—were lands of negative power, each in their own way. Loki was helpless in the first one, but he fed on the second one. Asgard, in comparison, was fairly lax; and the laxest of all was Midgard, since humans strove to understand the universe in different ways.

But today, Loki was not in Alfheim, or Asgard, or Midgard. Even the abyss would have been better—for the abyss ignored equally all of its supplicants. But no, Loki was in Vanaheim, and the magic here was bound to the will of the Vanir, and the Vanir knew how to use it. Vanaheim’s magic was very ancient, and very mean, strong forces rampant in the earth and water.

They had been in the mountains for three days.

They should not have stayed that long. Loki had gotten careless.

He understood exactly how trapped they were when Barton brought back logs of wood for the night and Loki could not set them on fire. The first thing he’d ever made was a flame; flames never failed to appear in his palm even when all rest failed.

“Barton,” Loki said—and then his eyes and ears stopped working, and he found himself trapped inside his own body.

He had no idea for how long he’d struggled to break free of the Vanir’s hold. Hours? Days? Or mere minutes? He twisted in mind and snarled in thought, pushing at the invisible cage weighing down on him. He pushed, bent, forced, gathered his own strength of mind, and decided he was free, but it didn’t work, and his anger increased tenfold and he declared he was free—and he was free.
The night had fallen, and the stars twinkled bright above the dark mountains. Not a fire in sight. Loki was lying face-down right next to their unlit fire. They had trapped him and left him there.

But they’d taken Barton.

As soon as he realized it, the world came into sharp focus before Loki’s eyes. He pushed on his arms, and sat up cross-legged. He exhaled deeply, then closed his eyes and tacked into the neural link.

Nothing.

But he expected it. The very fabric of space was against him, like a plastic envelope cutting him from the energy he knew to be thrumming all around him. He clenched his jaw and exhaled deeply. He took his anger—and the bone-deep, pounding fear, and the empty Barton-shaped hole in the fabric of the world next to him—and twisted them into something sharp, something mean and jagged, like bitten nails; and with it he scratched at the barrier blocking his magic, he gnawed and nibbled and bore a tiny hole into the transparent glaze. He felt a flicker. He pushed more, more, more, the Vanir were strong, but Loki was the unmovable force and the unstoppable object. He pushed and gnawed and pierced, and went through for a split second.

Barton!

He felt something weak flicker in return, like something bound and muzzled trying to be heard past layers and layers of plastic.

Alive. His shoulders slumped, and he took a deep, deep breath. Then he fought to regain the ground he’d already lost. He didn’t waste time and energy trying to communicate with him—locating him was the main issue at the moment. A few miles north—and then he lost contact again. It would be easier as he got closer.

He tried to reach his house—he should have been able to; the house, like the ruby, was a catalyst of belief, a power stock; but it was separated from him as well. This wasn’t just ordinary Vanir using Vanheim for themselves. There was a strong sorcerer in the group.

Loki let the magic push him back again, let it think it’d won; he tightened his grip on his spear, got up, and started running.

Loki jumped above gurgling mountain streams, skidded down rocky slopes and forced his way through the low bushes stuffed between the trunks like dust under a bed. The thorns pulled at his clothes and the rocks rolled under his feet, and he thanked the gods he could see in the dark; still, the moon was obscured by thick clouds and the forest was dark and deep. He did not care; he walked on, and ran whenever he could, climbing walls of rocks, heaving himself up, running down the slope, then up again. He kept prodding at the magic barrier as he ran—it distracted him from his dark thoughts, if nothing else.

But then, the barrier gave unexpectedly, and he wished it hadn’t.

Fire reflecting against the walls of the cave.
He is not restrained, but hands gently hold him down in position—pressing on his neck and back, turning his face against the stone. Another hand is holding his own in a firm grip. Metal pliers close around the nail of his thumb, and slowly rip it off.

He struggles not to scream as the flesh shreds. There is nausea heaving in the back of his throat. Unnatural heat running in his veins. As though the ground is swaying. He has no energy left—he is drugged, heavily drugged, but his mind does not falter—they want something of him; they left him completely aware. Only trapped inside his heavy flesh. He is limp and helpless in the hands which patiently press him down again, patiently find the nail of his forefinger, and close the pliers once more.

The barrier pushed Loki back down so brutally it felt like a punch to the face. He swallowed the memory of nausea, and started running again, stumbling at first, but then running faster, with steady, swift strides—running north.

The visions didn’t relent. Loki was right—as he got closer, fighting the sorcerer got easier, but that only meant he knew exactly what they were doing to Barton.

Their questions were short and precise. They were excellent wizards indeed. But they couldn’t travel across the Nine Realms the way Loki did. They wanted to know how he did it. They thought his slave might know. Barton wasn’t talking, so they worked him over, almost mechanically so, until he was ready to talk. Simple and efficient.

He has no nails left. They extend his right hand on the stone. They push a blade against his thumb, and slowly sever it in half, along the bone. Then they do it again, and again, cutting it into thin stripes still attached to the hand. When it is absolutely unrecognizable as a finger, when all is left is the gnawed bone, they cut it off.

Then they start again with the forefinger.

Loki wished he really was a giant so he could step over the remaining mountain, because he knew by now that the Vanir sorcerers were in a cave on the other side. So close, and yet. As he was, he could only run. He tried not to think and focus on running.

Eventually, he climbed a last rock, crossed a last river, and he found himself on a flat round stone gleaming blue and silver under the moonlight—the clouds had parted at last, and the whole mountain was bathed in light.

A sturdy woman was sitting on a rock at the entrance of the cave; she had the marks of the Vanir wizards on her cheeks. Her magic was strong, thrumming everywhere around them. The country listened to her. She had probably felt Loki coming.

“Laufeyson,” she said coldly. “As you—”

Loki rammed his spear through her breast and almost cut her torso in half.

She looked at him with a shocked expression, almost offended, then fell off her rock onto the round stone. She had not expected this, but she could survive the wound—she was gifted, a very old thing, and Loki himself had survived worse in much worse conditions. But this woman—she would not get
the opportunity. Before she could breathe her own blood, he cut her head off—then split her skull and squashed her brain under his boot. He instantly felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Vanaheim’s attention was away, and his house and power at arm’s reach again.

He turned away and walked into the cave.

Seven or eight Vanir men and women were sitting there, chatting in low voices, smoking their pipes, indifferent to the slave being tortured into madness in a corner of the cave. The drug must have worn off by now, but Barton had simply suffered too much—he couldn’t fight back; there was no need to even hold him down anymore. His right hand was mutilated and fingerless. The torturer had started working on his left.

A tall man rose as Loki came in. He said nothing; silence slowly settled among the little group as all eyes settled on the demi-god. Loki’s boots were dripping with blood; what he’d done was obvious enough.

“She was the daughter of our king,” the man said with stunned pain. “My sister.”

Loki turned his serene gaze on him.

* 

It could have been done more swiftly—more cleanly—than what Loki did. And he knew Barton to be watching from start to finish, but still, it was not enough for him to be less messy. He had spent too much time running in the dark feeling powerless as Barton’s agony echoed through his own body. He was physically unable to make it quick. At first, the Vanir tried to fight back; and then they tried to beg. Each proved equally useless.

Loki kept the torturer for last.

Eventually, the last echoes of the screams died off, and the mountains were silent again.

Loki slowly walked across the cave, stepping over the mutilated corpses, and to Barton; he crouched in front of him, then gently took his mutilated hand in his. Blood magic was the most powerful of all—just like when he’d slaughtered the bilgesnipe to preserve Barton’s life, Loki used the energies he’d just claimed for himself, as sacrifices. Pulsing with death and blood, vibrating with murder, he had no problems healing the miserable heap of flesh—straightening the squashed bones, reinventing fingers, smoothing it all and slowly putting the hand back down on the stone. Barton’s other hand was half-finished; Loki took it and healed it as well.

Every time after Loki tortured Clint Barton—every time after he broke him in mind and spirit, after he made him grovel and beg, after he stripped him clean of all dignity—he would hold him in his arms and reassure him, for Barton was vulnerable and helpless then, and it was pleasure for Loki to comfort him, just like it had been pleasure to hurt him; two aspects of the same implacable form of control.

This time, he sat back on his heels and said in a low voice, “Can you stand?”

Barton swallowed, then exhaled a breath as though he’d held it for hours. “Yeah,” he said, raspy. He swallowed again. “Yes, sir.”
“Good,” Loki murmured.

He got up, himself, and waited for Barton to stand on his feet. The archer wobbled a little.

“I—” he said hoarsely. “I didn’t tell them anything.”

“I don’t care,” Loki said brutally.

He took a deep breath, then rubbed his nose. “I don’t care,” he repeated softly. “I know that already.” He closed his eyes. “Next time,” he said in a pained voice, for if they lived as long as they planned to, there would be a next time—“if they threaten to kill you, you have permission to tell them everything you know.”

Vanir had honor. They would not have tortured a free man. Loki had made Barton into a slave, brought him into his world, so he was partially responsible—more than partially responsible: he held all responsibility when it came to Barton. He should have known.

Yes, this was his fault, but he had learned his lessons, though—lessons from the void and everything after—and he tried not to feel too guilty, as it wouldn’t be useful to any of them. He knew he had to trust Barton’s loyalty—had to trust it would remain unchanged, even after what he’d been through—even after what he’d seen of Loki today.

“Sir,” Barton said.

He looked a little worried. “Thank you for coming for me.”

Loki let out a mirthless, wan laugh. He turned away.

“Come,” he said. “I’ve had enough of Vanaheim.”

※

It was an intense relief to return to the safe stone walls of the house. Loki was soaked in blood, so much he made a squelching sound when he walked. He idly wondered whether he’d really just murdered the prince and princess of Vanaheim. He could not bring himself to care.

“How are your hands?” he asked.

Barton flexed his fingers. “Good as new, sir.”

Loki frowned a little. He did not like Barton’s tone—so nonchalant and a little sarcastic. He always sounded like that, but he should have not sounded as usual—not on such an unusual day. Faking it? But he knew better than hide his suffering from Loki by now.

Unless things had really changed between them after today.

Loki firmly repressed his rising paranoia. No—he would rest, he would eat, and after he’d regained his strength, they would talk this out.

“I’m going to take a bath,” he said, then he stopped.

He hesitated, then added, “You will go after me.”
That night, Loki did not shackle Barton to the bedposts as he usually did. The archer stared helplessly at him, but said nothing.

Loki did not climb into bed with him; he sat next to it and absently flipped through a thick old book, until Barton fell asleep.

Then Loki let his book fall and buried his face in his hands, and started taking deep, fluttering breaths.

A week passed, then another.

Barton trained in the magic room as usual, and his aim was as perfect as usual. Loki watched him from afar, but always answered distantly to his occasional questions or remarks. Many times during those fourteen days, Loki felt—knew—that Barton wanted him; but he did not touch him, neither to hurt him nor pleasure him.

Loki had not tied him to the bed ever since that day in Vanaheim. He hadn’t slept much, either.

It could have gone on forever and ever, really, if not for Barton coming to Loki one day with a knife in one hand, and asking him permission to hurt himself.

Loki stared at him.

“Why?” he asked eventually.

“I miss it,” Barton answered without a beat.

Loki closed his eyes. He rubbed his forehead, for several minutes. Barton waited, without asking again, without even demanding an answer. He was Loki’s obedient slave, and if Loki dismissed him, he would go; and he would find another way to confront him later. Loki smiled a little when he realized that.

He sighed, deeply. “I wish you hadn’t seen me like that,” he said.
“When you killed them all?”
Loki nodded, without a word.
“I’ve seen worse,” Barton said quietly.
He leaned back against the wall.
“I told you once I’d been tortured before,” he went on. “Do you want me to elaborate, sir?”
“No,” Loki spat.
He closed his eyes.
“Yes.”
Barton picked his words before he spoke.
“It happened four times,” he said. “First one was a classic. Two guys working me over with their fists. But I stayed there for a very long time—something like two days. By the end of it, I wished I was dead.” He took a deep breath. “Second time was shorter. Much shorter. Waterboarding. By the end of it, I wished I was dead. Third time was sleep deprivation. By the end of it, I wished I was dead. Fourth time was psychological torture—they hurt Natasha in front of me. By the end of it, I wished they were dead.”
There was a silence.
“That time—in Vanaheim—was different,” Barton said. “Sir, you trained me for pain—”
“Shut up,” Loki said. “Enough. Shut up.”
Barton did. Loki closed his eyes.
They waited for maybe five minutes.
Loki reopened his eyes, exhaled deeply.
“Go on,” he said through clenched teeth.
“You trained me for pain,” Barton went on as though there had been no interruption. “This Vanir guy? I managed to breathe through it. For the first time. I didn’t lose my mind. I could tame the feeling—I recognized it. Didn’t scare me. Didn’t break me. You were there for me before you even came for me, sir.”
Loki looked down again.
“They didn’t get to me,” Barton said. “I was just too tough for them.”
And when he heard the hint of smugness in his voice, Loki realized it was the truth.
“Sir, I think you know that already. but you don’t have to hold back,” Barton concluded. “I’m still yours. I’ll always be. And I’m fine.”
Loki looked up then.
And very gently, he said, “But I am not.”

Barton blinked at him.

And then he appeared to understand what Loki was saying—that he truly wasn’t holding back.

That the reason they hadn’t slept together ever since that day was because Loki didn’t want to. That the will to hurt Barton had deserted him.

When he saw Barton pale, though, Loki felt again this impulse of protection—the desire to dissect him; find what troubled him; delete it; and sew him back together. And he knew he wasn’t broken, either. Just very numb. Just very wary.

“I am afraid,” Loki said.

He had never said this to anyone ever before.

He smiled a little. “But I will cease to be, eventually. I have a hard time believing what I know, Barton.”

“Noticed that,” Barton mumbled, and Loki smiled a bit more.

“I think I need time,” he said quietly, and it was such a strange thing to say, such a strange thing to do, this admission of his weakness to someone who would not—could not—judge him. “I have a line to draw, between what they did, and what I do. And at the moment it is smudged with blood.”

“Of course, sir,” Barton said, eyes a bit wide. “I’m—I’m sorry, sir. Fuck, I really—I just didn’t even imagine…”

“It’s fine,” Loki breathed. He pulled Barton closer and said sincerely, “Thank you.”

He cupped his jaw, looked into his eyes pensively, then leaned forward; and when they kissed, he knew he could sort it all out, the good blood and the bad blood. It would take a little time, but he was free to take his time.

“You can,” Loki said.

Barton looked a little dizzy. “I—sorry, sir?”

“You can hurt yourself, if that is what you want.” He smiled a little. “But I’ll coach you.”

Loki made Barton write his master’s name into his own arm, with the point of the knife. Seeing that he was hard by the end of the cutting, Loki told him to take his cock out and stroke himself; he stopped him before he could come and denied him his orgasm. Barton was shivering with teeth clenched, and gasped his thanks to Loki with simmering rage.

The session could be considered a success, but still, Loki had barely felt any stir—well, no, he had; but only in mind and not in body, as though he still unconsciously shied away from his own urges.

And the next day, it still hadn’t changed.
And the next.

And the next.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Loki walked into his bedroom, and stopped at the door. Barton was curled up in the middle of the bed. He’d obviously tossed and turned during the night, no longer used to sleep free of restraints.

Loki sighed a little and raked a hand through his dark hair.

It had been three weeks since Vanaheim, and Loki still couldn’t hurt him; he still couldn’t see how he would be different, then, from the Vanir men. He knew it was not the same. He still worked on believing it.

But he felt alone.

And it had been enough to shake him up. He used to breathe through this feeling at all times, but ever since Barton, he had slowly forgotten the taste of loneliness. And he didn’t have to hurt Barton to be his master. He didn’t have to stay away.

So he dropped his leather coat, took a deep breath, and crawled into bed to settle on Barton’s side.

They had often slept in the same bed or shared a tight embrace before, but it had always been after hours of pain and pleasure. This innocuous atmosphere was entirely new. Loki felt a little nervous, but this man was his slave—Loki could do whatever he wanted with him, including seeking comfort, and warmth for the sake of warmth. Barton wasn’t going to mock him.

Still, when Barton’s eyes fluttered open, Loki stiffened a little. Clint saw him, blinked, then smiled and wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist to pull him closer.

Loki let him, closing his eyes. For a long minute, they just reveled in this intimacy which they’d lost for three weeks.

“Thank you,” Barton murmured.

“Don’t make a habit out of it,” Loki warned under his breath.

Barton laughed a little, then snuggled against him. “Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

Loki ceased to wonder whether he had been right to join him in bed, despite his extended lack of cruelty lately. He briefly remembered Barton worshipping his blue, cold body, and shivered. He’d felt so vulnerable then that the memory still made him deeply uncomfortable. But perhaps he could allow himself not to be strong, once in a while. He’d already admitted his fear and his weakness; he had nothing to hide from Clint. Master and slave also meant he could let himself go without a second
thought, and not just when it came to pain.

Such a strange feeling. But this was what he wanted, too.

He sighed and forced himself to relax a little. Clint smiled, then tilted his head to kiss Loki’s neck, softly. He went up a little, kissed his jaw, then buried his hands in his long hair and brought him close to kiss him deeply. Loki closed his eyes again.

“Let me take care of you,” Barton whispered. “Sir, let me serve you.”

Being taken care of. He’d always been reluctant to let his lovers pleasure him—pleasure was so empowering—but Barton was his slave, and acted as such; there was nothing wrong with letting him service his master.

Loki slowly rolled on his back, and Clint straddled him, still smiling. He brushed a strand of hair off his master’s face, then let his hands go down to hover over Loki’s sides.

“You’re not ticklish, are you?” he asked.

Loki raised an eyebrow. The All-Speak must be malfunctioning. “Tick-lish?”

When he realized upon hearing his tone that Loki simply didn’t know the word, Barton stared at him like a hunted deer.

It was enough for Loki to shake off the pleasant haze he’d let himself glide into. He sat up and frowned at Barton—usually, he never reacted like that, unless upon realizing he’d made a huge mistake. “What does it mean?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Barton said quickly.

Loki smirked in the corner of his mouth. “What does it mean,” he asked again.

Barton looked like he might start sweating. Or running. “Um,” he said. “It’s… I guess it’s a Midgardian specialty. Since you apparently don’t have a word for that. Wow.”

Loki waited. Barton squirmed. “It’s, um, a body trigger? I guess? Like, if you touch some people in some ways, it makes them… laugh.”

Loki frowned at him. “Laugh?”

“…yeah. This is… Man, I never thought it wasn’t a universal thing.” Barton scratched his head. “It’s convulsive laughter. Basically.”

“So,” Loki said, tilting his head on the side. “What you’re saying is—I can make you laugh in the same way I can make you scream or moan?”

Barton nodded hesitantly. He still looked torn between anxiety and puzzlement. “You seriously never did that?” he insisted. “When you were a kid or something?”

“No,” Loki repeated, wondering whether Barton wasn’t making fun of him—Loki had touched him in every way possible by now, and none of them had made him laugh.

Loki made a move towards Barton—and was very surprised to see him recoil violently. “No, but, seriously—it probably won’t work. Since I’m not mortal anymore, and all that.”

He looked very, very anxious. Loki blinked, still uncertain. “Is it painful?” he asked.
“No,” Barton said. “It’s just…”

Loki grabbed his hips and pulled him close. “Teach me.”

“Oh God,” Barton mumbled.

“Teach me,” Loki insisted, grinning. “How do I do it?”

He brushed his hands up Barton’s ribs, like Barton had done to him a minute ago—and to his surprise, Barton squeaked. In nearly two years of torture, Loki had never heard him squeak.

This was so strange. Loki guessed the whole thing was strongly linked to the intent of the tickler, or to the state of mind of the ticklee, because he’d brushed Barton’s ribs before, caressed them or punched them, or scratched them, or bitten them, and he’d gotten shivers or screams—never laughs. He narrowed his eyes and tried again, making a motion half-way between scratching and caressing. Barton twisted and tried to get away as though Loki had been prickling him with a spiked glove.

Loki pinned him down on the bed and did it again. Barton tried to resist, but then he arched and bucked and burst out laughing, in feverish, gasping peals of laughter, interspersed with pleas for Loki to stop. Loki was delighted. How had he never found out about this before?

“This works with all Midgardians?”

“Some—are more—sensitive—than others,” Barton gasped. “Please, sir, oh my God!”

Loki frowned a little—begging?—and asked again, “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Barton repeated, still out of breath. “It’s still… it’s pretty much unbearable.”

Loki was tempted to tack into the neural link before doing it again, but then Barton’s hands crawled up his thighs and squeezed.

Again—and again, going up and down his thighs, squeezing over the knee, then up, then down again, and it felt like being shocked—or—or—set on fire or—and Loki, to his own surprise, jerked back and let out an involuntary sound.

Barton gaped at him. Loki gaped back.

“Oh my God, you are ticklish.”


Barton and he understood at the same second.

Aesir were not ticklish, but Jotnar were.

“Oh, this is gonna be good,” Barton grinned—and he pounced on Loki.

Loki was right—it was somehow linked to his state of mind, because now that he knew what Barton was trying to do, he found himself much more vulnerable to it. And the archer was right, too—for some mysterious reason, the sensation, while perfectly painless, was absolutely unbearable. To his own surprise, Loki started laughing and gasping—and suddenly flipped Barton on his stomach to twist his arm behind his back.

“You would exploit this new-found weakness, I see,” he said, still panting with laughter. “Mistake, Barton.”
“No—” Barton begged, already choking, “no, no, no, please—”

He yelled and thrashed and gasped with laughter, and Loki suddenly realized he was getting aroused—the way Barton begged and struggled under his weight was only too reminiscent of extended torture sessions. But he wasn’t sobbing—he was laughing, out of breath, and yet somehow desperate for it to stop.

Painless torture. This was exactly what Loki needed right now.

He turned Barton on his back again and grabbed his wrists in one hand, pinning them over his head. He invoked coils of rope which wrapped tight around his crossed wrists and solidly tied them to the headboard. Barton’s whole body relaxed, although he was still panting. He’d really missed this. When Loki tied his ankles and spread his legs apart, the archer let out a shaky laugh.

“This is the strangest ordeal I’ve ever encountered,” Loki told him, smiling back.

He straddled him, then put his hands flat on Barton’s sides. The archer squirmed a little; he was wearing nothing but black underwear, and his erection was obvious. Loki grinned. “But since you’re enjoying this…”

“I’m not, I’m not, I’m not,” Barton yelled. “Please!”

But Loki had already gotten to work again—Barton bucked and thrashed against the ropes, choking on suffocating peals of laughter, and twisted like mad under Loki’s weight. When Loki tried it on his inner thighs, brushing the quivering muscles which fluttered desperately under his touch, it only took Barton ten seconds flat to start begging with that desperate edge in his voice he usually had when Loki pulled out a cane or a bullwhip.

This was a way like any other to dominate him. Loki still found it supremely alien, but this painless ordeal was a gift from the gods at the moment—exactly what he needed to reason with himself again. Barton was his to torment; and he was a willing slave. It did not matter what was being done to him; it mattered who was doing it to him, and in which state of mind.

Loki suddenly crushed him down and brutally grabbed his throat, and all laughter flew away. Barton stilled, panting; when Loki leaned down to seal their mouths together, Barton moaned and melted into the kiss, still breathless, arms taut and bulging in the ropes.

They hadn’t slept together ever since Vanaheim. Three weeks. Loki felt his repressed urges simmer in his blood. But—there was no hurry. And no need to make him scream this time—Loki was curious to explore that new road. He tickled Barton again, still kissing him, and the archer’s moans and gasps were muffled by his master’s mouth. Loki felt him growing harder; he let his hand sneak down and ripped the black boxers away.

Yes, dominance did not have to mean pain. Torture did not have to mean pain. Loki would not hurt Barton today. He would be extremely, extremely gentle with him.

He invoked a black piece of cloth and fastened it over Barton’s eyes. Barton swallowed and kept panting in the ropes, with a hardly concealed eagerness. Loki shuffled down, then grabbed his erect cock and kissed the tip, before licking a long stripe up the shaft. Barton moaned a little. He loved it when Loki gave him head.

Loki grinned. He invoked a leather cock ring, and fastened it tight around Barton’s cock and balls—that tight enough so he couldn’t come. Barton shuddered, but said nothing.

Loki let him go and got back.
At first, Barton didn’t understand. Then he winced and pulled at his restraints, but he was so well-trained that he didn’t protest—didn’t beg Loki to come back, didn’t demand to know what was going on. His erection was pulsing in the cock ring; tied as he was on his back, he couldn’t even rut on the mattress to relieve himself. He still moved as much as he could, pulling on the ropes, turning his head from one side to the other. This was, Loki knew, his way of saying he felt too free—Barton loved to be secured until he couldn’t move an inch. There were not enough bonds, not enough pain, maybe. Yes—just as Loki remembered: he hated gentleness. This was the worst torture of all.

Loki grinned and sat cross-legged on the bed, between Barton’s open legs. The archer stilled when he felt the mattress dip; Loki invoked a glass plug and closed his hands around it to make it ice cold; he grabbed Barton’s ass cheeks to part them and slowly forced the cold plug into him, until it rested snugly against his prostate. Barton shivered and jerked a little, but didn’t make a sound. Loki left it there and leaned back.

Barton twisted again, then stopped breathing when Loki grabbed his foot.

“Does it also work here?” Loki asked with a grin.

He brushed his fingers up and down the sole of Barton’s foot. Barton gasped, then gasped again with a more desperate edge when it made him clench around the ass plug. He became even harder in the cock ring, panting and arching a little on the bed, frantically trying to jerk his foot free from Loki’s hold.

Loki flicked his fingers and the ropes holding Barton brutally tensed. He had no wiggle room left, arms and legs stretched as much as possible.

Loki knew what he wanted. He wished his own clothes away, then leaned back against the wooden board and reached between his own thighs, closing his eyes and trying to relax.

It took quite some time, and Barton was occasionally whimpering in the ropes, unable to move an inch as he wished, and yet looking none the happier. He was still impossibly hard, trapped in the cock ring, and he clenched periodically around the butt plug which wasn’t big enough or long enough to even begin to satisfy him.

Eventually, Loki was ready. He crawled forward on the bed above Barton, and leaned down to kiss him, his engorged cock brushing his pale stomach.

“You have been so patient,” he said.

He did not speak only of the present ordeal.

“Thank you,” Barton whined. “Sir, please...”

Loki marveled at those moments—when he remembered how Barton had been this very first time in Stark Tower, stiff and guarded, expecting to be raped, and letting out through clenched teeth, *get on with it*. Now he was on display for Loki’s pleasure, and he begged Loki to remember that he could take it, could take it all, if only Loki would just decide himself. Loki was forever making the same mistake—treating him as fragile—but for once, he didn’t regret it; he’d rather frustrate them both with his hesitations than traumatize Barton by being too violent after the Vanir incident.

Loki had been unsure before, but Barton’s moan told him everything he needed to hear—that Barton was eager, so eager, *desperate*, and that Loki was, as always, the only one on his mind.

Loki straddled him, positioned himself and slowly guided the head of Barton’s iron-hard cock against his rim.
“Oh fuck, sir,” Barton gasped when he understood.

Loki smiled, then closed his eyes; he felt the head pop in, stretch him slowly; he lowered his body inch by inch, his lubed hole swallowing Barton without a hitch, and the invasion was somehow unbearable—and yet so good; when Barton’s cock slowly rubbed on his prostate, Loki bit his lip and threw his head back, panting with pleasure and exertion. Barton was equally breathless; he shifted his head in the blindfold. When Loki was entirely impaled, he settled there then gave him his fingers, and Clint sucked them eagerly, twirling his tongue around the digits and pulling them inside his mouth.

Loki could have tacked inside the link, but it felt like cheating. Instead he rolled his hips and listened to Barton’s hallucinated gasp; he loosened the rope ankles and said with a grin, “Work with me a little, will you?”

Barton let out a shaky laugh, then braced his feet flat on the bed and bucked up. Loki felt it deep inside of him—a sudden jab which shot through his entire body—and moaned in pleasure; he angled his hips and lowered himself down to take Barton deep, feeling it rub slow against his walls, ecstasy flaring behind his eyes and in the pit of his stomach, as though the friction lit up sparkles inside him. Barton was shaking all over. Loki tensed the ropes around his ankles again, clenching around him and rolled his hips to drag himself up slowly, clenching so hard Barton must feel he was trying to rip his cock off, slow, so slow. Barton keened and tugged at the restraints, desperate to move, to take more, but he couldn’t—he was pinned down for Loki to enjoy himself.

“I could leave you here all day,” Loki exhaled. He was actually considering it. “For my personal use. I haven’t done this in a while, you know.” He rolled his hips again, relishing the slow drag of Barton’s hard cock inside him. “I would keep you hard so I could fuck myself at leisure. After a few hours,” he grinned, “this would become quite painful for you.”

Barton whined, then yelled when Loki almost slammed back, taking him whole inside him in one go. He was flushed and trembling and pulling hard at the ropes. The Vanir ordeal hadn’t gotten him to fall apart like he did now.

Loki felt himself beginning to believe in what he knew—that he could want what he wanted. That Barton was alright.

So he took his selfish pleasure off Barton’s helpless body, unable to move and unable to come; then suddenly, after a few minutes, he changed his mind and snapped all restraints open; gripping Barton’s hips to keep him inside him, he made them both roll into the sheets so the archer would be on top. The move tore out a cry from them both; Barton still, trembling all over, then leaned forward, close enough so Loki felt the softness of the blindfold against his forehead. They breathed together, for a long minute.

Then Loki arched and murmured, “Now—” and Barton didn’t need a word more to start fucking him with deep thrusts; but what delighted Loki was how Barton wasn’t rutting after his own climax, but still trying to please Loki, as though he was still pinned down like a helpless toy. He was truly well-trained. Gasping and panting with pleasure, Loki grabbed Barton’s hair and brought him down to kiss him—hot and messy, missing his lips more than often, and he hissed, “Harder—” and Barton obeyed; he angled his hips, sought Loki’s prostate, and thrust hard and deep, sending bursts of light throughout Loki’s system; when his hand wrapped around Loki’s cock, the demi-god bucked and arched and crushed Barton against him to bite his shoulder while he pulsed hot and slick between their stomachs.

Barton stilled, shuddering like mad, still diamond-hard inside Loki. He braced against the mattress not to let himself fall on top of Loki and babbled feverishly, “Please sir, please, I’m gonna go mad,
please, I’m begging you, oh please, mercy, fucking mercy—” and Loki grinned around the flesh he was holding between his teeth. He let it go, then locked his legs behind Barton’s back so he couldn’t pull out, and clenched inside—used all his core strength to clench and press and squeeze, and pulse around him, without allowing him to move or get any sort of friction. Barton yelled, then almost sobbed. “Fuck, sir, please!”

“What?” Loki grinned, propping himself on his elbows and bucking his hips as he hooked his legs around Barton’s thighs, so Barton would be buried balls-deep inside him. “Does it hurt?”

“No, no, no, but—sir—” Barton did sob when Loki clenched around him again.

“Then what are you whining about?” Loki said with a ferocious smile.

Barton instinctively tried to pull out and Loki brutally grabbed his throat in retaliation.

“What are you doing?”

“Sir, I’m sorry, I couldn’t—” Loki clenched again, effectively pleasuring Barton while keeping him from coming, and his slave’s words turned into erratic gasps. He was trembling so hard he looked ready to crumble. Loki idly tacked into the neural link—and instantly backed off, shocked; Barton was so built-up Loki had almost come again just from feeling his incandescent frustration. Loki’s face split into a huge grin. He tightened the lock of his thighs, forcing Barton to plunge even deeper inside him, and the archer started to sob for good; he yelled when Loki squeezed him again and swore fuck God fuck shit, tears rolling down his cheeks, teeth clenched so hard it looked like torture in itself. He was too far gone, babbling nonsense, begging and pleading, shuddering and gasping, struggling not to collapse.

Loki smiled in the corner of his mouth, then wrapped Barton in his arms, bit him again, and unlocked the cock ring.

The second it came off—Barton cried out and came so hard he could do nothing else, just let it happen, unable even to move in any way—he just let it pulse out of him, eyes rolling back, and blacked out with the intensity of his bliss.

When he came to, they were still wrapped together, now under the sheets. Loki grinned at him.

“I really like this, being gentle. We should do it again sometimes.”

Barton let out a breathy laugh. He couldn’t do more—couldn’t speak. He was completely fucking out.

Loki kissed his neck.

“Now,” he said. “Let’s shackle you for the night. Shall we?”
Chapter End Notes

No Clints were harmed in the making of this chapter.
In Loki’s experience, being given what you wanted to be enjoyed at leisure was quite a bad thing. It killed desire and brought boredom.

With Barton—it was nothing like it. Months had passed since the Vanir incident, and Loki was stunned to find that even in times of peace, even in times of languid inactivity, akin to hot summer days with absolutely nothing left to say or do, his desire stayed the same. Barton effortlessly kept it alive.

And thing was—they had time. So much time. Barton was obviously not used to it. His kind lived fast and died old. His kind started to worry past the age of fifty—and sometimes even before that. But he had stopped aging; he would live long, and die young.

Loki wanted to demonstrate their immortality, and that thought led to another.

* *

One day, he strapped him down in a padded bed, his ankles locked in stirrups, his vision obscured by a thick blindfold. He tightened the buckles as much as he could without cutting the blood flow. Barton could not move an inch; there were straps over his hips, chest, forehead, and shoulders. Others pinned his wrists down on each side of his body.

“Are you comfortable?” Loki asked.

Barton licked his lips. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You’re staying here for a month.”

Barton stayed very still for a few seconds.

Loki could tell that his first instinct was to assume Loki was joking. But he knew Loki never lied when it came to the ordeals he put him through. Loki could almost hear him spiral down into anguished doubts. What had he done to deserve this? Would he be left to starve? Was it—

“If you have any questions, you’re allowed to ask,” Loki said.
Barton sighed in relief.

“I—sir,” he began, instinctively struggling against the unmoving straps. “Did I… are you punishing me?”

“No,” Loki said. “I would have told you that.”

He walked around him, letting his fingers trail up his arms. “It just pleases me,” he said, “to keep you here. Worry not, I will take care of you.”

He kissed him. “But you won’t be reading in the library,” he said. “You won’t be training in the magic room. You won’t be enjoying my bed. You won’t be moving or speaking at all. You’re a piece of furniture, Barton. You’re going to live like one for a month.”

“Sir…”

Barton’s voice was pleading. Loki brushed his chin. “See—the very fact that you are complaining means that you are not fully aware of your place yet. I admit it is a long-suffering journey. But you’ll get there. Now, open your mouth.”

There was nothing Barton could say or do, and he knew it. He opened his mouth, and Loki gagged him. The gag was much more comfortable than what he’d taken before—soft enough that his teeth could sink in, small enough not to put any strain on his jaw, and gentle enough that he could swallow any excess saliva by himself—but it was still locked tight and threaded into the padded cushion underneath his head. Barton let out a muffled sound. He couldn’t move his head at all. He couldn’t move anything, not even by an inch. Loki plugged him with a glass dildo, then took his cock and inserted a thick steel sound with a ring which he buckled around the crown. Barton tried to squirm and tried to moan, but he was stuffed full now. Loki looked at him appreciatively—he wasn’t going anywhere; and his body was completely useless now, able only to breathe.

Loki turned away and left him there, closing the door of the dungeon behind him.

* *

This was an experiment for him as well, and he was really curious about the outcome. He went to his library and took out the books he needed. He should treat Barton very much like he’d treat a comatose man—except Barton would be awake and well, trapped only because of Loki’s sadistic whims.

Loki left him alone for the first day, monitoring him through the neural link, from a distance. Barton was doing well for now. No matter how humiliating, how cruel and unnecessary this ordeal was, he was holding it together. For now—dehumanization was a slow process.

When Loki had determined everything he would need, he went back to the torture rooms and put a box of equipment on a table next to Barton’s immobile form. Barton startled at the sound, and tried to moan a little. His hands were clenching into fists in the leather cuffs. Loki knew he was desperate for attention—for a word of acknowledgment; for pleasure, or pain, maybe. Loki would give him none of it. The glass plug in his ass, just like the steel sound, would stay there all month.

He slowly pierced Barton’s right arm with a thick needle, then put him on an IV. He had other means of maintaining him alive—Asgardian means; but he knew this would get to Barton’s mind
more easily. Being fed through a plastic bag was better, in terms of objectification, than being strengthened by magic on a regular basis; and the Midgardian feel of it would resonate more strongly with Loki’s victim. And indeed, when he understood what Loki was doing, Barton let out another pleading moan. It was only now starting to sink in—he would stay here for a month. Nothing could save him.

That was for keeping him alive; but he also needed to be kept in shape. Exercising him would be tiring; Loki preferred to stimulate his muscles directly. This meant electricity—a lot of it, and for long periods of time. He taped electrodes to Barton’s arms and legs and abs; the back of the chair was pierced with long holes to expose his back, and Loki taped more electrodes along the bulging muscles there. Barton was fighting his restraints. Trying to show he was expecting to be let free.

His delusions wouldn’t last. This was just another way to break him—although Loki would gleefully admit this was the cruelest one yet.

Loki turned on the electricity; Barton’s muscles clenched out of sheer reflex. The current wasn’t strong enough to cause pain—it wouldn’t burn him like the coffin had, a few months ago—only a great discomfort. Three hours a day would be enough to keep him well.

Loki walked away again and left Barton to be shocked by the relentless machine, the IV slowly dripping above his head.

Barton lived off his indignation and disbelief for the first week; he slept a lot, woke up when the TENS unit started to shock him again, and twisted in his restraints every time Loki was near. He apparently held onto the hope that he would be freed after a few days.

Loki did a body check every day; he changed the sound in his cock, unstrapped the electrodes to give him a sponge bath, and oiled Barton’s skin to prevent it from chafing against the leather of the chair. It was hard to tell with the blindfold and gag, but Barton looked like the ordeal was driving him mad; there was no reason for him to be kept there, strapped down and hooked to the IV and TENS unit, plugged shut in every way, reduced to a piece of meat. No reason, other than Loki’s cruelty, and his will to humble Barton more deeply than ever before.

On the second week, Barton started to cry.

This was a natural reaction; Loki had never pushed his dehumanization so far before. To be confronted to this truth—that Loki could do anything he wanted with him, could leave him there for two months, for a year, forever—must be quite a shock. The tears meant he was starting to give in. Loki wiped them off, but they were replaced by more as Barton sobbed behind the gag. His master smiled in the corner of his mouth, and let him despair. The crying lasted for a few days, interspersed by long periods of resigned calm.

Then Barton began to get hard.

Truth be told, he had been at half-mast often before—but Loki left him alone for long periods of time when he could only pity himself and fight against his restraints to pass the time, until the next shock session; those empty moments must not be very arousing. Yet on the beginning of the third week, Loki found him erect and twitching as much as he could in the straps—which wasn’t much—
desperate to get some relief.

He was starting to enjoy this, enjoy the constant phantom hunger of his empty stomach, enjoy the sponge baths and the way his own body was being taken away from him—enjoy the thought of being Loki’s object. In terms of submission, this was as far as he would ever get, short of being killed; for the only thing left he owned, now, was his life. His very thoughts were gone, scattered away like birds in a summer sky; Loki could tell from the way he breathed, deep and even, as though in an abysmal trance. Loki could have pleased him, could have driven him insane, but he didn’t touch him, although he had to relieve himself later, panting under the ministrations of his own hand as he imagined the thoughts crossing Barton’s mind, his mind slowly reshaping itself into absolute surrender.

By the end of it, Barton was broken.

He was breathing calmly in his restraints. When the TENS unit shocked him as it did daily, his breathing got deeper, and that was all. He didn’t try to arch and fight the unyielding straps. He looked happy to be pinned down; when Loki oiled him and cleaned him and changed the sound, he didn’t lean in his touch, only let himself be manipulated and prodded until he was left alone again.

On the last day, Loki unbuckled the gag and slowly, slowly removed it. Barton did not jerk up with hope; did not move at all; did not attempt to speak. He looked so absolutely serene Loki was almost deafened by the silence of his mind.

Loki leaned on the bed with his arms crossed near Barton’s head, and just watched him for a while. Barton’s serenity fascinated him.

“Say my name,” Loki demanded.

“Loki,” Barton murmured, and it was like a prayer—like the first and last word of his life—nobody had ever said Loki’s name like this.

Barton’s voice was weak from lack of use. Loki massaged his throat, then his jaw, and felt him swallow against his palm. In his silent place, he would listen and hear anything Loki said as gospel. The demi-god leaned closer to him, closer, until his lips brushed his ear and he could speak so low he barely heard himself.

“You are going to live for five thousand years. One month is nothing. One year is nothing.”

Loki brushed his fingers up Barton’s nose, then followed his cheekbones and jaw.

“I’d love to leave you there forever,” he went on, still very low. “It would solve so many of our problems if we could just live in boxes. Stored away. Bound and locked without any worries for me or you.”

He grinned. “But it is way too quiet for our patience.”

Barton smiled a little.

Loki unbuckled the straps, appreciating the deep marks engraved in the skin. He was going to help Barton up and take him to the baths, to clean him gently as he very slowly began to come out of his mind-numbing objectification. He would watch as he woke up from his trance, watch the surprised look in his eyes as though he’d been brought into a new world, as though he’d just been born.

Then he would bring him back to the dungeon and proceed to get him reacquainted with his own body. He had a few thoughts on how to proceed.
Perhaps it would take a while; but they had so much time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

By the way, next chapter will be the most violent of the entire series. Be prepared. :D
On the Edge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even after all this time, Loki still tried to fight his darker urges.

He had always—no matter how clumsily or dispassionately—taken care of his lovers; especially when he was stung by guilt after he’d hurt them in a fit of feral desire. And he had always struggled, too, not to be a monster.

But now that Barton was here—and now that he was here to stay—Loki was slowly, very slowly letting even his darkest thoughts and fantasies run free. He had discovered, during the Mad Hours, that he loved Clint Barton, and that his wish to kill him was nothing more than another fantasy. Now that he was no longer scared he couldn’t stop himself, he allowed himself to dream of it at night. The more he delved into the darkest corner of his soul, the stronger he felt, because he knew, no matter how violent his cravings were, that he could always draw the line. Barton trusted him to do it; and consequently, Loki was growing to trust himself.

And this also meant he was opening himself to new possibilities.

Clint Barton was his slave, and the truth of it was only beginning to sink in—that Loki could do anything he wanted to him. Not everything he dreamed about; he knew that what aroused him wasn’t always things he wanted to come true—and this simple limit had been so hard to define, but now that it was done, it was so freeing. Only three months ago, he wouldn’t have dared locking him down for four weeks as he did; but they had come such a long way that even Loki, so easily prone to doubts and second thoughts and creeping fears, had enjoyed himself without a hitch during Clint’s seclusion; and after he was released, Clint himself recovered in less than a day, and even appeared calmer and steadier than before, as though his month of captivity had truly drilled into him the thought that he would never, ever be left behind.

So, yes, there was an idea in Loki’s mind, growing richer and darker with every wet dream and every wicked fantasy; every time he put Barton through another session of torture, every time he watched him writhe under the lash, he thought of how much more they could accomplish. Barton was strong in body, and he’d been proved to be virtually indestructible in mind. He could endure a lot worse than everything Loki had already thrown at him.

Loki didn’t want to kill him (although he would have loved to) and he didn’t want to incapacitate him in any way, either. Loki had been careless before; he’d hurried over many steps and lingered for far too long on others. How many times had he almost ruined it—ruined it all—because of the doubts and fears ingrained in him from a thousand years of mental conditioning.

But now, they had finally established a solid base, and in the protection of those sturdy boundaries,
Loki could allow his mind to run wild, to run free, in all its frightening wickedness. He didn’t have to worry about being a monster, about what he should and shouldn’t do. He only had to want, and to decide, and to plan, and to do. And he knew Barton would love it. He knew Barton wanted to let go about as much as Loki wanted to take power. The equation, in the end, was simple: as long as Loki didn’t waver in his decisions, Barton would never object to them. As long as Loki knew what he was doing, Barton would be more than happy to take it.

This was the true reason it had all worked out in the end. They needed each other on a gut level. And Loki’s gut was pushing him in a dark direction these days—cruel instincts whispering sweet poison in his mind at night, as if his hunger for violence had grown thousandfold after the Vanaheim incident, and ten thousandfold after the long serene month during which Barton had been made to explore his immortality.

For the first time, Loki actually felt self-confident enough to follow his urge, and watch how far and how deep his own desires would take him. He wanted to let himself have his way, because he trusted himself to keep Barton safe, and he trusted Barton to take it. No one would blame him for it, or tell him this wasn’t right. He was free.

It was about time he began to enjoy his freedom.

Loki came for Barton in the middle of the night. It had been a few weeks already since their last intense session—namely, the month of isolation—and ever since then, things had been quite tranquil by their usual standards, so Barton was well-rested, and unharmed. And completely unsuspecting. Loki hadn’t let anything show; he had kept his dark urges hidden with the delight of the prankster planning his trick with a straight, bland face.

Barton slept in Loki’s room, these days. Loki still chained him to the bedposts, and when he walked inside the bedroom, he found his slave spread-eagled on the bed, sleeping on his back in loose clothes, soundly and deeply.

Loki did not turn on any lights, except for the silver gloom oozing from the walls at all times. In the dark, he swiftly straddled him, light as a feather; he unclasped the manacles from the bedposts and bound Barton’s wrists together, then did the same with his ankles. He opened his slave’s mouth and pushed a ball-gag between his jaws to lock it tight behind his head.

Barton woke up then—and the second his eyes fluttered open, Loki slapped him so hard his hand left a red imprint on Clint’s cheek.

Without waiting for him to get his bearings, he grinned, then pulled out a knife and slowly began to cut through Barton’s clothes. He was in no hurry—on the contrary; he wanted to make it last. To make him understand today was special. Barton was still reeling from the hard blow, and he looked just a little unsettled when he felt Loki cutting his clothes to shreds, instead of simply removing them or wishing them away as usual.

When Barton was naked, Loki brutally stuck the knife into the pillow, only an inch away from his throat. Barton stared at him with wide eyes, swallowing around the gag. Loki grinned again, feeling his darkest, coldest needs flare inside his blood; and there were no fears, no doubts, no second thoughts marring them. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew precisely what he wanted. He
was going to take his pleasure.

He leaned forward, very softly, and kissed Barton’s forehead; a soft, mocking kiss which made him look more seriously worried than anything else Loki had done so far.

“Today,” Loki breathed, “I am taking you to the edge.”

Barton took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed around the gag, but there was nothing he could do or say. Loki grinned, then stopped straddling him and nonchalantly grabbed the chain linking his wrist cuffs before walking away. Barton’s body slipped off the bed and fell hard onto the floor; he began to fight then, at least to get up on his feet or knees, but Loki didn’t care and kept walking with brisk strides. He pushed the door and got inside the torture rooms, dragging his slave behind him.

Nearly two years of pain drove Barton to go very still as soon as they crossed the threshold. These rooms had become much more than a dungeon; this was the place they’d learned the most about themselves and each other, and although Barton had screamed and cried a lot in there, he’d also laughed, and whispered soft words, and heard soft words whispered in turn.

Loki intended to fix this. The torture rooms, today, would live up to their name.

He dropped Barton on the floor, on his stomach; then he straddled him again and put a knee between his shoulder blades to keep him down. First, he would need a spreader bar. He called one made of dark, sleek wood, with one metal ring embedded at each end.

Barton was breathing fast against the cold, marble floor; he wasn’t making any sound behind the gag. But he soon would.

Loki untied his wrists just long enough to draw his arms behind his back and shackle them again, leaving no length of chain between both cuffs—they were tied together by a single O-ring, which he clasped to the ring at one end of the wooden rod.

He shuffled off Barton’s body and brutally spun him on his back. His eyes were open wide, and he was glancing around, obviously trying to figure out what would come next. Loki smirked at him, then gripped his hair with one hand, peering into his eyes; then he slapped him again, even harder than before. Barton let out a muffled sound—he couldn’t even jerk his head on the side to soften the blow—but began breathing again the next second, deep and silent, chest heaving.

He squirmed and winced a little; the wooden rod was stuck between his back and the floor, twisting his arms and probably digging in awkward places, making it very uncomfortable for him. Loki slowly let go of his hair. He invoked a sleek, steel cock ring, with a tinier ring hanging from it. He clasped the bigger ring around Barton’s cock and balls, and barely tightened it. Sure enough, Barton was already hard; anticipation, manhandling and fear never failed to arouse him.

Turning Barton on his stomach again, Loki grabbed the long wooden bar bound to his wrists at one end, and spread Barton’s legs apart. His slave looked like he’d finally begun to understand where this was all going, and squirmed helplessly under his weight. Loki smirked, then reached between his legs to grab the O-ring hanging off the cock ring; he clasped it to the other end of the rod, then simply let go of it all.

Barton let out a huffed, frantic breath through his nose and squirmed all the more. The wooden bar was heavy and long; strapped to his balls at one end and to his bound wrists at the other end, it was a beautiful predicament. While Barton was lying down, though, it wasn’t very effective, since after a second, he realized he could just twist his wrists in the shackles as to fold his arms against his back,
so the bar would rest across his body without stretching his arms or pulling too much on his balls.

But Loki wasn’t going to let him lie down.

He got off him and gripped his hair to manhandle him up on his knees. Like this, the bar was already a lot less bearable; it naturally pulled Barton’s arms behind him, stretching them completely, and putting a lot of weight on the cock ring. Barton could have alleviated it by lifting his wrists; but try lifting your bound wrists higher up behind your back with your arms tensed and already as high up as they’d go. This was putting a tremendous strain on his shoulders, and Loki knew it.

Barton was breathing hard and fast, and he looked angry. Loki seized his chin.

“Like it so far?” he breathed, with a wide smirk.

He grabbed the bar in its middle. If it had been a rope, it would have simply stretched like a bowstring; but it was a wooden rod, straight and unbendable; the triangle formed by Barton’s tense arms, his equally tense back, and the line of the bar—it was beautiful. When Loki pulled the rod further away from his body, Barton let out a muffled sound and twitched uncomfortably, and Loki honestly didn’t know if he was pleading for his shoulders or for his balls. He let out a small laugh.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s put your mouth to use.”

He unclasped the tight ball gag, and Barton was so obviously relieved he could move his jaw that he didn’t even try to speak. Loki wrapped a hand behind his neck, and invoked a fat, black dildo in his other hand. It was covered in short, nasty spikes, and it had two leather straps at the end to make sure it would stay inside. Barton had taken various toys of many sizes by then; but he still paled a little when he saw it. He hated spikes, no matter where, and Loki couldn’t blame him.

“So here’s the thing,” Loki murmured. “You won’t get any lube; and you won’t get any preparation. But, ask me,” he grinned, “and I might let you suck on it.”

He honestly didn’t care one way or the other. He certainly wouldn’t mind shoving it dry up Barton’s ass, but he also loved to hear him beg, and humiliation always added to the torture. Barton clenched his jaw, and for a second, Loki thought he would pick the most physically painful option. But after considering the girth of the spiked toy, Barton’s tight lips parted in defeat.

“Please—sir,” he said, slowly, angrily. “Let me—let me suck on it.”

Loki raised his eyebrows, mocking, and said nothing. Barton moved his arms a little and gritted his teeth when the bar lolled behind his back from side to side, pulling at his balls. “I—please, sir,” he tried again. “I want to suck it. Let me suck on it. Please.”

Loki sighed a little, because, really, Barton wasn’t trying very hard—but oh, well, that would do.

Tightening his grip on Barton’s nape, he put the tip of the dildo against his lips, which parted hesitantly; he pushed it in, slowly, but relentlessly, forcing Barton to angle his neck in a hurry to take it deep inside his throat.

There was another reason Loki had given Barton this choice—the tongue and lips were among the most sensitive parts of the body, and while Barton was choking on the length of the toy, he couldn’t avoid being intensely aware of just how sharp the spikes were, and how uncomfortably they pricked his throat and mouth—and he knew, he knew the whole thing was about to enter the other end of him; anticipation was the best of tortures. His face fell slowly as he gagged and choked, trying to suck a little, trying to pull away, too; but Loki’s hand was firm on his neck and he made sure to keep the entire toy stuffed in Barton’s mouth, watching him jerk with short spasms as he tried to cough.
and not to cough at the same time.

Eventually, Loki decided he’d had enough and pulled out the toy, making Barton break into hacking coughs, a long string of saliva stretching from his lips to the tip of the toy.

“Now,” Loki murmured in delight.

He shuffled closer from Barton, kneeling between his parted knees, and took him in the parody of a one-armed hug, pressing their chests together; but his free hand ran down his back to grab his ass and knead it.

“Please,” Barton panted, squirming uncomfortably against him, nervously. “Please, sir...”

Loki smiled, then positioned the tip of the toy at his entrance and slowly pushed it in. Barton gasped and bit his lip, then pressed his forehead into Loki’s shoulder. Loki’s cock twitched a little as he slowly forced the entire toy inside Barton’s ass, stretching the tight muscles and dragging the spikes inside of him. Loki distractedly tacked into the neural link to make sure the spikes weren’t shredding his insides, but he’d calculated their sharpness beforehand, to combine the highest amount of pain with the minimal amount of damage. As it was, there was not a drop of blood; but before the toy was even completely in, Barton was fighting back desperate sobs against Loki’s shoulder and kept trying to squirm away, to push the toy out, no matter how futile. Eventually, it was in; Loki tied the straps around Barton’s inner thighs, then seized his chin and dropped a soft, chaste kiss on his lips.

Barton couldn’t help clenching around the toy in his ass, and every time he did, he jumped a little and whimpered uncontrollably. Tears were rolling down his cheeks; Loki licked them with a very red tongue, then grinned again.

“If you’re going to whine like this,” he said. “I’ll just put the gag back in.”

He waited, but Barton’s little moans couldn’t be swallowed down, no matter how hard he tried; true to his word, Loki gagged him again, shoving the rubber ball between his jaws and buckling the strap tight behind his head. Barton began shivering, but he was far from being broken yet; sure enough, his anger hadn’t deserted him, and to be able to bite into something actually looked like it helped. He took a deep breath and obviously willed himself to endure it—to endure it all.

Time for the next step, then.

Loki got up, without letting go of Barton’s hair.

“Oh, you’re going to hate this,” he breathed.

Heat flared between his legs, because this was it—from this moment, the game was truly on. He forced Barton’s head to turn and made him look at the highlight of the evening, which was hanging from the ceiling in the other end of the room.

It was a hemp noose.

For a second, Barton looked just thunderstruck.

But then he buckled in panic and tried to break free. Loki smiled viciously and started dragging him towards it; Barton struggled and writhed, his eyes impossibly wide, and he began to beg—his brief flare of pride entirely forgotten; he was pleading without words through the gag, imploring Loki, anything but that. But Loki mercilessly tugged him all the way across the room to drop him right underneath the noose, which swayed slightly, eerily in the dim light.
Barton couldn’t seem to be able to look away from it. His breathing was chaotic and disheveled. Loki looked down at him with cold eyes, his hand still firmly fisted in his hair. He felt like he was boiling inside. Oh, yes—pure ecstasy. He lived for this look of horror in Barton’s eyes, for the twitches of his muscles as he tried to get away.

But then, as nothing more happened, Barton began to ride out his moment of panic. His frantic writhing calmed down, and he started taking deep breaths through his nose; then he shuddered deeply, and looked up at Loki.

Loki just looked back. This, he loved more than anything else—the trust that made Barton seek reassurance, confirmation, and comfort, in his very torturer. No matter how much Loki hurt him, Barton never stopped looking at him for guidance.

And guidance he did find. Looking into Loki’s eyes was enough to remind him of his place—remind him that he was Loki’s to hurt; and that although he knew his own life didn’t belong to him, he trusted Loki with it, and he looked like he understood, in this stretched-out second, that even though he was in for a very unpleasant moment, Loki wasn’t going to hang him till death. He relaxed, by a fraction, and stopped trying to escape his master’s grip; he exhaled through his nose, and finally looked down, still terrified, still sick with anxiety, but submitting.

Loki smirked in the corner of his mouth. In moments like this, he could only feel proud of how well he’d trained him. He raised his arm to grab the noose, then looked down at Barton again, and smiled.

“Let’s take this off,” he mumbled.

He let go of Barton’s hair to slip his hand behind his neck, and unclasped the ball gag. Barton would need to breathe deeply, and composedly, and it would be easier for him to use his mouth. He didn’t take advantage of Loki’s generosity, and stayed silent; looking down, still wide-eyed, still frightened, but tamed—accepting of his fate.

Loki grinned, then pulled the noose down until he could put it around Barton’s neck. He only tightened it loosely; gravity would take care of the rest for him. Barton was beginning to sweat with intense stress and equally intense pain, for his nervousness made him clench around the torture device shoved up his ass; he swallowed, while he still could, but said nothing.

Loki snapped his fingers and the rope began to retract slowly into the ceiling.

Barton lifted his head when the noose tightened around his neck; when it was too much for him to bear, he got up, awkwardly so since his every movement hurt his strapped balls and made the toy move inside his ass; but eventually, he managed to stand, and the rope was still tightening. When the noose started really pushing against his Adam’s apple, he cast Loki a desperate look; but Loki only grinned at him, and the rope kept winding up until Barton had to stand on tip-toes—chest fluttering with shallow, panicked breaths, holding his head very stiff and very high, whimpering miserably because of the tension which made him clench all the more around the spiked toy.

Loki made it stop then. He waited for a minute while Barton got his bearings; he was mostly wide-eyed, a few tears rolling down his cheeks—shocked at finding himself in such a position, but still waiting for what would come next.

“We need,” Loki murmured slowly, “another bar.”

Barton let out a shaky sound which could have meant anything. He was beautifully hard, cock erect and pulsing in the steel ring. He was waveriing, trying not to slip, and obviously trying not to think about what could happen if he lost his balance.
Loki invoked a second spreader bar; when he crouched down to undid the shackles holding Barton’s ankles together, his slave let out another inarticulate, desperate whine. Loki grinned, then grabbed his calf and kissed his knee; then he tied the spreader bar to his ankle, pushed his legs apart, and tied the other ankle to the other end.

Barton scrambled to find purchase on the ground, slipped a little and panicked when the noose tightened even more around his neck in retaliation. He had trouble standing on tip-toes with his legs spread so wide. He squirmed a little, trying to bring his ankles together, but he couldn’t bend the unforgiving bar, just like he couldn’t bend the one stretching his arms up behind his back and pulling down on his balls. He let out a small, desperate moan, then went very still, barely breathing. He swallowed painfully in the noose, and tried to hold his head even higher. His outstretched limbs were shuddering; he clenched periodically around the huge toy shoved up his ass, and whined a little each time the spikes punished him for it. His shoulders were trembling, and he struggled desperately to balance it all.

Eventually, he stilled, shuddering, sweat rolling down the crease of his spine, but silent.

“Very well,” Loki said.

He grabbed hold of Clint’s hard cock, then grinned, rubbing his thumb on the tip to make him twitch. “I feel like I’ve been ignoring this from the beginning.”

Judging by the look on Barton’s face, he wouldn’t have minded Loki ignoring it for a little longer. Loki tugged harder and Barton closed his eyes, panting with oversensitized pleasure, then suddenly wincing with pain when Loki dug his nail into the slit.

Loki rolled the head of his cock between his fingers, then pressed to squeeze the tiny hole open. Barton’s eyes snapped open.

“No—please,” he stammered.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him—and enjoyed very much the look on Barton’s face when he realized he’d made a mistake.

“Hmm,” Loki said, with a cruel grin. “Something here isn’t tight enough.”

The rope wound up a bit more and the noose started seriously squeezing Barton’s neck. He let out a panting breath and said nothing, eyes very wide, holding very still on the very tip of his toes, breathing quick and shallow and uneven.

“What were you saying?” Loki said affably.

Barton made no answer.

“Well then.”

Loki invoked a hollow sound with a ring at the end, then pushed it inside Barton’s cock, pumping in an out a little before sticking it all the way in. Barton choked on a sob, which turned into a whimper when Loki tightened the ring under the crown of his cock to keep the sound in place. He wasn’t done, though; he invoked a tube of metal which split in half, and clasped it around Barton’s shaft, leaving only the head of his cock free.

Although “free” might have been too big of a word at this point. Loki let go of his cock which hung, useless, between his legs, locked in a steel prison from the outside and the inside out. Barton was still rock hard, but right now, it only added to the torture. He was quietly crying, but he tried not to sob as
it only made the noose feel tighter.

Loki slipped a finger between his neck and the rope, and turned the knot so it would rest just below his right ear.

Then he willed the rope to start tensing again.

Barton scrambled and panted and let out an amazing sound—a gasping wail as he struggled not to lose control, tip-toes, spiked dildo, spreader bars, cock rings and cages and sounds driving him beautifully mad. He arched and moaned like an animal, panicked and mad with torture, and started sobbing without sobs when Loki finally stopped the rope—small, hitching sobs he had to repress harder than ever not to choke completely in his strangle collar of hemp.

Loki considered his hanging, helpless body for a second. Barton could barely hold himself on the tip of his toes; his arms were stiff and tetanized behind his back; and he’d clenched so hard around the spiked dildo in his ass that it had finally done a bit of damage—a single drop of blood was rolling down his thigh.

Loki was dizzy with the intensity of his pleasure. Each one of Barton’s shallow, wheezing breaths seemed to make his cock even harder. But now was not the time for his own release—not yet.

The demi-god kissed Barton’s lips, light and loving.

“This is the last step,” he breathed. “It is also the worst. Do try not to pass out.”

“S—ir,” Barton managed to gasp. “P—lease, s—ir.”

Loki slapped him, then caught his jaw in a bruising grip.

“Shh,” he murmured.

He kissed Barton again, hard and deep this time, and felt him sobbing silently under his lips. Loki grabbed his ass, made him grind against him, then found the bottom of the dildo and pushed it even deeper. Barton cried out and choked instantly in the noose, scrambling to stand even higher on his tip-toes, shuddering, crying, on the brink of madness. His whole body was twitching and jerking, but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide or escape. And he knew Loki wasn’t done, which made it all so much better.

Loki’s entire body was pulsing with pleasure. He invoked the last object and set it on a small table next to Barton’s hanging, tortured figure. It was a small wooden box; he opened it and cast a pensive look at the needles inside; then he glanced up. Barton was watching him, but he was so strung-up, so focused on all the things he had to keep balancing together, that he could not react.

“You won’t have to fight for this one,” Loki murmured, rubbing a gentle thumb along Barton’s jaw. “Just let yourself suffer. Alright?”

Barton took a shallow breath, closed his eyes, and gave the tiniest nod—the noose wouldn’t allow him to do much more. Loki still adjusted it again, so it would cut off his breath almost completely. Barton went very still, eyes glassy and ajar; his entire body was powering down to let himself focus on the most important—oxygenating his brain with the small trickle of air Loki still allowed to pass through his crushed trachea.

Loki pinched his right nipple, then rolled it between his fingers, although it was already very much erect. Then he squeezed it and slowly, slowly, pushed a needle through it.
Barton screwed his eyes shut and let out a frantic keening, jerking desperately in his restraints. Loki stuck another needle through his right nipple, admiring the bright red of the blood trickling down his side. He inflicted the same treatment to his left nipple, going even slower so Barton would miss nothing of the pain blooming white and red in his tortured flesh.

Loki crouched down then, taking the box of needles with him. Barton let out a panting breath when he understood, but he was past begging. He only whimpered, small and helpless, again and again, unable to stop.

Loki kissed the inside of his thigh, then pushed a needle through the quivering flesh. Barton let out a beautiful, halting moan, which broke into hitching sobs when Loki did it again with another needle, then once more, then pushed three other needles into his other inner thigh, just under the leather straps keeping the dildo in place. Blood trickled down his legs, spiraling around his calves.

Barton was whimpering, with no words, letting himself suffer indeed. But when the demi-god grabbed his balls and rolled them in his hand, his slave couldn't help it.

“S—ir.”

Loki should have tightened the noose again in punishment, but Barton had been very brave, so Loki said nothing and just pierced his ball sack with the thickest needle—slowly, slowly, until it went clear through it.

Barton’s scream began as a low whimper when Loki first pushed in the needle, and the whimper grew and grew as the needle went in, and it changed into an animal keening, which exploded in a full-blown, gasping shout. He could barely breathe, and yet he shouted so hard it sounded across the entire room. He almost fell down from his balanced position and scrambled desperately to stay on the tip of his toes, for another moment, just another moment, but oh, it was so difficult, because it hurt so much.

Loki couldn’t help grinning, pupils dilated. He picked up the box. There were a lot of needles left, and they were all for Barton’s balls.

He pushed them into the pulsing flesh one by one, reveling in the knowledge that his slave was about to pass out with agony, yet struggled as hard as he could to stay conscious so as not to sag in the noose and strangle himself. By the time he was done, Barton’s balls were sadly useless, bleeding out from the steel needles stuck into it. Drops of blood fell on the floor with small, soft sounds. Loki grinned, then got up and walked around Barton.

“The edge,” he breathed into his ear.

Barton was barely moving, half-strangled in the noose, breath hitching, tears flowing freely down his face. Loki finally palmed himself through his pants and almost moaned out loud with ecstasy, while his other hand slipped between Barton’s thighs to go up again, squeeze his tortured balls—he screamed, sobbed, whined, writhed as much as he dared—then brush the end of the spiked dildo stuck in his ass.

“And now what?” Loki grinned. “There is nothing left to have fun with. Do I just leave you here?”

Barton didn’t answer, but he wouldn’t stop crying.

“Oh, I know,” Loki breathed in his ear. “Let’s make you come.”

Barton squirmed a little at that, eyes widening again. Loki couldn’t jerk him off—not with the steel sleeve clasped around his shaft; but there was a feature of the dildo Barton was still unaware of. Loki
pushed a button at the base of it.

The tip, resting against his swollen prostate, suddenly sent off an electric shock right into the bundle of nerves, which made Barton buckle so violently he finally lost his balance; Loki wrapped an arm around him and held him up so he wouldn’t strangle himself.

“Now, now, you wouldn’t want to miss the best part,” he panted, breathless with arousal.

Barton whined and thrashed weakly in answer, unable to speak, a pitiful animal at the end of his leash. Loki was absolutely thrilled. “Alright,” he said. “This is really going to hurt”—and he made the dildo shock him again twice more violently.

This was the final straw—Barton’s overstimulated body fell apart and he came, with a completely disheveled noise which morphed into cries of pain as his climax was mercilessly repressed by the needles in his pulsing ball sack. But he couldn’t stop coming, and his eyes rolled back into his head with a pleasure so astoundingly intense, an agony so terribly great, that Loki felt it echoing like a clap of thunder through the neural link.

“Oh, that is a big one,” he panted in his ear, “come on, Barton, till the last drop,” and Barton kept coming, yelling and sobbing in pain as he did, and Loki didn’t need much more to come himself, licking Baron’s tears and sweat, pulsing hot inside his pants in a warm, wet explosion of ecstasy.

He would have gladly passed out with pleasure, but this—only this—was to stay Barton’s personal privilege today. As a matter of fact, he’d sagged in the noose which was now completely strangling him; he was jerking a little in the stranglehold, but he couldn’t hold himself upright. Loki helped him up again; then he invoked a razor-sharp knife which made quick work of the rope.

Barton sagged against him, and Loki slowly lowered him down to his knees. Then he slipped his fingers under the noose, and loosened it with little tugs. Barton’s neck was raw and bruised; when the strangling collar of hemp went off, he gasped loudly and his chest began heaving in deep breaths.

Loki waited patiently until he’d caught his breath. When Barton was oxygenated enough for the torturous pain to take a front seat once more, Loki kissed him, then pushed him down on the floor and got to work.

He took out the needles first—he took them out slowly, as slowly as he’d put them in, and although Barton jerked sporadically and sobbed silently on the floor, he didn’t say a word. It wasn’t his place; his body was Loki’s to play at leisure. In such moment, there was nothing else he knew.

Loki didn’t heal Barton’s nipples and thighs—where was the fun in that?—but he did heal his tortured balls, just in case, carefully closing the dozens of small wounds. He could tell the pain still lingered, the fragile flesh bruised and sensitive, and it pleased him. He removed the spreader bars next; first the one spreading Barton’s ankles apart, then the one torturing his shoulders. Afterwards, he unclasped the steel cage around Barton’s shaft, and unbuckled the sound ring to pull the sound out; Barton whined a little when he did, but didn’t react when Loki weighed his soft cock in his palm with a little smirk. Next he ripped out the spiked dildo, grinning at the resulting yowl of pain; and then, there was only the cock ring left, and Loki threw it away to clatter on the floor. Barton’s wrists were still shackled together behind his back, but Loki had no intention to set him free at the moment.

He heaved his limp body up and let him rest against him. Barton shuddered deeply, whimpering as his body slowly relaxed and the pain flared brighter still, now that he adrenaline was seeping out. Blood was trickling all over his body; he was sweaty and disheveled, panting heavily, and still in deep shock from the raw terror of his hanging.
Loki wrapped Barton in his arms to enjoy his last twitches of agony, as he himself slowly came down the dark heights of his cruel pleasure.

He sighed, deeply, and hugged Barton tighter. Norns, but this—this had been good. And no guilt. Only pleasure, in mind and body, pleasure. He felt more sated than ever before, even though he had come only once.

Barton slowly melted against him, his breathing calming down, and growing very deep, very measured. Loki grabbed his hair and softly tried to pull his head up, but it hung limp, Barton’s eyes unfocused and unseeing. Yes, he was done.

Loki grinned, then kissed his raw neck. He scooped him up in his arms and went to sit on the bed; leaning against the wall, he sat cross-legged and helped Barton curl up in his lap. He pulled the covers over him as high as he could, and wrapped his arms around him again; and they stayed together, without talking, for a long, long time.

“Well,” Loki whispered at long last.

He was softly carding through Barton’s hair, rubbing his relaxed shoulders, caressing his jaw. “This, was… extremely satisfying.”

Barton swallowed, then breathed something which resembled a shaky laugh.

“That’s my line, sir.”

---

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Thoughts?
It seemed like Loki, after all, could never escape his guilt. He was certain Barton had enjoyed himself or, at the very least, had never succumbed to the fear that he would be tortured to death. He had been certain, at the time.

But, since the noose, Barton had become strangely silent. He had never been truly talkative before, but it had been Loki’s pleasure to realize that as time went by, Barton opened up more and more, and smiled true smiles with a surprising ease. Ease was the right word; like a hawk high up in the sky hovering mid-air without flapping its wings or moving as much as a single feather, he looked fulfilled and in his exact place. But now, he was taciturn, closed of expression with eyes the color of a storm, and Loki felt the doubts he thought he’d chased gnaw at him all over again.

Another reasonable, careful conversation was in order, such as the one which had freed them from their awful conundrum after the Vanir incident.

“Barton, if you keep this up, I’ll string you up by your thumbs and leave you there for a week until you feel like talking,” Loki spat.

Barton lowered his bow and looked up at him, blinking a little. They were in Loki’s rooms; Barton had been busy waxing his ordinary bow and Loki… well, Loki had been sitting on a chair with his arms and legs crossed, glaring daggers at him.

“Sir?”

Loki felt himself deflating instantly. “I—” he shook his head. “No. What I meant—” he took a deep breath. “Barton, you’ve been different ever since your—since your hanging. Did I—” Loki was surprised at the physical effort it took him to spit the words out. “Did I do... something... wrong?”

Barton blinked again, then laughed a little, under his breath. “Sir, you never do.”

“Then what?” Loki exploded, anger and relief taking the better of him.

Barton shrugged, looking a bit embarrassed. “I’m sorry—I guess I was lost in thought. Some things… some things just stuck with me.”

“Such as?” Loki asked, feeling himself boiling silently at Barton’s cryptic phrases.

This time, the archer looked surprised, as though he thought it was obvious. Then he flushed a little, puzzling Loki all the more. This looked like he was afraid to ask for something.
“Tell me,” he ordered more calmly.

Without a word, Barton put his hand on his own neck and did a squeezing gesture. Loki gaped at him.

“I—” Barton said, looking tremendously awkward, hand climbing up to scratch his hair. “Like—this is exactly what we’re not supposed to do, okay? On Earth, I mean. Asphyxiation, that’s a thing, but you kept hearing stories of people who killed or crippled themselves or their partners with this. Lack of oxygen causing brain damage and stuff. When you hung me up, sir… I knew I could just take it. Without worrying. Because you always know what you’re doing.”

Loki wanted to scoff at that, but the moment was particularly ill-chosen. Besides, he supposed Barton was right—only when it came to the tortures Loki put him through, but still.

“And it felt… letting go like that…” He did a helpless gesture, as if the awe he’d felt could not be conveyed into words. “I guess you can’t understand, can you?”

“I don’t think I can,” Loki admitted. “But we can explore it some more.”

Barton’s pupils instantly devoured his irises and when he spoke, he was already breathless. “Sir—yes, please, sir—thank you, sir.”

Loki blinked, then grinned. Gods, Barton could turn his mood around in three seconds flat. “Barton,” he said in a low voice. “When you want something, especially something like this, you can always ask me.”

Barton nodded. “Got it. Thank you.” He still looked frozen with breathless delight at the thought of what was coming. Loki couldn’t help being surprised by the intensity with which he wanted this.

“Well, then,” he said, sounding a bit hoarse himself. “On the bed. Close your eyes.”

Barton sat cross-legged on the mattress and did as he was told, breathing a bit ragged and fingers clenching slightly around the fabric of his pants. Loki himself was dressed in comfortable clothes—he only very rarely wore his armor at home—and he climbed on the bed to sit behind Barton. And then, he did nothing.

This was one of his favorite parts. Letting him wait. Anticipation made Barton’s cheeks flush and his breath quicken a little already; or perhaps he was oxygenating his body in prevision of what would come next. Loki watched up to the tiniest telltale signs—the line of his shoulders very faintly straightening and relaxing, his fluttering eyelids, the way he licked his lips, and he could almost hear Barton try to guess when it would begin. He tensed up ever so slightly whenever he thought it would come, then relaxed a little when he was proved wrong, only to tense up again. It was during one of these minute moments when his guard was down that Loki suddenly seized his neck and strangled him.

Barton hissed and jerked violently; Loki did not do it gradually or carefully—he crushed Barton’s windpipe and cut him off entirely on his first try. Barton jerked a little more, then again, more weakly, and then he stopped, hanging limp and heavy, chest straining in his efforts not to try to breathe, eyes still closed, head thrown back.

Loki knew exactly when the lack of oxygenation would become critical—had Barton still been mortal, the fatal threshold would have been under one minute, but as he was now, he could go without oxygen for five full minutes without any damage. Loki released him well before that, and opened his fingers gradually, feeling the trachea regain its shape as the pressure decreased, and
Barton started taking huge lungfuls of air. Loki’s fingers stayed on his neck, fingers massaging it ever so slightly. When Barton’s breath was about even again, Loki began adding pressure again, very gradually so this time. Barton leaned back against him, seeking the warmth of Loki’s body, incredibly relaxed and so full of trust that Loki wanted to kiss him until that made him breathless. But he kept using his fingers and, like an expert organist, brought Barton to the edge of asphyxiation again. This time, he allowed a small trickle of air to flow, as to keep him on the threshold for a while longer. Barton’s mouth was ajar; he was slumped against Loki, letting out strange breaths as though each of them was his last—strange, moaning breaths, weaker and weaker as his supplies decreased. Loki did kiss him, then, maintaining the vice of his hands; Barton seemed unable to kiss back, but he opened himself with such abandon that Loki himself felt a little light-headed. Of all the ordeals, all the tortures he’d put him through, he’d never thought this would be the one to haunt Barton, to fascinate him to the point that he could think only of how he wanted more.

“More,” Loki murmured in his ear. “You want more.”

He released Barton, then pushed him on his back, head sinking into the pillows; when he felt Loki straddling him, he moaned in appreciation of the weight holding him down. His eyes were ajar, but still unseeing, vague and unfocused. Loki put his hands on his throat, above and under his Adam’s apple, and pushed; but he also put a knee across Barton’s chest and let his full weight pin him down. Barton let out an inarticulate sound of drugged delight, then shut up entirely as oxygen failed him again. Loki kept him under for a long, long time; for this one, he tacked into the neural link as to monitor him with maximum efficiency. Colored lights were blooming and dancing behind his eyelids, like fireworks and will-o’-the-wisps; when they faltered, Loki allowed a bit of air to trickle in, then cut him off again almost instantly, gradually pushing him down deeper and deeper, like a diver reaching a decompression depth and pausing before sinking further down in the darkness of the abyss.

Loki, Barton said through the neural link—like a bubble of air popping at the surface.

Loki wasn’t surprised. I am here, he answered, and he heard his own answer resonate in Barton’s world, enveloping him like the ocean in which he was drowning.

Barton didn’t speak more, but he still sent something through the neural link, a wordless warm wave of unabashed adoration, of ecstatic worship, like five thousand years devoted to love, like a kiss—and Loki gave a kiss to the unmoving lips.

“I love you, too,” he murmured, because Barton couldn’t hear him anyway. He kissed him deeper, outlining his lips and tongue, and he very slowly released his pressure, moving his knees away and loosening his fingers, so Barton would come back up to the kiss, which Loki kept open-mouthed as to feel him take his breath directly from his master’s lungs. And it was precisely what happened—Barton arched a little, then gasped for air in Loki’s mouth, and smiled against his lips when their mouths fitted together. Loki loosened and loosened his grip until he wasn’t holding him anymore, but still Barton’s breath remained very mild, as though he tried to keep himself down for a little longer, or as though he preferred to kiss Loki than to breathe.

He held up his arms, and Loki understood; with a smile, he helped him to sit up and they sank in each other’s embrace, holding tight with relief and light-headed glee.

“Thank you,” Barton breathed. “Sir, that was amazing, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Thank you,” Loki said in a very low voice.

And then he felt his lips moving on their own volition. “I need you to do it to me.”
Barton was too relaxed to worry, but he still objected, “Sir, I don’t know how. I’d hurt you. It wouldn’t be as good for you.”

“I don’t expect it to be good,” Loki explained. “I just need you to strangle me until I can’t move.”

“Why?”

So I’ll know you’d let me live.

Loki didn’t say. He just murmured, “Do it.”

Barton exhaled, then nodded, and slowly pushed Loki back into the pillows, where he was a minute ago. He didn’t put his knee on Loki’s chest, but he caught the pale neck in his strong, calloused hands, and he started squeezing.

Loki arched and thrashed so ferally Clint instantly let go and backed off. “Sir—”

“No,” Loki panted. “No. It was just a reflex. I’ll contain myself. Do it.”

Barton was still too out of it not to trust Loki blindly; he licked his lips, then straddled him again, and wrapped his fingers around his neck.

This time, Loki managed not to kick him back spear in the stomach jump back to safety but it was a close thing. As Barton added pressure, Loki felt it more and more difficult not to move; he stayed motionless, though, because he trusted Barton with his life and he desperately needed to give himself a tangible proof of that. And then, the air flow was completely cut off, Loki’s sight flickered then went away, and he was left in the dark.

He stayed there for a breathless eternity. It felt like plunging back into the abyss below the Bifrost with his lungs crushed. There was no hope. Nowhere to go. Only death around and inside him. He tried to breathe, once, and couldn’t. He tried to breathe, twice, and couldn’t. He tried to writhe, but his body wasn’t responding. He tried to breathe—

—and Barton let him breathe, let him come back up and breathe, gasping and sucking air into his lungs, feeling light-headed at how stupid this had been of him, Barton could have killed him, he could have, but he hadn’t, and Loki felt himself laugh the hoarse laugh of the survivor, giddy and trembling on the bed. He sat up and held Barton in his arms like they’d been before, but this time he held him so tight he almost cut off his breath all over again.

He opened his mouth to thank him. But all he heard was—and he must have said that since it was his voice coming out of his throat—

“Have you never wanted to kill me?”

Barton pulled back, just enough to look at him in the eyes. “What?” he said softly.

“Have you never wished—” Loki swallowed then went on, hurried and febrile, “A few days ago. When I was pushing those needles in your flesh. Did you not wish me dead? Did you not hate me? Did you not wish you could take your revenge?”

“No,” Barton simply said.

He buried his fingers in Loki’s dark hair and rested his forehead against his master’s shoulder. “When you hurt me really bad, sometimes I pray—but I pray to you, and I never pray for your death.”
Loki nodded, relief overflowing him to the point that he couldn’t speak.

“Sir, you know all that,” Barton said in a tone of mild reproach, as though he was offended by Loki’s concerns. He perceived them as lack of trust, Loki realized, even though he’d just been given the opportunity to free himself once and for all.

Loki laughed under his breath, still a little shaky. “Yes,” he admitted. “I know.”

And for the first true time, their kiss tasted of eternity.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for reading.
It took so many beginnings, so many false starts, so many trials and errors; and yet there are only two real endings down the way.

It ends a few decades later, when Loki takes Clint back to Midgard for the last time.

They stand under a heavy rain Loki may or may have not conjured himself. It soaks Loki’s hair and rolls down Clint’s cheeks. It makes the dark soil muddy and treacherous underneath their feet. It drips down the black coats and black umbrellas, makes bloodshot eyes blink and cold lips quiver. It makes the small crowd shiver, but somehow, they are all grateful for the cold, stinging drops.

Sometimes blue skies are simply not welcome.

Loki and Clint stand at the back of the small crowd. Bruce Banner is sitting on the front row. He glances at them, once; his weary eyes gleam with recognition, then he looks away. Others have recognized them, but no words are spoken.

They are used to their presence at the funerals by now. They know they will just watch, and then go.

When they start digging the grave, Clint holds himself even more stiffly. He stares right ahead and swallows against the leather of his collar. Loki focuses on the rain, and says nothing.

It takes a long time, but eventually, it is done. Four persons carry the coffin. Clint is not among them; it is not his place. He does not move from Loki’s side.

Loki focuses on the rain.

When it is all over—when the drenched flowers are piled on the freshly upturned earth, when the crowd scatters, Banner glancing again at Barton, a tired, distant glance, just before he goes, because there is nothing to say and Clint unable to look at him, unable to move his head—when they are the
only two left standing there, Loki finally turns to Clint.

“Is there anything you would like?” he asks quietly, his voice barely audible over the constant patter of the rain.

Clint doesn’t answer for a long while. When he does, it’s nothing Loki expected.

“I want to go to a nightclub,” he says.

The music is almost unbearably loud even to Loki’s ears, and the strobe lighting which flashes and spins against the darkness is painful to his eyes. He was surprised before, but he understands, now, why Barton would want to come here of all places. It is hot and sweaty and full of people stomping their feet and waving their arms and clapping their hands, tossing back their hair, laughing and shouting, grinding together, losing their breath. Alcohol flows like honey and milk. The beats of the music thrum in the pit of Loki’s stomach, in his bones, in his mind. It reeks of life. This is what Barton wants and needs right now, indeed.

Reeking life.

Loki does not need to be told what role to play. He prides himself in knowing Barton well enough to know exactly what he needs, and that is why he is his master, even though he is the one being used that night, and fully aware of it, too. For the first hour, he sits at a table, in a white button-down and black pants, and casts an icy look on every Midgardian brave or drunk or stupid enough to try and approach him. Clint is at the bar; Loki left him on his own to intoxicate himself, to drown into the incredibly Midgardian feel of this place. To forget, maybe, for just an hour. To pretend he had a different life.

Loki will not ask him later. No matter what he says, his slave still gets to keep a few rooms of his own.

Then Clint gets down from his stool and elbows his way through the dancing crowd. Loki spots him at once; he gets up and the crowd unconsciously—or consciously—recedes to let him through. They meet in the middle of the dance floor; Loki grabs Clint’s neck as he reaches him, and kisses him hard. He can taste alcohol, but he knows Clint is not drunk. He will be soon, albeit not on this kind of spirit.

Loki lets the pounding drums drown it all out, and starts moving along with the beat. This cannot be called dancing; he feels like he is casting a spell—he feels like he is worshipping a voracious god, like he is losing himself in the sacred fury of sacrifice, giving his energy to a deity which will provide other things in exchange. He has never done this kind of thing, but he finds it easy; it requires no skill, only confidence, and it is somehow freeing in its savageness, in the very lack of rules. Loki does, though, monitor the look in Clint’s eyes, as they dance and dance and dance as though this is nothing but a feverish nightmare, in the darkness torn asunder by the multicolored lightning and the roars and whines and keens of the music. Eventually, Clint’s eyes grow glassy, his movements less coordinated. When it does happen, Loki grabs him from behind, presses him close against his own body, his left hand wrapped around Clint’s throat, his right hand grabbing his hip, going down to clutch at his inner thigh, then up to press against his pelvis. He makes him grind against him, in slow, pulsing movements, and forces him to keep going, to give more, to get on with someone else’s rhythm, to lose himself to the point of exertion, sucking hickeys into his neck as they move. The music snarls and pounds and screams, twisting like a living serpent. Clint has closed his eyes by now, and breathes raggedly, red and green and blue flashes lighting up the perspiration on his skin. At some point, Loki notices the many looks cast upon them by the people dancing around—looks of
envy or desire; looks of outrage; looks of worry for Clint, who looks like he is drugged, half-unconscious and breathing hard in the lock of Loki’s arms.

Eventually, Loki can feel him ready, can feel him trying to grind back, or to escape, maybe, struggling for breath, shaking his head to hide from the lights piercing through his eyelids and the sounds piercing through his eardrums. Loki manhandles him towards the men’s room, then; he is quite sure this doesn’t normally happen here, but he doubts anyone will dare to interrupt.

Then he sees a black-clad figure with an earpiece move towards him in the pulsing shadows. A security guard, probably. Apparently, Loki was aggressive enough, vicious enough, for a concerned stranger to report him. He doesn’t care; at any rate, it means he’s doing it right. He walks inside the men’s room, slams the door shut behind them and locks it. Then he pushes Clint inside a stall, crushes him face first against the damp tiled wall, and tugs his jeans down in one sharp pull.

He takes him without any care or preparation, making him scowl and groan and scramble until his arms are twisted in his back, wrists pinned down almost against his shoulder blades by Loki’s right hand, the left one gripping his hair so he’ll hold still. Clint grits his teeth and endures it, gasping out with each thrust; Loki can see his muscles quiver, he can feel his body yield, he can almost hear the white noise in Clint’s mind finally coming to an end. When he is brought to the point of collapse, when he cannot take it anymore, Loki wraps his hand around his cock, and that is all it takes for him to fall apart.

After Loki pulls out, Clint slowly glides down on the floor, defeated, broken, eyes unseeing.

By the time Loki zips himself up and smoothes his shirt, Clint has drifted off. Loki then takes him in his arms—lifts him up bridal style, and goes out of the stall at the very same second the security guard breaks through the bathroom door. It certainly took him a while.

He is as tall as Loki, and his shoulders are broader. When he sees Loki, though—when he sees him effortlessly holding an unconscious Clint in his arms, having obviously fucked him into oblivion; when he sees the look in his blue eyes—he takes a step back. His instinct tells him not to move. It is far too late anyway; Clint Barton is beyond any rescue he can provide.

Loki goes out of the men’s room, then out of the club, without being further disturbed.

The relative silence of the outside and the open air are a great relief. It is very late; a few cars pass by. There is a hotel across the street. Loki walks in and quietly asks for a room. He does not take the elevator, but climbs up with a steady pace, Clint limp and unconscious in his arms.

The room is bland and nondescript. Loki takes Clint’s shoes off, then leaves him on the bed and goes into the bathroom. He is not quite used to it, but he feels dirty, and he makes a point in not using any kind of magic today. The shower will do.

When he feels a bit cleaner, he goes out, dries himself, and puts the white shirt and black pants back on. He stays barefoot. Going back to the main room, he finds Clint shivering in his sleep; he draws the covers over him, then sits on a chair next to the bed, and closes his eyes.

The first rays of dawn wake Clint up. He stares hazily at Loki, then reaches out; Loki takes his hand, and squeezes. He can feel him squeezing back feebly, a weak, wordless thanks pressed into his palm. They say nothing for a little while.
“Sir, I don’t want to do this anymore,” Clint mumbles.

Loki looks at him.

“What do you mean?” he asks in a quiet tone.

“I don’t want to come back again. It’s not worth it.”

Loki always knew this day would come—the day when Clint would leave Midgard behind for good. And he had a feeling today was this day. Their first funerals did not go down like this; Clint mourned, yes, but he never felt the need to wreck himself to this extent; on the contrary, Loki usually left him a bit of time before resuming their games. But Barton’s world has grown older, gone ahead without him, and he no longer feels a part of it; by now Loki is secure enough in their mutual trust to know that it will not harm him—not in a disproportionate way. He will forget, as centuries go by.

Still, it causes Loki a slight pang, too; even though he wished for this moment to happen oh so many times before. For this is the first ending, and it makes him aware, for a second, that even though they have time, time doesn’t stop for any of them, and their own ending will come, too soon.

He brings Clint’s hand to his lips, and kisses it.

“Then, to the stars,” he whispers.

The rest, the in between, the longest part of it all—it can simply not be told. They live for too long and travel too far and go too deep for it to be told by anyone but themselves, a story they whisper to each other in the dark as they make love, a story written with their seed and blood, in spikes of dazzling pleasure and valleys of stunned calm, of low tides, of mixed breaths and laced fingers. They live many an adventure, they betray many a king and save many a prince, but the greatest legend of them all is the life they share, the illusion of immortality which pulses in their blood as they forget who they used to be, only to be born again; for a hundred years is a long time, and they have many hundreds, many thousands, many lives ahead of them, and so many endings—which are all meaningless after all since no matter who they become and what they lose, they stay together. They like this game and they play it to forget that they will not, cannot, live forever.

In each second, they find their eternity.

It ends a few thousand years later.

By now, Loki has walked twenty-one times through Idunn’s orchard for Clint. Every time, his slave was fed the apple in the middle of the atrium, Loki still nude in his dark blue skin, Clint kneeling and bowing to him, for the whole Universe to see.

On the ninth time, they have heard a skald singing bright and clear, *O hear my song, as I sing fire and ice,* and there were other songs, songs of battles and blood. And songs of the end.

Of course, Clint knows the tales. He knew about them even before Loki took him as his slave. The skald sings in Old Norse, but Clint knows the language by now (in their house of stone, they still
speak in English, and it is in English too that he screams and begs, for Loki never ceased to give him pain, and Clint never ceased to take it) and Clint repeats the verses under his breath.

They are running out of eternity.

Winter, a surreal, cosmic winter, grows and freezes the lower branches of the Nine Realms. Midgard is almost a dead world by now, the humans having flown away over the centuries to hive off in the galaxy, away even from Heimdall’s gaze, and from Loki’s reach. Clint and he have come across a few of them sometimes (one of them, a low-class criminal locked away with a walking tree, even recognized Clint as human, although he is not human, not truly, not anymore.)

*Ragnarök will begin with three years of winter.*

Yes, they both know the songs. They know Thor will be killed by a snake and Odin by a wolf, know Heimdall and Loki are meant to kill each other. Loki never wondered about those old rumors coursing the branches of the tree, but now that the end is here, he wonders. And it seems so unlikely. He hasn’t seen Thor in years, nor Odin, nor Heimdall. Perhaps Barton’s presence disrupted it all.

Loki has no intention to fight anyway. When the final winter starts, Clint and he go back to their house of stone, and they give up on all pranks, all schemes, and all projects—they drop all their masks and all the identities they forged for themselves over the centuries; and they stay together in that tiny space, like they were so long ago when they still barely knew each other, and by now, they are both old enough that three entire years in bed seem like only one very long, very pleasurable night.

And then, one day, they wake up in the ice fields of Jotunheim.

It comes as a surprise at first, but as they look around, they understand quickly enough. Jotunheim itself, that planet Loki had attempted to destroy eons ago, is deteriorating like an old rotten fruit, layers of permafrost shrinking and peeling away, revealing Loki’s bedroom hidden under the ice. The entire land is being turned inside out, the entrails coming out and swallowing the rocks and the jagged mountains. Impossibly, they hear the hoarse song of a rooster in the distance.

Loki knows only too well what it means, for there are no birds and no trees in his realm of birth. This is Fjalarr, one of the three messengers of doom, and the end has begun; and the end will not let them hide beneath layers or stone waiting for a peaceful death.

Looking up at the stormy skies, Loki can see the Nine Realms are aligning again, like they did five thousand years ago. Through this strange, multi-lensed telescope, like so many round screens hovering in the air, Loki can see that the entire realm of Midgard bursts like a monstrous egg to let out a serpent the size of a planet, and fire starts raining down from the skies in Alfheim, and the very fabric of reality shakes and simmers, spreading a soul-deep horror into all living things throughout the Nine Realms—and the Bifrost opens everywhere at the same time.

It hits the golden city of Asgard, the desolated lands of Midgard, the fires of Muspellheim, and the ice of Jotunheim. It is time for the last stand; and there will be no hiding; fate is waiting for them.

Without a word to each other, Loki and Clint walk into the column of light. The colors take them to the last battlefield—the field of Vigridr, legend says.

And Loki smiles, he cannot help it, because even after all this time, there are still things he never knew. And he never *knew* those fields had a name. He can hear bilgesnipes in the distance, and he
sees a little wooden house on top of a hill as the rainbow drops them on the ground.

He allows his smile to linger for a second; then he turns away, closes his eyes, and silently lets the remnants of his house fall apart. Throughout the Nine Realms, the yet untouched stone rooms collapse on themselves, burying away Loki’s precious books, the walls stained with Barton’s seed and blood, the marble baths, and all the rest. Clint can feel it too, and he breathes deeply in mourning as their home of five thousand years passes away.

Then the archer puts on his silver helmet, and takes out Ichaival, loaded with Dvalin’s arrows. He waits only for Loki’s word.

Loki gives it when the giant snake appears in the skies, reminiscent of the Chitauri whales, so long ago. Barton’s arrow is lost, of course—the serpent of Midgard is simply too impossibly huge—but the gesture was enough. The first shot has been fired.

The Bifrost strikes all over the field again and this time, the Aesir and Vanir and Elves arrive in a ferocious explosion of colors. Odin is their leader, of course, Thor by his side as he always was; and at this very moment, the sun shines black, the skies turn red, the Bifrost breaks—a tremendous howl is heard, and the battle begins.

Thor is the first to die—taking the monstrous snake with him in a tremendous, fantastic lightning storm. Loki spares one thought for him, then looks away.

Only to find the All-Father himself next to him in the turmoil of battle.

Loki knows Odin is supposed to die in the jaws of a wolf. He still buries his spear into the old man’s good eye, and he doesn’t feel a single tinge of regret. Loki must be a wolf, then, as well as a falconer, but there will be no skalds to speak of it, no one to complain that the legends weren’t respected. It is, after all, the end of all things. Odin dies in silence and will not be mourned, for there will be no one left to mourn him. If there was any magic left, perhaps he could be saved. But magic is when the Universe listens to you, and the Universe itself is falling apart. There is nothing left to listen.

Loki does not rejoice as he wrings his blade free from the corpse, just like he didn’t cry for Thor; too many years have passed for him to retain even his hatred towards his not-father. He killed him because he was here; because it is the end. When all things die, then Death loses its meaning—or rather finds it; now rid of the anxieties of the living, it can bloom in all its mysterious and unknown glory. What is Death, when nothing lives?

Loki is about to find out.

Heimdall’s sword feels unbearably cold when it rips through his body, easily cutting through the leather of his armor. Loki winces and half-heartedly tries to move, but frankly, there is no point. Of course Heimdall would avenge Odin, whom he served faithfully for so long. Of course the predictions all make sense in the end. Oh, Norns.

So Loki feels himself dying, and the feeling is familiar, except that this time he knows that nothing can possibly save him. He falls on his knees and remembers he is supposed to kill Heimdall back. He does not honestly think he can. He feels so drained already; and the legend was already wrong about the wolf, so maybe…

But then a black arrow hisses past and almost entirely disappears in Heimdall’s throat just under the
chin—severing his jugular with incredible precision. Loki smiles, then; he coughs hoarsely with laughter, and smiles, and sits cross-legged on the ground, and waits for Barton to find him.

It does not take long. Clint drops his bow and quiver as he comes closer; he takes off his helmet and sits in front of him, and the battle is over for them.

They look at each other face-to-face, in a breath of eternity amidst the raging slaughter all around them. Loki opens his hand, and Clint unbucks the dagger on his thigh to give it to him. He knows what is going to happen. He is not afraid.

Loki grabs Clint’s throat, and looks him in the eye; he doesn’t look away as he slowly, slowly buries the blade to the hilt inside his stomach. Clint pants, and scowls, without another sound; Loki has held back for five thousand years, and it is as good as he always imagined.

Clint screws his eyes shut as the knife goes in all the way; he takes a fluttering breath, then Loki rips the dagger out and he gasps, blood and life flowing out of his body, a few tears rolling down his cheeks.

Loki breathes perfection through his dying lungs. They press their foreheads together, deaf and blind to the turmoil going on around them.

So quiet.

“Loki,” Clint murmurs.

He scowls again and coughs; then he frames Loki’s face and kisses the blood trickling from his lips. “I love you, sir,” he manages. “I’ve loved you for five thousand years.”

Loki smiles.

In his last breath, he whispers back, “And I will love you for five thousand more.”

They lean in for a last kiss, but they are dead before their lips can touch.
Well, this is it.

Readers, I cannot thank you enough. For reading, for kudoing, for commenting. For telling me everything you liked and why you liked it. This has been a long, long fic, and writing both POVs has helped me exploring myself, as well as exploring those characters I love every day a bit more.

This is probably the last installment of the series. There is, of course, *Dimensions of Trust* which qualifies as a crossover companion piece, I suppose. Perhaps there will be a sequel to this one, but it won’t be before a few months in any case, so it’s probably best to consider it over for now.

I will keep writing about kink (because kink!) And as a matter of fact, my next long fanfiction will be another FrostHawk; it will involve kink, but it will be a completely different story, with a much slower built, different roles for them both, and majorly different outcomes. Stay tuned or subscribe if you’re interested.

And thank you. Thank you so much for reading. :)

**Works inspired by this one:**

[*Pair and Clint on a Sunlit Stroll* by locusinbloom (Fractual_Visions), *The Hawk and his Falconer* by miazilla, *Fanart for From the Top* by impiarum]

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!