Loki in the Marquesas
by Weaselwoman

Summary

This is a tale of Loki: Skywalker, Mare’s Mother, God of Mischief; Loki who solves the gods’ crises in his own way, and for his own purposes.

Notes

1. In *The Sandman: The Kindly Ones*, Neil Gaiman’s Odin called Loki ”Mare's Mother.” This is that story.

2. Sleipnir is a stallion, not a mare.

3. The famed Norse Crisis Flowchart is from http://bettermyths.com/norse-crisis-flowchart/

“God of Mischief,” Odin said.

“Allfather.” Loki—sometimes Odinson, sometimes Laufeyson, sometimes child of no one at all—gave his putative father his widest, least sincere smile. “You have need of me.”

It was a family meeting in the smallest conference room on Asgard: Odin and Thor in their “business suit” leathers, as Loki thought of them, practically-but-not-quite armor; cousin Tyr in new leather, Frigga in satin, Sif in absentia, Freya Sifsdottir dressed like her current hero on television (Rachel Maddow); and Loki, just arrived from his island, in board shorts and a ratty message T-shirt; covered in tribal tattoos, with one flip-flopped foot propped on the edge of the conference table. He had looked worse before; there were a number of meetings—none recent—in which Loki had been literally what the goats had dragged in: Toothgnasher and Toothgrinder being the goats in question. Still, Odin gave him the stink-eye and he straightened in his chair, fading out the tattoos and converting his outfit into the appropriate green leathers. “Better?” with his head cocked towards Odin, like a bird.

Odin started the meeting. “Thor insists on going to war, beyond the nine realms, and Asgard needs a diplomatic representative in New York.”

“And with the Avengers,” Thor added, “to help defend Midgard while I am gone.”

“Let’s unpack those statements,” said Loki. “Brother, you could be years following your hammer to fly to the Badoon—or I could open for you a direct path. And Father, you have finally decided to treat with Midgard as allies, rather than subjects —to join their United Nations—and you find they do not reach to you with open arms, but rather must decide whether to accept Asgard as a member of their association. I suppose it must rankle, seeing the political and economic successes my Jotuns have had on Midgard.”

“Your Jotuns.”

“You gave them to me, did you not? My box of broken toys, to repair and not to rule? And I have done that; I do not rule Jotunheim, but there’s not a soul there, up to the very kings, who would deny their success was due to me.”

“Because Thor gave you access to Midgard!”

“Possibly. In any case, however, if your successor-king Thor is not there to represent you in New York, if their diplomats have more issues to resolve, who will see to our family’s interests? Sif does not care to; Tyr is no diplomat; Frigga will not come alone; would you send your student princess, who does not even bear your name, or would you do it yourself, King?”

“Freya would consult with you, anyway; and she is too young for such responsibility,” Odin said. “And were I to come, at this juncture, they would see me as a petitioner rather than a king. Asgard does not grovel.”

“But a second son in New York would ruffle no feathers, being neither too high in rank nor too low.”

“And the Avengers?” prompted Thor.

“If they can tolerate me, I suppose I can tolerate them.”
“And so we come to what you want,” said Odin. “You want Sleipnir, my horse.”
“And so we come to what you want,” said Odin. “You want Sleipnir, my horse.”

“Just a breeding lease. For one year. For my ranch on Midgard.”

“As you say, let us examine this further. You know that Heimdall keeps me informed of your activities.”

“I’ve made no secret of them. And Thor has been my guest from time to time.”

“You need a stallion for your horses.”

“For my mares. I’ve a herd of white mares, and their daughters. Every year or so, I bring in a stallion for them, to develop the breed.”

And where did you get these horses?”

“As I said, I bring in a stallion….”

“No, Loki. The mares. Where did they come from? Had they not mothers?”

“Ah. Well…” Loki looked down, swallowed.

Odin reached into a nearby pile of papers, pulled out a magazine turned to a black-and-white photo, and tossed it across the table to Loki. “Does this simplify your explanation?”

It was a picture of tattooed, naked Loki, seen from the rear, with a fiendish grin on his face and a whip-handle shoved up his ass. Homage to a famous Mapplethorpe self-portrait. In it, Loki boasted an impressively bloated belly.

“It’s been censored.”

“What goes on at that ranch of yours?”

“Fine. My white mares are my daughters. My daughters, as Sleipnir is my son. Does that explain things?”

“You have congress with stallions?” asked Tyr, appalled.

Loki shrugged. “I can become a mare, easily enough. And there are artificial means for which the stallion himself need not be present.”

“This is argr,” Tyr continued. “You shame us all.”
Odin asked, “Would you have congress with your own son? The result would be a monster.”

“It would be a centipede,” said Thor, under his breath.

“Father,” Loki addressed Odin rather than the chaos around him. “I won’t seduce your precious horse. I am already gravid.”

“What?!?” from both Thor and Tyr, almost simultaneously.

“I found a stallion. And ... tried him out. But he collicked, and died, before he could be sent to my ranch.” Loki paused. “For years, I have searched for a horse like Svadilfari. Believe me, I’ve looked.” Loki patted his still-flat belly. “There is none like him on Midgard. And only one on Asgard.”

“Which you are not worthy to approach, my disreputable son.”

“Look again,” Loki said, tossing the magazine back at Odin, “I’ve never used your name. ‘Mr. Laufeyson, of Jotunheim and French Polynesia, breeds rare sport horses on an island in the Marquesas.’ There is no mention of Odin, or Odinsons, or Asgard at all. No shame, no disrepute, falls on you.”

“And it will not, if you represent us on Midgard until Thor’s return?”

“It will not,” Loki promised.

“A year’s campaigning lost while my war horse dallies with your oversexed daughters. Is that it?” Loki nodded. “Then let us discuss terms. What is the usual fee you pay?”

“First choice of the colts, or its value.”

“I’d want all the colts, not just one. You may keep any fillies.”

“Done.”

“And you may not bear any child of Sleipnir’s.”

“Well...”

“No, Loki. In fact, this foal you carry now shall be your last.”

Loki looked down, sighed, looked back at Odin. “Very well. Have you any other conditions?”

“One; but perhaps it is not only for you.” Odin shifted to catch Freya’s eye, then again to Loki. “Your mother and I have noticed just how calm you have been these last many years. Helpful; possibly even reasonable. But we only see you a few weeks, then you are gone again for a year or more. We would be honored to have a calm, helpful, reasonable, sane Loki in our councils at any time. But now, it seems this new maturity is only due to the mad schemes you are engaged in elsewhere. I’d like you sensible—as you are now—but not gravid. Can you do that?”

It seemed more bargaining was possible. “Would you accept half sane, half the time?”

Odin sighed. “I am willing to accept mostly sane—say, three-quarters sane—all of the time; nothing less. And I challenge my grand-daughter, your niece here,” another sharp look at Freya, “your protégé, to help you attain this long-term maturity, and to demonstrate it to me. Thor,” who startled as Odin addressed him, “is not Midgardian science able to accomplish such things?”
“So I am told,” said Thor, who had engaged in many previous discussions on this topic with both of his parents, and who had asked various SHIELD therapists, quietly, for advice.

Loki bowed his head in acquiescence.

Chapter End Notes

Aristotle says that one should start telling a tale in the middle, not at the beginning; so the first few Prologue chapters will be coming from the middle of the tale.
Frigga is like cowbell

Chapter Summary

Loki's mommy also wonders WTF.

Chapter Notes

This fiction is not Thor: The Dark World compliant (obviously, if you've seen the movie), but the movie illuminated the need for more Frigga. More Frigga is a good thing. Hence this short chapter. More notes at the end.

Frigga sat silent through the entire meeting, sometimes meeting his eye with a concerned look. As they stood, she came toward him.

“Loki? So my baby is having another baby?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Mother,” said Loki, scanning the group for Freya. “It’s just another horse.”

Frigga sighed. “I wish I understood you, Loki. Why...?”

“I think you know perfectly well why,” he said, overriding her. But he hadn’t meant to snap at his mother; not really.

She looked up at him, said quietly, “I meant for what purpose. You always have one.”

“Ah. Well. As Father says this is to be my last foal, ask me afterwards. All right?”

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Note: The famous SNL sketch with “More Cowbell” is: http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/more-cowbell/n41046/
Some unspecified time earlier

Chapter Summary

Time to justify the title of this work!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four people relaxing in the grass in the shade of tropical chestnut trees, along an empty gray-sand beach on Ua Po’u: a tall and muscular blond man, a dark-haired woman (also tall and muscular), a leaner tall pale man with his dark hair in a ponytail, and a tan-skinned black-haired girl at the cusp of womanhood (if she were a boy, her voice would be cracking between registers; if she were a cat, she would be elongated and energetic, not quite past kittenhood). Waves growl quietly onto the shore; a cool breeze blows from the vivid blue ocean.

“You were right,” says Sif in Thor’s arms. “This is very peaceful. How did you find this place?”

“I didn’t,” says Loki, eyes closed. “Pele did.” Behind his lowered eyelids, Loki was tense as coiled wire. He let the conversation wash over him as he thought.

This is done and this is done and this is agreed to—finally!—and then come the next steps…and then comes the big step. He raises himself up with his elbows beneath him. The big step is preying on his mind (like the remembered blow from the Other, which has never quite gone away). Loki gives a bright, false smile.


“Loki, what are you thinking?”—this from Sif.

“I’d hoped,” he confessed, “that time would calm my mind; but my wits are still scattered. And I’ll need to focus entirely for this next step.”

“For Jotunheim?” asked Thor.

“Yes,” he snapped, “for Jotunheim. What else occupies all my time? The Casket does its work, my plans are finally approved, my scouting has been successful; what else would it be?”

“It’s good to have a big project,” said Sif, lazily. “I think I was the calmest I’ve ever been when I was pregnant with Freya.”

“But didn’t you feel vulnerable?”

“I felt invulnerable. Had anything threatened her, I would have attacked like a lion.”

“She would even have attacked me,” Thor said. “But I was a nervous witling the whole time.”

“And sometime after,” Sif added.

“Could Loki bear children?” Pele asked, in jest; but all three Asgardians jumped.
Thor caught his brother’s eye. “Loki, no!”

“Don’t ‘Loki, no’ me, brother. You have no idea what I am contemplating.”

“Not more children, I hope. Yours are monsters.”

“Not all of them, but… they are always threats.”

“Except Sleipnir,” said Sif.

“Hush,” said Thor to Sif; and then turned to Pele. “My apologies, child. This tale is not fit for your delicate ears.” Then smiled at her. “Although I can see why you get along so well with my brother. You both think of outrageous things.”

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After Thor and Sif returned to Asgard, Loki and the child-goddess Pele play a game with green leaves and fallen nuts in the sand.

“A story not fit for my delicate ears?” Pele snorted. “Will you tell me of Sleipnir?”

Loki brushes away their game, lays back. “Not all my children are monsters. As I said, all are threats. Except…Sleipnir is valued, is welcome for all his fierce brilliance.”

“Sleipnir?” Pele asks again.

“He is a horse,” explains Loki, eyes closed in the warm sun.

“So have another horse,” says Pele. “It’s obvious.”

As they drowse on a wind-cooled beach, in the hazy sun, in the Marquesas.

Chapter End Notes

1. Ua Po‘u is one of the Marquesas, a chain of volcanic Islands between Tahiti and Chile, which are part of French Polynesia. Geologically, the Marquesas are very much like the Hawaiian Islands, only much older; and the first migration of native Hawaiians probably arrived from the Marquesas. The people speak two local languages (North Marquesan and South Marquesan), Tahitian, and French. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marquesas_Islands.

2. Pele is that Pele (no, not the soccer player). There are stories about her in the Marquesas as well as in Hawaii. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pele_%28deity%29. (And yes, I asked for her permission before publishing this chapter.)
And now, back to the beginning of the tale

Chapter Summary

In which Odin judges Loki.

Chapter Notes

Note: These events take place just after the Avengers movie. Laufey is, in the Marvel Universe, Loki’s biological father.

Loki, in chains and muzzle, is taken to the smaller throne room. This meeting is not private; there are enough counselors present that Odin’s judgment will be communicated; but there are no unruly spectators, and no family, to potentially disrupt proceedings. And after all, he has not damaged Asgard.

Odin’s thunder, usually aimed at Thor, is now addressed to him. “Loki. First you will listen, then you may talk. Understood?”

He looks indifferently at his father, then tilts his head. Listening.

Odin: “You are a wild animal, Loki. Punished, you become an enemy. Rewarded, you are insufferable. Given a task, you are … useful. So for this latest outrage, I give you a task. Fix your mess. Repair Jotunheim.”

Then the chains, the muzzle drop.


“No,” said Odin. “Jotunheim should be Jotunheim, returned to its glory: whole and sound.”

“A large task, then.”

“Suitable recompense for your damage to it.”

And Odin motions him into a private room.

“And what about Midgard?” Loki asks.

“Midgard is Thor’s concern, not yours.”

“I see. I have trampled Thor’s playthings, so you give me a box of broken toys of my own.”

“To repair,” says Odin. “Not to keep. Jotunheim is not yours.”

“I do not want Jotunheim. But was I not meant to rule?”

“Thor was meant to rule, my Jotun foundling. You were meant for something else.”
Loki winced; Odin raised a warning finger. “Only truths here. Silence has harmed too many. Here was my wisdom: you were to be an outsider’s eye, for all the nine realms; to understand what we would miss, what was beyond us. And to be an unseen hand, to work in the background. But I let Frigga coddle you.”

“You became a monster to raise a monster, Father. Were you ever going to tell me who I am?”

“Not while Laufey lived, if I could have avoided it.” Odin sighed. “Jotunheim was great, once. And now, so low has it fallen... You are still a child. Rebuild Jotunheim, for its people. You will return their Casket of Ancient Winters, as a sign of good will, and to facilitate repairs.”

Facing his son’s evident skepticism, Odin sighed again. “Loki. My mother, Bestla, was a Jotun. They are not all like Laufey.”

“And his sons? What are they like?”

Odin’s expression shuttered closed. His next words were in a cold voice. “You know one. The rest are for you to discover.”

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Next he went to Frigga. “Odin wants me to go to Jotunheim.”

“Loki, my clever one: How can you have all the answers until you know the questions?”

“I’ve been to Jotunheim, thank you!”

“Not like this. As Odin’s emissary, you will be protected. Take advantage of your position to learn.”

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As he packed, Odin told him more.

“I never meant to keep the Casket; Jotunheim is not whole without it. The planet crumbles, and falls apart.”

“Then why did you keep it?”

“I’d hoped to outlast Laufey; I could not afford to give him the victory that the Casket’s return would represent. And then you used the Bifrost to make things much worse. Jotunheim needs the Casket, now.”

“But why me? Could not Thor have returned it?”

“Does it pain you to play the hero, even if to Frost Giants?”

“It pains me to be playing your game again.”

“Then consider my other selfish reason: If things go wrong on Jotunheim, you could survive there. Thor would not. How much do you hate him?”

Loki stared at Odin with genuine dislike. Thor would make a heroic botch of things and, whatever the result, be declared victorious. Loki, on the other hand...ye gods, was the All-father really letting him loose with a priceless artifact and a defenseless realm, after he’d nearly destroyed New York? Perhaps Odin meant him to fail. Perhaps he would do so, spectacularly. This might be fun.
“As you say, it’s my mess. I’ll take care of it.”
Loki Goes to Jotunheim

Chapter Summary

What the title says.

Chapter Notes

Notes: See the end of the text

Loki had been given some briefing before this trip, at least. The Bifrost’s attack had swept over the livable surface of Jotunheim, wiping out a third of the population, and proportionally many more of the beasts they hunted for food. The seas had fared a little better, but had been clouded and polluted by much of the debris from the blasted cities; the pollutants were slowly settling out. (The damage would have been far worse, but most Jotun buildings were made of ice, not metal or stone.) However, the most significant damage was to the structure of Jotunheim itself; a small planetoid, much of its land had been ablated away, and what was left had too little mass to remain in a stable orbit around its primary sun. Given enough time (and it was not very much time, as astronomers reckon), Jotunheim would be no more. Unless the missing mass could be coaxed into returning. The few remaining Jotun seidhr-masters were persuasive, but not on this scale.

Perhaps a certain Jotun prince-magician could have rebuilt the realm, given a very long lifetime to do it. However, the Casket of Ancient Winters, returned to Jotunheim, could easily sing the lost flocks of ice-birds home to roost; could call home asteroids and comets, and persuade cosmic dust to land; could grow Jotunheim back into stability. The Casket was not a war-weapon, as Laufey had thought; it was the beating heart of the realm.

Laufey the fanatical warlord, the Unifier of Jotunheim, the King over Kings, had mellowed drastically after he lost the Casket to Odin’s forces. Its return might well have rekindled his ambitions, but Laufey was no more, slain while attacking Asgard (slain by Loki, in fact). The kingship was now held by his remaining sons, Byleistr and Helblindi. That they could share a throne argued that they might be more peaceful than their sire; beyond this, little was known.

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Although the Bifrost’s repair is nearly complete, it is still not a safe method of travel, especially carrying so unpredictable an artifact as the Casket. But Sleipnir, Odin’s warhorse (Loki’s child), can leap from world to world. Loki wraps himself in furs (he will not travel in Jotun blue, thank you very much), loads saddle-bags with grain, puts the Casket in a Midgardian Styrofoam box, and prepares to ride to Jotunheim.

(A Styrofoam box? Tony Stark had made Thor what Steve Rogers called a “Care package,” before leaving Midgard: a white insulated chest, filled with brightly wrapped snack foods such as Pop-tarts, chocolate bars and fruit roll-ups; sealed with dull silvery duct tape. Although Thor had promptly devoured his beloved Pop-tarts, he urged Loki to take many of the rest of these items as emergency rations. Loki absentely stashed them in a pocket dimension and took the box instead; the Casket of
Ancient Winters was too cold for Sleipnir to carry without freeze-branding his furry back in a permanent pattern.)

Sleipnir leaped; Loki rode from the Bifrost site with the Casket mounted pillion behind him, in the gaudy cheap Styrofoam chest, somehow attracting all the falling snow in their vicinity. They arrived at the near-ruins of Laufey’s (former) castle, the only remaining structure on an icy wind-bared plane, in the dark of an afternoon.

A deep voice calls “Who comes?” from what seems to be an inhabitable part of the ice castle, just beyond what had been the main courtyard when Loki (with Thor and Thor’s companions) had invaded; and Loki replies in a shout, “Bestlajarson’s emissary, from Asgard!” He thinks he hears a “Hmph!” in return; shivers under his furs, on his warm horse, until a large stone door opens.

He thinks the cloaked figure beckoning him forward is a woman. Loki dismounts, follows her to a byre out of the wind, finds a stall for Sleipnir and unloads him: off with the harness and bridle, he gives the horse a currying and grain from the saddlebags into an ice basin, and with a blast of green fire from his hand turns an ice-filled stone block into a bucket of warm water. Taking the Styrofoam box, he follows the woman into the castle proper.

Up the stairs to a second floor, Loki follows her into a dank room just above ice temperature. It has a bed and a basin, musty furs piled on the former; castle buttresses block most of the view from the pane-less window, but also block out the wind. She waits for him to put down his things, take a breath; then motions for him to follow her again.

“I’ve just arrived. Please let me make myself presentable for the court,” Loki says, and she nods in acquiescence, leaves the room, closes the door. Loki hauls the rest of his clothing from a pocket dimension (but she has already seen him do magic), washes up, changes his apparel to his richest suit, and opens the door. Again she beckons, and he follows.

Into a tall, thick-pillared icy chamber, with two thrones at the far end and two tall kings, crowned with ice, sitting on those thrones. Loki walks forward, formal and cautious, with none of his usual insolent swagger; halts standing below and between them.

“Hail, Kings of Jotunheim. I have come as Bestlajarson’s emissary.”

“Bestlajarson…” says one in a deep rumble. “Borson is anathema to us, but Bestlajarson’s emissary we will hear.”

“Have you a name, Bestlajarson’s emissary?” asks the other tall king, his voice equally deep.

Loki swallows. “I have, Majesties, but it may sound harsh to your ears. I do not wish it to be so. I am Loki, of Asgard.”

“Loki,” says the first, thoughtfully.

The second king smiles a slow and terrible smile. “Elder brother.” Oh, Loki’s fate will be cruel.

Notes: Odin’s parents were Bor and Bestla.

Thor’s invasion of Jotunheim was in the first Thor movie.
For Sleipnir’s ancestry (although of course you already know it), see also *The Slippery One*, earlier in this series.
Loki sounds out the rulers of Jotunheim. They are not what he expects.

Time travels oddly between the realms, moving in loops and stutters. For all that Byleistr and Helblindi are his (much) younger half-brothers by Laufey, they are decades older due to Jotunheim’s more rapid chronology, and are both far taller than Loki. He comes as an upstart petitioner, who should have been their ruler.

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“Have you a name, Bestlajarson’s emissary?” asks the second tall king in his deep voice.

Loki swallows. “I have, Majesties, but it may sound harsh to your ears. I do not wish it to be so. I am Loki, of Asgard.”

“Loki,” says the first, thoughtfully.

The second king smiles a slow and terrible smile. “Elder brother. I am Helblindi; my fellow king is Byleistr. What message does Bestlajarson send?”

“He seeks to return that which belonged to Jotunheim. A great treasure.”

“Youself?” asks Helblindi, now laughing.

Loki mercilessly quashes his own irritation, gives a diplomatic smile. “No; although you may have my aid. I bring you the Casket of Ancient Winters, and Odin’s request that I help you to achieve your former glory.”

“Glory,” said Byleistr darkly. “A priceless artifact on a shattered world, and its few defenders seeking glory—does he mean to complete our destruction?”

“Borson might,” Loki said, “but Bestla’s child would not.”

“We do not want glory,” said Helblindi, contemptuous.

“What would you instead?”

“Prosperity,” said Byleistr. “That our children no longer starve.”
“Honor,” said Helblindi. “That we are no longer seen as monsters.”

“Shall I return these desires to Odin, then, for more negotiation?”

“No, Loki of Asgard,” said Byleistr. “We need to discuss this more. Stay. Dine with us. Then let us see what wisdom the morrow brings.”

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“You understand,” said Loki carefully, “that by Odin’s command, I shall not rule Jotunheim; and by my own, I will not.”

Helblindi nodded. “You grew up elsewhere. This is not your home.”

Byleistr, supporting: “It is ours.”

Loki said, “And I killed Laufey-king.”

Helblindi grunted. “He earned his death, many times over.”

Byleistr added quietly, “You didn’t grow up under his thumb.”

Helblindi: “We knew of your fate, growing up. Laufey-king told us as small children. You were the object lesson.”

Byleistr: “That even the crown prince, the firstborn, could be discarded like trash if he did not ‘measure up’.”

Helblindi: “He threatened us whenever one of us failed to live up to his expectations. So we worked together, Byleistr and I, in order to survive.”

Byleistr: “As we grew older, he sought to split us apart. Only one could be king, he said, and he offered and withdrew the future crown to each of us, on the turn of a whim. One day Helblindi came to me.”

Helblindi: “We made a pact. I told him that if I became king, he would rule with me.”

Byleistr: “And I pledged the same. We waited, miserable, under Laufey’s rule, wondering whether revolt was possible.”

Helblindi: “And then one day Thor invaded…”

Byleistr: “With you by his side. Our own soldiers reported an Asgardian who had turned blue in battle.”

Helblindi: “We knew you’d survived. For the first time we felt hope.”

Byleistr: “Then you returned, and made plans with Laufey-king. You were on his side; he, who had abandoned you!”

Helblindi: “When Laufey-king was murdered, we were of two minds. Perhaps you would help us, after all.”

Byleistr: “Or perhaps you would be a worse tyrant than Laufey ever was. His own blood, raised by Asgardians? We feared of you.”
Helblindi: “Should we fear you, Elder Brother?”

Byleistr: “Or will you help us, and our impoverished realm?”

Helblindi: “Dine with us, this evening. Become better acquainted with your family.”

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A rest before dinner, in his cold chamber, on freshly scented furs; the brothers had escorted him to the room, leaving him alone. (Helblindi had explained: their court has but few servants. Although it is an honor to serve the court, the land is poor and few Jotuns can be spared from their agricultural duties.) Loki rose in the silence and darker twilight, dressed, and found his way escortless into the only lit hall, near the throne room. There, he met a young Jotun woman, not too much taller than he, with a fine figure and a merry smile: the hooded figure from his arrival, transformed.

Loki smiles back, uncertain. “Are you here to seduce me?”

To her hearty laugh. “I am Gerda Stormdottir, Helblindi’s wife.”

Still in Asgard pink skin, Loki blushes.

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At dinner, they talked. Helblindi at the center of the high table: Byleistr on one side; Loki closest, then Gerda, on the other. The brother-kings reminisced.

Helblindi: “We each promised Laufey that the first thing I would do as king…”

Byleistr: “Would be to exile my brother at the furthest end of Jotunheim.”

Helblindi: “And the second…”

The two, in unison: “To create a magnificent memorial shrine to our great and wise father.”

They crashed their drinking glasses together in a toast; laughed loudly.

Loki turned to Gerda. “Are they always like this?”

She blinked at him. “You do not know? You live; and you are here. Laufey’s greatest evil has come to naught. Of course they cheer.”

“But I will not join them in kingship.”

She snorted. “Bestlajarson’s whims. You need not rule to be welcome, kings-brother.”

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As the dinner ended, a brooding Loki admitted, “I tried to destroy Jotunheim, after I killed Laufey.”

A laughing “Well, you didn’t succeed!” from Byleistr; then from Helblindi, a quieter “Will you try again?”

“I do not know,” Loki confessed.

Byleistr clapped him on the shoulder, from an enormous height, yet a softer blow than Thor would have delivered. “Let us make sure you will not wish to, then.”
Gerda leads him back to his chamber, where rushes are alight, and the now-scented furs have been shaken out to form a soft layer on the ice slab bowl of his bed. The Styrofoam chest holding the Casket seems to have built itself a table-high ice plinth, drawing moisture from the ground and freezing it. The room is less dank than before, colder but cozier.

“It confuses me,” Loki confessed. “Why are you all so nice? I do not belong here, and will not stay.”

“And yet you will be always welcome,” said Gerda, with a kiss to his child-high forehead, and leaving closes his door.
New Plans

Chapter Summary

In which Loki meets a stable hand and parts with the Casket of Ancient Winters. Also there are fruit roll-ups.

That night, in his nest of furs, lit by flickering torches, Loki thinks. He had intended to revolt, to knock over the wain of his (All-)father’s expectations, to destroy these worthless toys he had inherited before demanding more. Instead…his Jotun relatives were people who welcomed him, even in his enmity-drawing Asgardian form. Who did not seek to belittle him, for all his scant height, his apparent youth. Who looked up to him, somehow.

In Midgard there is a saying, “Living well is the best revenge.” Once he’d scorned the notion, thinking (as he still does) that revenge is the best revenge, but… suppose he succeeded as this task—at these tasks, Odin’s and Byleistr’s and Helblindi’s—suppose he succeeded beyond all their expectations. Suppose Jotunheim became great, and prosperous, and honored. Midgard did not seem to owe fealty to Asgard; instead they ruled themselves, their many countries forming bickering but solid unions such as the United Nations. What if the Jotuns were to prove their value—to Midgard—and join such unions while stubborn Asgard still insisted futilely on a superior role? What if I can do better at creating a prosperous realm than Odin can?

On that happy thought, Loki snuggled into his furs, and slept.

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In the morning, the Casket of Ancient Winters, still in its Styrofoam box, has built its pedestal into a bower of ice branches and spires, tendrils and leaves. Loki addresses it: “It’s better to be home than to be a stolen relic, is it not?” And whistles as he proceeds to check his horse, before breakfast.

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Given the overall lack of servants (last night, the royals had even brought the food out from the kitchens!), it surprises Loki when he goes to check on Sleipnir, and finds the horse snorting at a young stable-boy just beyond the stall.

“If your lordship will move his horse, I can muck out the stable.”

Loki takes the headstall off a wooden peg in the wall, and the horse dips its head to wear it. As the boy is showing signs of shuffling around the horse while Loki leads it into the aisle, he warns, “Do be careful, he bites. And kicks.”

The boy, looking down at Sleipnir’s many hooves: “Twice as much as other horses, I reckon.” When Loki catches the boy’s eyes, they are shining in admiration.

Loki clears his throat. “This is Sleipnir. He is Odin Allfather’s war horse, and has trampled many a Jotun. Have you no fear?”

The boy mutters, “I thought he was yours before he was Odin’s.”
Loki blinked, all defenses back up. “You are well informed. What is your name, boy?”

“Torvi, my Lord.”

“Well, Torvi, I would introduce you, but he may someday have to meet you in battle. I would not break his heart—or yours.”

“My lord.” The boy bowed, then took to his shovel again.

-x-x-x-

At breakfast, Byleistr said, “There is one more family member you must meet. My wife keeps her own court; it was safer in Laufey’s day, and now—there is too much work to be done, rebuilding. My heir has just returned, though. Prince Thorvinn!”

An unfortunate name, thought Loki. And apparently, another agreed.

“It’s Princess Thorvinna, father. I thought we had agreed, last time…”

-x-x-x-

After the cold meal, the brothers stared across the icy plain. Loki asked “Where was the temple, before?”

An old mage would know, could conjure it in image as a template to rebuild.

And so an old man returns from Laufey-demanded long exile, called for by the brothers.

Loki does not wish his own presence known, so he is disguised, dressed as Thorvinna’s (female) cousin.

The temple ascends from the ice, the old mage’s imaginings.

Loki prompts the brother-kings to ask: Where was the casket kept? and marks the spot for later return.

Asks for himself: “I heard…there was an abandoned child that Odin took? Where was he found?”

That spot he does not mark.

To his brothers: “Is it appropriate to reward the Mage? I have Asgardian gold.”

Byleistr said, “He has no use for it. There is nothing it will buy, here.”

“Then perhaps…” Loki pulls from its pocket dimension a brightly wrapped fruit roll-up, peels back its film and tears free some bright red strawberry bark. “Here, have this,” putting the piece of sweet fruit in the old man’s hand, mimics eating; then handing him the rest.

“Where’s mine?” whispers Thorvina.

“Greedy child. Later,” Loki chides and promises, all in one breath.

The old man is as impressed with the crackling cellophane wrapper as with the fruit; Loki gives him another one, still unopened. “From my travels in another realm. With our thanks.”

-x-x-x-
Once the old man has gone, Loki goes to his room to change his clothing, and excavate the Styrofoam box from where the Casket has nearly built Yggdrasil in his absence. Outside, the family attends as he lifts the Casket from its box (yes, turning blue in the process; but they already know he is Jotun); places it in its proper position on the ground. The Casket practically hums in satisfaction.

“And now,” says Loki, dusting off his hands and slowly turning pink, “I have done what I can here. Let me think on your wants, and how to satisfy them.”

“You didn’t ask mine,” says Thorvinna.

Loki hands her a fruit roll-up. “Your kings prefer prosperity and honor to glory. And you? Would you have glory, or something else?”

“I must agree with my kings, Lord. Prosperity for the Realm, and I would like to share in the getting of honor. But for me… education. Travel. Especially travel. They tell me you have been to all nine realms?”

“And farther,” agreed Loki, hiding his dislike at how unpleasant the farther had been.

“Then I would have honor, and travel, and … something useful to do. An heir should not be a figurehead, I think.”

“These are all wise choices, Princess.”

-x-x-x-

Loki bridles the horse, and puts the saddle up. Hears a rustle behind him. Sighs, and continues equipping for his ride. Climbs aboard.

“Enough of this farce, child. You lack the guards to watch an uninvited guest, yet can spare a stable boy for an empty stable? Don’t lie to me, Torvi. Don’t lie to me, Thorvinna.”

She shuffled forward, looking at her feet. “It wasn’t my parents’ idea, nor my kings’. I wanted to see Sleipnir before you left.”

“Your perverted uncle’s misshapen child?”

“Misshapen? He can travel anywhere, even to Niflheim! Sleipnir is the finest horse in all the realms.” And tries to touch.

Loki jerked the horse’s head away. “He still may have to kill you some day. I still may have to kill you some day. Don’t make this any more difficult than it needs to be.”

Sharp heels like spurs, and Sleipnir trots, leaps away from Jotunheim.
Furious Education

Chapter Summary

In which Los Bros Odinson interact, and Loki does not destroy Midgard.

Chapter Notes

Notes will be at the end.

Loki returns to Asgard at a tail-swinging trot, thinking back on Torvi/Thorvinna with a mental grin, and considering how to get the information he needs to rebuild Jotunheim. The libraries of Asgard are insufficient for this task. One realm has far more experience with the rise and fall (and rare re-ascension) of empires than any other: Thor’s portion. Midgard.

The stable below the castle was no mere cow barn, and old Ebbi still ran it efficiently. Nevertheless, Loki groomed his own horse, tending to Sleipnir rather than leaving his son to the care of another. While he still could.

But of course his arrival had not escaped notice; and here came Thor to see…

“How did it go?”

Loki gives the solid reassurance of his son a pat that is practically a thump. “Well, it appears I have a family. Another one, that is.”

“What are they like?”

“They are Jotuns, Thor. Monsters.” (It was always easier to say the hateful things yourself; the words hurt less when they came back as mere echoes.) “Two brothers, a sister-in-law, and a niece.”

“Royalty?”

“The kings of Jotunheim, a queen, an heir apparent. It seems I was royally bred and fostered. If only I’d known.” (Prickly Loki.)

“You knew you were a prince!”

“Yes, but not of which realm. Perhaps it makes a difference, eh? Would you still be Thor if you were Thor of Muspelheim? Or even Vanaheim? How much of who you are is defined by what you are, Brother?”

“I think you would still muddle my brain, no matter where we were, Brother. But Father Odin awaits you.”

-x-x-x-
“Did Jotunheim meet your expectations?” asked the All-father. Did the bastard know what things were like there all along?

Loki furrowed his brow. “It changed them, considerably.” Then, with a child’s open grin, “Shall I rebuild Jotunheim, then? There will be glory—eventually.”

“You delivered the Casket.”

“It is not enough. I need more….”

“More?” asked Odin.

“Time. Information.”

Odin gave a wordless nod; Loki took his leave, went to find Thor.

-x-x-x-

He next came to Thor, wearing his most effective smile (neither a narrow grimace, nor so broad it was caricature): “I could use your help.”

“How?”

“I need access to Midgard.”

“The last time, you brought in an alien army to try to rule them.”

Loki shrugged. “That was last time.”

“The Midgardians will think you wish to conquer them again.”

“Assure them that is not my wish.”

“No, Loki. You assure me. What do you wish to do on Midgard?”

Loki huffed. “I find our libraries inadequate. I need to learn how to rebuild a realm. I’ll need access to Midgard’s archives.”

“Unfettered access? Loki, they think you unreliable, untrustworthy, and destructive. They’d never allow it! Nor will I.”

“Then how shall I fulfill Father’s wishes, Brother?”

“You could have tutors instead. They can attest to what you are learning, and reassure SHIELD and the Avengers.”

“And you and Odin will know as well what I am learning.”

“Yes. You’d get your access, but I must be prudent. If that is acceptable to Midgard, would it also be acceptable to you?”

“For now,” said Loki.

-x-x-x-

“My brother wishes to be tutored on Midgard,” Thor tells Director Fury.
“Your brother? Your asshole brother?”

“Suitably guarded, of course.”

“What’s in it for us?” Fury thought a moment. “I’m not letting him near Stark. Maybe we could let him take some college courses. Have him write a senior thesis or something. If he’s gonna produce anything useful, we want to see it.”

-x-x-x-

But Fury must interview Thor’s asshole brother before he can finalize this. Said asshole arrives in handcuffs and Asgardian leather, with a very large guardian (the male equivalent of a prison matron?); Loki’s silver tongue not restricted by a muzzle. He nods politely to Fury.


“I believe I already took that course.”

“Yeah, and you failed it.”

Loki gives him a careful look, not quite supercilious. (After all, he needs Fury’s permission to continue.) “Did you really wish me to succeed?”

Fury blows a breath, finally deciding that it’s better to know what Loki is up to than to wonder about it.

“Can Odin bind your magic?”

“It is painful; but yes, it is possible.”

Fury thought some more. “Not riskin’ it. You’re taking courses through Skype.”

“So I am a pariah. Women used to take classes behind screens, so that they could not be seen or heard. Is that what this is about?”

“It’s about a favor to Asgard. But I’m not risking anybody at the college.”

Loki nods again and leaves with his Asgardian jailer.

Fury calls Thor back in to give his permission. “Your bro is a brat, you know that?”

Thor laughs. “That has always been true.”

-x-x-x-

Having no previous academic record—at least on Midgard—Loki takes, and aces, several placement examinations. He is admitted to Empire University’s graduate school. Mainly by correspondence courses and to Fury’s amusement and alarm, Loki studies socioeconomics, ecology, and business. (Anything more directly related to politics is vetoed by SHIELD.) The “student in the iron mask” participates remotely: with camera turned off, voice scrambled; text messages run through several successive translation programs before being sent; every attempt being made to disguise/erase the bright personality behind those irritating, brilliant, impertinent questions.

-x-x-x-
In his monitored room at SHIELD Headquarters, Loki is thinking, writing notes on paper in a spidery hand; some ideas do not belong on computers, yet need to be contemplated. Done reviewing, a green flame snaps into life and devours his pages. He smears the ashes with long fingers. Let SHIELD (or Stark) try to analyze that!

(Mysteriously, their cameras fail to see his writing.)

-x-x-x-

And in addition, Loki quietly follows the work of the glacial geologists and planetary scientists studying Enceladus, the distorted ice-rich moon of Saturn; and reads papers on comet impacts and early solar system accretion. He corresponds with the scientists via e-mail, humbly asking for useful information. SHIELD monitors this activity without comment.

-x-x-x-

His thesis is on restoration of an arctic island, after a volcanic disaster: Svalbard, say, or Novaya Zemlya or Iceland. The historical analysis is based on the 1783-4 Skaftáreldar eruption in Iceland, with additional discussion of how to rebuild an island realm should something similar happen again. (Of course it’s really about Jotunheim.) It is circulated among a very large panel of outside reviewers before Loki is allowed his thesis defense.

(A copy leaked to SHIELD is reviewed by a recruiter unfamiliar with the name Laufeyson – it is now annotated with “Have we interviewed this guy?” and Fury’s own response: “Several times. Not a candidate for recruitment for the near future.”)

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Loki’s thesis defense was a long struggle to control his sarcasm. It would not do to call esteemed professors idiots, nor to imply that their reasoning was fundamentally flawed, even if both were true. In the small lecture hall, to a selected audience of wary academics, bored SHIELD guards, the occasional Asgardian disguised as a SHIELD guard, and the more intellectual of the Avengers team (Stark, Banner, Hill)—and his large brother—Loki explained his assumptions, how he arrived at his conclusions, and the conclusions themselves. He explained costs of recovery in terms of energy, manpower, and money (having determined what Euros were, and how they worked). He answered endless questions. He watched Banner elbow Stark to prevent the asking of a doubtless particularly obnoxious question, and mentally thanked the calm alter-ego-of-a-rage-monster for helping Loki keep his own cool. He accepted their applause at the end, and waited at the stage for his brother’s approach.

“You turned no one into a toad!” Thor greeted him.

“It was a challenge. But they acknowledged me their master.”

Thor’s Midgardian friends were approaching as well. Stark said, “It’s just the name of a degree, Reindeer Games. I’m pretty sure they won’t kneel to you.”

Loki ignored him.

Thor continued, “I allowed your tutoring, Loki. What comes next? Asgard?”

“Not yet.” Loki has other plans. Then a sharp look at his brother: “You need to go back?”

“Well… Sif wants me back for Freya’s name day.”
“I hadn’t realized that you were back together. Congratulations.”

“Jane is not happy about it,” Thor admitted. “Midgardians have some notion called…monogamy?”

“It is a consequence of their short lives, I believe. Yet many have …exes? Former spouses they still communicate with. Perhaps there is still time for things to work out.”

Thor wore his emotions so openly.

Loki sighed. “Very well. We can return for now. But you must call me Master.”

A shiver of Loki’s hand, and they are back in Asgard, on the completed end of the construction site that is the Rainbow Bridge.

“Master Loki,” Thor said with a bow; then straightened, and, just as Banner had done to Stark, Thor elbowed him.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

Skaftáreldar: see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skaft%C3%A1reldar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skaft%C3%A1reldar), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B3%C3%B0uhar%C3%B0indin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B3%C3%B0uhar%C3%B0indin) for this traumatic eruption in Iceland. A quarter of the population and most of the large animals died as a result of this two-year eruption cycle. Political issues in Norway that prevented aid from reaching Iceland were also the cause of many deaths there.

Master Loki: I am enjoying Matantei Loki and Matantei Loki Ragnarok (Mythical Detective Loki (Ragnarok)) as anime and manga right now.
Trust

Chapter Summary

In which Loki gets his own way, and meets someone

Chapter Notes

Notes at the end.

Loki gives a copy of his Master’s Thesis to Odin in Asgard. “For Iceland, read Jotunheim. For geothermal power, read the Casket of Ancient Winters. Note that much is still needed. I’ll want Midgardian resources.”

Odin: “Midgard is under Thor’s protection. It is his to decide.”

-x-x-x-

So, after Freya’s name-day festivities (which he attended, smiling dutifully), Loki went to Thor with a request. “Let me back on Midgard, brother. I need some resources there.” He continued, “Your planet is so rich! I’d prefer it to Asgard, too. The little I take will not be noticed; the little I give for it will disrupt no economies.” He might have been a little stir-crazy at the time.

Thor, with a hangover, was clearly unwilling to be taken away from Sif and Freya; well, Loki couldn’t begrudge him that. He added, “I’d prefer to go alone.”

Still silent, Thor looked quite doubtful at this.

That was it. Loki started to pace. “I’ve been well behaved! I’ve been very well behaved!”

And that opened the floodgates of Thor’s speech.

“Of course you’ve been well behaved the whole time. You’ve been watched!”

“Then don’t watch me! Can’t you trust me? Can’t you at least try?”

Thor was dumbfounded, again.

Pausing, Loki took a calming breath. “Wait a while, and see what I’ve done. Your Midgard allies will tell you of any major disruptions, surely.”

“They will tell me if they know you are responsible.”

Pacing again. “If you tell them I am there, they will suspect my every move! That is watching, Thor. Just ask them to notify you of any untoward events. Say you are curious. You might even say you are asking my help in understanding such things.”
“That would imply you are here!”

“To them, not to you!” Loki blew another breath. “Look, it’s all there in my suggestion—trust and suspicion in one package. Will it do? Have I finally a chance to earn your trust?”

“When you put it that way…,” Thor said slowly.

“I do.”

“Very well then, Loki. Go play on Midgard.”

“Work,” Loki said. “I’ll be working there.”

And left.

-x-x-x-

Jotunheim had been in dire straits before Loki’s return with the casket. The lands and seas had been wiped clean of many species, the traditional foods of Jotuns. The people had held off bearing children that the realm could not feed. And while Loki was learning, Jotunheim has been changing: growing warmer in areas where the meteorites land, growing colder overall as the Casket does its work. The Jotuns are ill-prepared to deal with these temperature changes.

Loki travels the Earth, visiting the far Arctic, the near Antarctic, and tropic regions where snow-topped volcanoes have their own ecosystems. He opens portals and sends samples: “Try this!” and “Try this!,” sending more of the favorable items. He sends books (Thorvinna wanted books) on making greenhouses and growing the strange, previously unknown crops that can feed the people. He scours Midgard for more plants and animals—whole ecosystems, in fact—to enrich impoverished Jotunheim.

-x-x-x-

On the way down from Hale Pohaku, crossing the old Saddle Road on Hawaii’s Big Island, driving an underpowered four-wheel-drive jeep in the sudden rain, Loki spots a small girl hitchhiking with a large, white, wolfish bitch. He feels sorry for the dog, and pulls over.

The girl is kicking the back of his seat. She tells him Haleakala on Maui has its own silver-sword plants, and that sunrises there are magical. She tells him it’s better to build one’s own kingdom than to wait to inherit one.

“I have tried that, without success.”

“Not by trying to take over an existing kingdom; I mean build one! From scratch!”

Faced with crossroads at the east end of the road, Loki asked, “Where are we going?”

“TO my home, please. I have some volcanoes to build.”

Volcanoes? “Where is home?”

“Kilauea. Turn south.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:
The Hilo-Pohaku (or “stone house”) is the barracks for astronomers for the Mauna Kea observatories. Nowadays, one stops at the Mauna Kea Visitor Information Station (http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/info/vis/visiting-mauna-kea/visitor-information-station.html) instead.

The Saddle Road travels from Hilo to Kona across the middle of the Big Island. A topographic saddle has the cross section of a valley in one direction and a mountain in the other; this “saddle” is between the mountains Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea, and is about 6600 feet above sea level at its highest. The “old road” was quite dangerous, and included military tank crossing areas; in the last few years, construction of the new road—the Daniel K. Inouye Highway—has widened or replaced the most dangerous sections. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawaii_Route_200. The site http://www.hawaiihighways.com/photos-Saddle-Road.htm has some photos of the old road.

Silverswords are round balls of spiky leaves with silvery white hairs and tall flower stalks; they superficially resemble yuccas and beargrass (which would be another good plant for Loki to collect). Along with 50 or so other species of plants in the Hawaiian Islands—from rock plants to trees and vines—they are descended from one tarweed that arrived on the Hawaiian Islands about 5 million years ago. Two varieties of silversword are found atop Mauna Kea and Haleakala. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argyroxiphium.

Haleakala is the big volcanic caldera on the island of Maui.

Sunrise on Haleakala is magical. One arrives in pitch darkness, with the stars overhead; then the sky slowly lightens, and you become aware that all around you is black desolation. As it gets lighter, you start to see red rocks among the black ones, then silvery-green brush. Then you realize the immense scale of the place: you are looking across a miles-wide bowl of land. As the sun comes up, birds start singing. It is daybreak like a symphony orchestra warming up, and a great start to any day.
Loki lets the girl and dog off at the southeast corner of the Island, at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. The dog shakes water off as it leaves the car, and trots away, looking back at her mistress.

The girl said, “You do not know me, do you? You are not from my islands. I am the goddess Pele.”

Loki bowed, very deeply. “I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

She laughed. “Many are not. And you have done me a favor. Is there anything you would ask from me, in return?”

Loki said, “Some of your plants and their pollinators, for my impoverished homeland; for me, your friendship.”

“Let me show you something,” said Pele. Passing a low shrub on the side of the road, she plucked a red o’hel’o berry and reached up to put it in his mouth. “What do you think?”

Loki, like all Jotuns, had a sweet tooth.

“You have my permission,” the girl said formally. “And my friendship, Loki of Asgard.”

-x-x-x-

On impulse, he sent a postcard from his next stop in New Guinea to “the girl at Kilauea, Hawaii;” to his surprise, a card was waiting in return when he visited New Zealand unannounced. “There is an art exhibit in San Francisco I wish to attend. Take me there.” How could he refuse?

-x-x-x-

At the museum in San Francisco, Pele looked even younger than she had on the Saddle Road. The exhibit was Sexy Monsters: Japanese Erotic Prints of the 19th and 20th Centuries.

“Thank you for coming. They won’t let me in on my own,” she huffed. “They think I’m too young.”

Loki was reduced, at first, to a dazed uh noise. Pele was wearing her long black hair in two ponytails (left and right, symmetric, with a ruler-straight part in the middle); wore a red school blazer, plaid pleated miniskirt, white knee socks and black patent leather shoes. Recovering, he said, “I can’t imagine how they got that idea. Let’s go in.”
Loki liked art; had spent an enjoyable hour at the museum in Stuttgart before taking the eye of the man who had his needed iridium. The curator of this exhibit had obviously spent considerable time in setting it up: an introductory section, signage everywhere, warnings in general and on specific works, a clear path from print to print to follow the thematic logic; and, of course, an exhibit gift shop. Pele was ignoring all that, flitting from work to work, jostling patrons, and theatrically declaiming “Oh my God!” at regular intervals. And laughing.

Having gained Pele’s ingress, Loki was free to look on his own. In the images, mortals were doing unmentionable things to each other. And they seemed to be enjoying it…except when they weren’t. Loki had thought he could tell the difference between a face in orgasmic ecstasy and one in pain; maybe he couldn’t, after all. He came out of his perplexed stupor at Pele’s “Look at this one!”

He walked over.

“What do you think of this picture?”

“You’re trying to embarrass me,” Loki complained.

“No, look!”

He did. “I don’t think that’s actually possible.”

“I know, right?”

Loki was still standing there when Pele dashed back from viewing another print. “Is this all new to you?” she asked.

“Of course not! I’ve done that, and that, and of course that one—and that one, with more women of course—and…you’re laughing at me.” Oh. She was.

Pele calmed herself, looked at him. “Loki. It’s art. It’s not a competition.”

“How do you feel about this, then?” With nostrils flaring, he pointed at a Hokusai print with Mount Fujiyama in the background.

“Ooh. Pretty!” Then stuck her tongue out at him. “See? Appreciate the art, don’t fight with it.” Turned her head: “What’s going on with that one?” and was off again, all laughter.

She ducked away, came back, pulling him to another bright image. “Did you ever try that, with feet?” He hadn’t.

“Quit looking so much like a stern uncle,” Pele said. “You’ll get us both kicked out!”

“You are the one laughing.”

“Yes! See that one?”

He did. The woman(?) in the image had her tongue out one side of her mouth, her eyes crossed. She looked embarrassed to be caught in such a position, but it felt so good…he’d been in similar situations. A tightness dropped from him, and Loki laughed.
“Now look at this one!”

Loki stared. It was impossible. It was ludicrous. It was…kind of funny, actually, the way his eyes were bugging out, and her lips were parted—lower teeth showing—and—wouldn’t hair get caught there?—and—no, an elephant should not be involved, and—was that a UFO? and—he laughed. Then saw the title. *Coitus Interruptus.* Oh, yes. Perfect. Ridiculous. At some point he stopped laughing to catch his breath, caught Pele’s eye, and laughed anew. One couldn’t die laughing, he supposed.

Another print: Pele was suddenly (just a little more) serious. “Now try seeing with a connoisseur’s eye. Surely that’s exaggerated?”

“Yes!” Laughing.

And another: “Is that a kraken?” Loki’s eyes are wide.

Pele counts legs, including one nearly completely shoved up an orifice. “Ten legs. A squid.”

And another: Loki said, “I didn’t know Midgard serpents were so accommodating.”

A last one: “Well. That looks uncomfortable.”

-x-x-x-

Loki paused at the gift shop.

Having overcome her latest set of giggles, Pele seemed determined to act as immature as possible. “What are you buying? A dildo?”

He did not look toward her as he answered. “Now that I know your taste in art, I am buying some postcards.” Transaction completed, he turned to her. “Friends should stay in touch, should they not?” And smiled.

-x-x-x-

Later they visit a sushi restaurant, and order (to share) the largest octopus tentacle they can find. It’s nearly the length of Loki’s forearm and hand.

At the table he asks, “Do you drink?”

Pele *hmphs.* “My favorite offering is gin. You?”

“Yes.” He orders a bottle, pours her a mugful in a rough stoneware cup. “Goddess, your offering.”

They each take one end of the tentacle in their mouths (Loki takes the wider end), and start chewing slowly toward the center. Loki crosses his eyes; Pele sputters, drops her end. Puts it back in her mouth and curls her tongue around it, licking a sucker. He drops his end, laughing. It becomes a contest of increasingly lewd facial expressions as each tries to get the other to drop the tentacle. Then
Pele reaches over to Loki’s end, lighting a fire with her fingertip nearly under his chin. Loki makes a hand gesture and freezes the whole tentacle solid; Pele’s tooth scrapes with a loud screech before she drops her end. “No more powers?” he suggests; and she nods. The tentacle thaws suddenly; Pele starts rolling it in one direction in her mouth, Loki rolls his end the other way, and the piece is nearly wrung dry before they quit rolling it, quietly eating towards each other. Finally, their faces nearly touching, Pele holds up three fingers, ticks them down. Lets go of the tentacle as Loki recoils and slurps it down.

“Release the kraken?” she suggests.

Loki sticks out his tongue, with a half-chewed piece of octopus curled on it. “Do you want it back?”

Pele laughs.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

**Hawaii Volcanoes National Park**, on the Big Island of Hawaii, includes the active volcanoes of Mauna Loa and Kilauea, and any new land that is produced by the growth of the volcanoes. Pele has been continuously active at Kilauea since 1983 or so. See [http://www.nps.gov/havo/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/havo/index.htm).

Pele is usually thought of as a Hawaiian goddess, but there are stories about her in other places as well (notably the Marquesas). She is the goddess of volcanoes. The *Encyclopedia Mythica* ([http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/oceania/polynesian/articles.html](http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/oceania/polynesian/articles.html)) calls her ravishing and whimsical.

Also, two erupting volcanoes on Io, the moon of Saturn, are named Loki and Pele.

**O’hel’o** is a Hawaiian native plant, *Vaccinium reticulatum*, related to the blueberry. It has bright red sweet berries, and is sacred to Pele.

**Hokusai** (1760-1849) is most famous for his *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, but also produced erotic *shunga* prints, notably The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife (NSFW; the original tentacle porn). If you wish to (again, it’s not safe for work!), see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dream_of_the_Fisherman%27s_Wife](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dream_of_the_Fisherman%27s_Wife)

**Coitus Interruptus**. Presumably the man in the print is trying hard not to come, but distractions keep happening. This print does not exist, as far as I know.
Vacation

Chapter Summary

In which the story loops back to Chapter 4.

-x-x-x-

Loki, nervous in Asgard, ushering Thor and Sif toward one of his portals. “Mother will care for your offspring, yes?”

“Yes, but…” Thor speaks more slowly than this manic brother before him, pauses to trade glances with Sif. “What’s this about, Loki? Why do you need both of us?”

“I wanted to thank you, really, for sharing your realm of Midgard with me. I like your planet, brother. It isn’t boring. The locals have a custom there. It’s called a vacation.” A hand-wave, and the portal opened to shady trees, a sandy beach, blue water under a lighter blue cloud-dotted sky. Loki said, all in one breath, “And I wanted you to meet someone.”

“A girl,” Sif surmised.

Thor balked at the portal. “Loki, is it a girl?”

And Loki flushed. “She’s just a friend. You’ll see.” And stepped through.

-x-x-x-

Here, on a beach on Ua Po’u in the Marquesas Islands, Pele looks up at three large gods; her arms crossed, she wears a faint frown (with a hint of a smile to its edges).

“This is your brother?” To Loki, about Thor.

“Yes.”

“I thought you had issues.”

“They’ve been resolved; else these would not be here. Nor would I.”

“In that case, Loki’s brother Thor, lady wife Sif, you are welcome to my islands.” The smile won over.

Thor looked at the diminutive and childlike Goddess. “You are a god, in your own right?”

“Yes.”

“Not an ‘advanced being’”—Thor used finger quotes—“from another realm, as we are?”

“This is my planet, Asgardian. I came from Tahiti, and before that from Havi. I have always been here.”

-x-x-x-
They are on a shady hike, on a Wednesday, with Pele leading them and Sif with her, stretching her legs, competing. The brothers lag behind. Thor says, “So we are invited here, as you have forgiven my slights; not that I always knew what they were. And our parents? Are they not welcome? Have you forgiven them?”

“Mother: always. Odin: not yet.”

“I do not understand this. Father has done as much for you as Mother has; has always forgiven you, once you repented; why can you not accept all he has done for you?”

“I know, Thor. Odin gave me my life, when Laufey would have taken it.”

“More. He gave you a home—his; and a family—his. Ours.”

“And an education. And a role in life… yes. But!” Loki stopped; whirled to face his brother. “Whenever we played before him, each game was a trial. One in which we usually succeeded, of course. But with every victory, you gained rewards. I gained strictures. ‘No, Loki, not that way;’ ‘No, Loki, you won but you cheated!’ Even, ‘Well, you must have cheated, we just don’t know how.’ Pounding a troll on the head with a hammer is fair, but being raped by a horse is cheating.”

“Loki…”

“And now come more strictures. ‘Rebuild Jotunheim, but.’ ‘Fix what you’ve broken, but.’ Do you know why I like your Midgard, brother? There is room for change. There is always change, here.” He took a breath. “I love you, Brother, but we will never agree about Odin.”

-x-x-x-

That evening, Sif also came to talk to Loki privately. Perhaps he had been pacing too much. Perhaps she thought him unwell.

“I thought this was to be a chance to relax,” she said. “You do not seem rested.”


“You need to be sensible,” said Sif. “Accepting of reality as it is.”

“And yet it is so mutable…”

-x-x-x-

A week of hikes, swims, meals, conversations and restful, starry nights ends with the four relaxing in the grass in the shade of tropical chestnut trees, along an empty gray-sand beach. Waves growl quietly onto the shore; a cool breeze blows from the vivid blue ocean.

“You were right,” says Sif in Thor’s arms. “This is very peaceful. How did you find this place?”

“I didn’t,” says Loki, eyes closed. “Pele did.”

The girl starts her tale. “When I left Tahiti, I turned into a crab and walked along the ocean floor. Eventually I came upon these islands. I climbed to the shore and turned into a dog, then I walked inland. I could smell good food. I came into a valley and there were people there, so I turned into a woman. They welcomed me to their meal. The food was good, and there was plenty of it, but it was
all cold, and I was cold from crossing the ocean. Why don’t you warm it, I asked them. They said they could not, because it was a cloudy day and there was no sun to warm the rocks. No, I said, why don’t you make a fire? What is that, they asked, still offering me more food; so I showed them. Now they have campfires and I am always welcome here.”

Behind his lowered eyelids, Loki was tense as coiled wire. He let the conversation wash over him as he thought.

This is done and this is done and this is agreed to—finally!—and then come the next steps…and then comes the big step. He raises himself up, elbows beneath him. The big step is preying on his mind (like the remembered blow from the Other, which has never quite gone away). Loki gives a bright, false smile.


“Loki, what are you thinking?”—this from Sif.

“I’d hoped,” he confessed, “that time would calm my mind; but my wits are still scattered. And I’ll need to focus entirely for this next step.”

“For Jotunheim?” asked Thor.

“Yes,” he snapped, “for Jotunheim. What else occupies all my time? The Casket does its work, my plans are finally approved, my scouting has been successful; what else would it be?”

“It’s good to have a big project,” said Sif, lazily. “I think I was the calmest I’ve ever been when I was pregnant with Freya.”

“But didn’t you feel vulnerable?”

“I felt invulnerable. Had anything threatened her, I would have attacked like a lion.”

“She would even have attacked me,” Thor said. “But I was a nervous witling the whole time.”

“And sometime after,” Sif added.

“Could Loki bear children?” Pele asked, in jest; but all three Asgardians jumped.

Thor caught his brother’s eye. “Loki, no!”

“Don’t ‘Loki, no’ me, brother. You have no idea what I am contemplating.”

“Not more children, I hope. Yours are monsters.”

“Not all of them, but… they are always threats.”

“Except Sleipnir,” said Sif.

“Hush,” said Thor to Sif; and then turned to Pele. “My apologies, child. This tale is not fit for your delicate ears.” Then smiled at her. “Although I can see why you get along so well with my brother. You both think of outrageous things.”

-x-x-x-

Before they left, Sif came privately to Loki. “Can we talk?”
“About myself and Pele?” Loki batted his eyelashes, put hands to heart. “She’s my souuuulmate.”

“Uh…”

Dropped the pretense. “Relax. She is only a friend. I would not presume above my station.” Started to pace along the beach.

Sif walked with him. “No, that’s not what I meant. I…wanted to talk to you about Freya.”

“Your daughter?”

“Our prodigy, Thor’s and mine. But Asgard does not suit her.”

“So?”

“She wants to study on Midgard. She’s decided she would like New York, from what her father has told her of the place.”

“Very cosmopolitan of her.”

“But she isn’t, really. Freya is more thoughtful… she wants to learn husbandry, I think. She has bothered Eir since childhood, and Ebbi has started refusing her access to the barns. She always wants to learn more.”

Loki knew that trapped feeling, of being a wild bird caught in a glass cage: battering against invisible barriers, slowly suffocating.

“You cut my hair, once, to help free me. You’ve created your own opportunities here, on Midgard. Could you watch over my daughter as she tries to do the same?”

“Of course,” he said quietly.

-x-x-x-

A portal opens, closes; Loki and Pele remain.

“All this talk of sanity,” Pele snorted. “Is that what is so important to you?”

“Sanity is,” said Loki, “the difference, for you, goddess, between building a campfire and building an island.”

“Sane people appreciate camp fires. But are you not building a world?”

“Rebuilding a realm. Fixing old damages under command, under observation, with every suggestion checked and re-checked before I can proceed… it is a paltry campfire.” And I need to do more. “To persuade reality to repair itself: that is an island.”

“And you can’t do this without more ‘sanity’? And do you not lose something – spontaneity, mischief?”

“Oh, Goddess, they are not complements, but components. To have more of one does not take away another; but I cannot sustain the volition I need. I can build plans, but not plans within plans within plans; and I need them all.”

“You are commanded now, yes? Building Odin’s plans within plans? Could not some other – could not I—command you to do what you need done?”
Loki stared away, looking at her sleeping dog instead of Pele. “I would turn on you, like a rabid wolf. As I turned on Laufey-king, and Odin Allfather, and Thor Odinson. As I always turn, and bite. It is my nature.”

-x-x-x-

The day after Thor and Sif returned to Asgard, Loki and child-goddess Pele play a game with green leaves and fallen nuts in the sand.

“Thor mentioned a story not fit for my delicate ears?” Pele snorted. “Will you tell me of Sleipnir?”

Loki brushed away their game, lays back. “Not all my children are monsters. All are threats. Except…Sleipnir is valued, is welcome for all his fierce brilliance.”

“Sleipnir?” Pele again.

“He is a horse,” explains Loki, eyes closed in the warm sun.

“So have another horse,” says Pele. “It’s obvious.”

As they drowse on a wind-cooled beach, in the hazy sun, in the Marquesas.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

In mythology and the Marvel universe, the goddess Eir is the chief healer.

Ebbi comes from The Slippery One. (Gratuitous plug for my own work)

Loki cut Sif’s hair: See Symbols. (A second gratuitous plug)
Chapter Summary

Horse making! (And probably too much about horses)

Chapter Notes

Notes at the end.

The next day, the plan was equally mad. Still, Pele endorsed it. Over green tea ice cream, she asked, “To have a baby horse, what do you need?”

“A safe place; and a stallion.”

“I’ll find the place, then. You can find the stallion. Do you like my island? Hawaii?”

“I like you; but your island is a bit conspicuous. And full of tourists. I doubt it would be safe for me.”

“Ah. Do you like these islands? The Marquesans are my friends.”

Loki inhaled a deep breath; let it out raggedly; looked around him; then slowly relaxed. “Yes. I like these islands.”

“Then I will get you a place. Find your stallion.”

-x-x-x-

With Pele’s help, Loki set up an alias for himself in horse form: the grey mare Lopt, height just over 14 hands, age 10 or so. Through the Internet, he found and vetted a bloodstock agent, a Mr. Demarest in England. And called him.

“How can I help you?” came a raspy voice across the phone lines.

“I’ve a mare I’d like to breed, and I am looking for a stallion.”

“Describe your mare.”

Loki did. To a reported height of 145 cm, the agent said, “Hmpf. Short.” Not by Norse standards, Loki thought.

“What’s her breeding?”

“You wouldn’t have heard of her parents”—Laufey and Farbauti—“and I don’t have additional information.”

“So, a short, grade mare. What do you use her for now?”
“Mainly hacking about. But it’s a waste of her talents.”

A sigh on the other end. Well, Loki had chosen Demarest for his no-nonsense columns about horses, and the few uproarious negative Internet comments about him, as well as his broad network of contacts. The man continued. “Look, every owner has a favorite horse they want to reproduce. What talents?”

Building empires, Loki thought. Attempting to take over the world. “There was an accidental breeding when she was very young, to a draft horse. She produced an outstanding jumper.”

“And you want a repeat of this breeding?”

Not for all the worlds. “I’d rather not subject her to that again; I’d prefer something smaller. With a good mind.”

“Oh? What’s her temperament?”

“Intelligent. Fiery, I think. She does not tolerate frustration.” (Loki could imagine Pele laughing in agreement in the background.)

“What would the foal do? Become just another hacker?”

“I’d rather it have marketable skills. I don’t plan to lose my horses, but one never knows. Things can be unstable, sometimes.”

“Wise plan. If you are not looking to create another jumper, there are other possibilities. Sport horses and ponies are always in demand.”

“You have a stallion in mind?”

“Yes.”

Here we go, thought Loki. “Describe him, please.”

“There was a successful and very popular three-day eventer called Simon,” Demarest said. “Short. Half-shetland or something. But with enormous heart.”

“Heart is good.” Loki had been doing his homework.

“It’s better on the dam side,” said Demarest. “At any rate, Simon is not available. For one thing, he was a gelding; for another, he’s dead.”

“You are suggesting his sire?”

“No, I’m recommending his clone, Simon Says. S-Two ended up shorter and studdier than his progenitor, without those long gelding legs, and so far mare owners have been reluctant to sign up for his services.”

“He sounds like what I’m looking for,” said Loki.

“Send me conformation photos and a video of your mare in motion. I’ll contact Simon’s owners.”

-x-x-x-

“Conformation photos?” Pele laughed. “Should you send him mug shots?”
“Nonsense.” Loki checked; they were in private. He doffed his clothes, took a deep breath, and changed into the form he had not worn in so many years (and that had such unfortunate associations: but Pele had no stallion here to rape him). A dainty, green-eyed white mare stood before Pele. Loki snorted, shook his head, and posed, proud as a stallion.

-x-x-x-

Like Jotunheim, the islands of French Polynesia are underpopulated compared to their glory days. With European discovery came diseases; with modern times came the desire to live in cities rather than the low-opportunity countryside. Only six islands in the Marquesas are populated now, but more had been occupied in ages past.

There is an island to the north, Eiao, which was formerly inhabited; it is now visited by Marquesans annually to hunt feral sheep, and occasionally to collect its hard black basalt for making traditional implements and weapons.

Pele gives Eiao to Loki.

-x-x-x-

A call back: “I’ve Simon’s owners’ permission to continue. When will you send the mare?”

“Um, we’re in French Polynesia,” Loki replied. “But we are on the equator, so she can be put into season at any time.”

“Artificial insemination, then?”

Technology had certainly changed in 1000 years. “Yes.”

-x-x-x-

They traveled by borrowed yacht from Ua Po’u to Nuku Hiva, the dog staying behind with a friend. Pele’s friends in Taiohae—who seemed to be everybody—greeted her warmly. Fond greetings followed the introduction of her cousin, Monsieur Laufeyson, who intended to start an import/export business in the Islands.

“Yes, bonjour all around,” said Loki, catching his breath, ducking to accept several tiare leis, and kisses on both cheeks from men and women alike. They were the center of a large, moving party, walking uphill to the hotel. They signed in, carried their scant luggage (her tote, his small duffel) to adjoining rooms, collapsed.

“Now what?” asked Loki.

“Give my friends time to prepare a feast,” said Pele. “Then we’ll dance until dawn.”

And so they did.

-x-x-x-

A few days later, a plane was due in the early afternoon.

A no-name mare is a large risk for the reputation of an unproven stallion: should the owners allow a poorly built foal to be represented as S-Two’s get, he might never be chosen for well-regarded mares. So the owners (in addition to the stud fee, of course) asked for photos of the resulting foal at the ages of three days, three weeks, and three months—and a personal inspection of mare and foal.
when the latter became a yearling. With their approval, the foal would be registered as the offspring of Simon Says. Loki will worry about it later.

On Nuku Hiva, the little airplane arrived on a little landing strip, bringing them a bright blue thermos bottle. They drove back along the twisty ridge road and went to the hotel, to Loki’s room, and started the defrosting process; then to dinner.

Over the remains of the meal, Pele batted her eyelashes, and asked, “Wouldn’t you rather play with me first? Or instead?”

Loki answered, “That kind of play? No, thank you. I have a daughter and two nieces, and you remind me too much of them.”

“There was a man named Ohia who also said no,” Pele said, sipping her gin. “I turned him into a tree.”

“What will you turn me into, Goddess?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I think I will make you a mother.”

-x-x-x-

That night, Pele delivers the AI dose (with Loki on elbows and knees as she pours an ungodly amount of cool fluid into his newly-created opening). He falls asleep like an infant, with his rump in the air.

-x-x-x-

Loki awakes in the middle of the night, alone, with a burning sensation below his balls, at his new entrance. He conjures some ice and applies it. Horse sperm can irritate a mare’s genitals, so he is not especially worried. Things seem to be working.

-x-x-x-

Pele comes by in the morning, a quiet rap on his door, and Loki, in bed, bids her enter.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Strange,” Loki admits. “As if there were a large marble, loose under my tongue; only … down there.”

“May I see?”

Nude, he pushes down the cover sheet until only his genitals are hidden. (She’d seen more last night.) There is a small raised bump under the thin skin on his abdomen; perhaps he should have created more space for his new female organs. He feels a tickle, and the bump moves slightly.

“Can I touch?”

“Please don’t poke.” Loki pulls up the sheet again.

Pele says, “I’ll order breakfast in.”

Loki sleeps the rest of the day.

-x-x-x-
The next day, Pele rouses him to run errands in Taiohae. They are greeted familiarly everywhere; Pele welcomes, and Loki reluctantly tolerates, more kisses and hugs. Loki wears a crisp white linen three-piece suit, a pale green shirt of the same hue as his bright eyes, a Panama hat; Pele is in a long red T-shirt, with white *tiare* flowers in her hair, flip-flops on her feet.

They purchase lunch, and then go to a table by the beach. As they sit, a woman comes by, greets them, ruffles Loki’s hair.

As she leaves, Loki says, “Your subjects are too presumptuous.”

Pele jumps up on the table, grabs his face with both hands. “Listen, they are *not* subjects. They are *neighbors*. And to stay here, to be welcome, you must be useful to them.”

“Oh?”

“There was a famous singer. When he moved to the islands, they said, ‘We have singers here. Do something useful.’ So he brought an airplane and flew their airmail to them. Find a way to be useful, or never leave your island.”

When they finished eating, she took his hand. “Come on. One last errand.”

She led him to a tattoo parlor, and around to the house behind it.

“What’s this about?” said Loki.

“My friend Jacques lives here. To commemorate this glorious event”—did he sound this pompous? —“you’re getting a tattoo.” Rapping at the door.

Jacques was a large, dark, blocky fellow, meticulously illustrated in local patterns of sharks, turtles, dolphins and waves. “The real thing,” Pele said to him, “candlenut ink. All right?”

“Oui; fine,” said Jacques in a deep calm voice; and to Loki, “What pattern do you want?”

“Yes,” Pele echoed, “*what do* you want?”

This was mad, but...they’d done it, he was *doing* it, he was committed:

“A foal,” said Loki. “A baby horse.”

Notes:

**Conformation**: How a horse is built. To be successful at particular sports, a horse must have the appropriate bone structure. This can be shown in images of the whole horse on a flat ground, taken from the side, front, and rear. It is also wise to see videos of the horse moving, such as at a walk, trot, and canter, and while jumping over a fence. For areas of special concern (especially legs and feet), often X-rays are taken.

A **grade** horse is one that does not belong to a recognized breed. Often breeds (and types such as sport horses) have registries in which acknowledged horses are enrolled.

**Three-day eventing**: dressage, show jumping, and cross-country racing (with jumps), one sport per day, all on the same horse. The equivalent for the Winter Olympics would be the ice-skating mandatory program, X-game freestyle snowboarding, and skiing the giant slalom.
**Simon and Simon Says (S-Two):** Simon is based on the famous eventer Teddy O'Connor (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_O%27Connor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_O%27Connor)). The relationship between Simon and Simon Says (also known as S-Two) is based on that between the barrel horse Scamper and his clone Clayton (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scamper_%28horse%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scamper_%28horse%29)).


**Artificial insemination,** or **AI** for horses involves the collection of semen from a stallion, dilution with an extender such as powdered milk in water, and either chilling or freezing for delivery into the receptive mare. The mare must be in season at the time; the usual AI dose is 60 ml, about two turkey-basters’ worth.

**Bump:** Even before it is fertilized, a horse ovum is about 30 mm across. Veterinarians can use ultrasound to find ripe eggs and predict when a mare is ready to be bred to a stallion, or via AI.

**Famous Singer:** Jacques Brel.
Hiva Iotuna

Chapter Summary

Loki incubates.

Loki’s tattoo: under his navel, a little horse inscribed in a truncated diamond shape, lying on its back, with four upraised feet tucked together.

-x-x-x-

They sailed to a cove on Eiao, where Pele had ordered a native-style house to be built. She showed Loki everything she’d prepared, all the supplies that had been brought, where to find (and how to save) fresh water. Then she left; returning to her dog and her own various tasks.

Alone on his island the first day: horse-incubating Loki sitting on the beach, legs spread, carving runes of protection into the sand. His house was built on a proper chieftain’s stone platform, two kilometers above the beach; chestnut trees by the shore, water inland, fruit without disease to pick up when he hungered; grassy volcanic uplands, a leeward desert: all his to protect. He renames it Hiva Iotuna, Jotun Island.

That night, he lay on a pleasant bunk, tucked into the eaves: long enough for him, not quite wide enough for two; with an oil lamp to read by as the fine rain fell. There were plans to be made, but for now he was home.

-x-x-x-

After the “event” with Svadilfari, Loki had changed his shape many times, relieved to be able to perform this magic, finally, usefully and in public. Then he found out he was pregnant; and Sleipnir was born with eight legs. He consequently prefers not to change his shape when pregnant. It is not maturity but damned caution: Loki cannot afford to create more monsters.

-x-x-x-

During the days he builds his ranch: fences, a round pen, sheds for hay storage and other supplies; the beginnings of a barn and guest rooms. At night, Loki reads more of the works that influenced Western science, and confirms that the incredible diversity of Midgard is indeed due to change: Darwin and Wallace on evolution; Alvarez and Alvarez on how invaders from the cosmic realms reset the table for change; even Jared Diamond to see how societies are affected by “superheroes” in their midst. (He dislikes the resulting stratification of Central and South American societies, which remind him too much of Asgard.) Einstein bores him; but Shakespeare is fascinating. Midgard is a world of contingency and cusp, where one small deviation from a previous pattern leads to enormous changes: here is a proper seat for his empire of change.

-x-x-x-

After a few days, the flutter in his belly settles down to one spot. He coddles it with the Asgardian wildflower tea recommended in his mother’s book of herbs. Coddles …it?—no, her—his second daughter (after Hel), and his second foal. Loki names her Dua.
A month later, Pele and her borrowed yacht sail into Loki’s harbor.

“This island meets with your approval?” asks Captain Pele.

“It does,” says Loki.

“Then come. Meet more of your neighbors. I have many islands here.”

And she takes him on a cruise of the Marquesas. They visit ancient ruins, small local restaurants, markets, viewpoints, and beaches; eat goat and pig and poi, poisson cru and local fruits; drink rum and gin and Hinano beer.

At one ceremonial site, on Nuku Hiva, strange petroglyphs are carved into a rock in the shape of a turtle. “No-one can read them anymore,” says Pele.

“Couldn’t you…?”

“I have sworn not to.”

Near Hatiheu, on Nuku Hiva, Pele reads aloud: “Hikokua has a carved tiki in the shape of a phallus. Any woman who touches it, legend says, will soon become pregnant.”

She says, “Come on, touch it. I dare you.”

“Thank you, no,” says Loki. He’s wearing surfer shorts and a “been there, done that” T-shirt.

On the way back to his island, they pause again in Taiohae’s harbor to steal Wi-Fi access. “So you like your home and your neighbors,” Pele says, concentrating, fingers flying across the keyboard of a battered laptop. “Then you won’t object to paying me rent?”

“What sort of rent?” Surely money was not an issue.

“Look!” And Loki remembered their visit to the art exhibit. Pele’s taste in art was…unique. This time it was a website filled with images of pregnant women—and cakes—showing off their “baby bumps.”

“This is what I want. A picture like this—of you.”

“For this foal?”

“For any foal you have. Or anything else.”

Loki rolled his eyes in exasperation; but of course he agreed.

Months later, bored Loki in hiding from Asgard, his belly starting to show, visits his neighbors on a nearby island, still looking to find a way to be useful. The lunch provider, a sailor, hesitantly asks him whether his import/export business can use any fish. *Quickly.*
“Don’t you need it?”

“Yes, but we can’t keep it. We didn’t get enough fuel oil this week, nor any parts for our refrigeration plant. The fish will spoil before the next supply boat arrives, and no one will profit.”

“Show me this plant,” says Loki.

It’s a large cool space, backing onto a cave for climate control. There is dirty equipment smelling of salty rust and machine oil; a large side door for trucks and several small doors for humans. It’s not very private, though.

“I have a colleague at my island,” Loki starts slowly; “he may be able to help. But he’s very shy; he has to work alone. I’ll bring him by this evening.”

His name?

Loki grins internally. “Monsieur Ron-Paul Tapuva’e.” And adds: “Bring many large tubs of water; salt water will do, as much as all the ice you need.”

A glamor on another person is not a shape-change; Loki can do this magic without risk to his child. He brings the silent “M. Tapuva’e,” apparently a tall Jotun (but in fact a conjured image), to the refrigeration plant at sunset. Loki closes the door and gets to work, chilling his fingers and thus the vats of liquid into ice. Moves the ice blocks into the cave, leaving the salt-rich brine remaining for other uses. Works all night; done and done. Conjures again his Jotun shadow, and the two head back to the island.

Here is a way to be of use. Loki collapses into daytime sleep.

-L-L-

Loki has carried this foal a long time; his belly is larger than a basketball and he will have to change forms soon. His lovely, isolated island is suddenly too remote – what if he needs help? He has, after all, never done this alone before. In a panic, he spells Pele’s name in stones along the beach, summoning her.

-L-L-

Loki collapsed in the sand, crouching on elbows and knees and toes, knees splayed around his pendulous belly in the cool sand, head wrapped in his large hands. Shuddering, not quite crying, utterly panicked. Waiting for Pele.

-L-L-

“Loki.” She was standing on the beach, her dog shaking off water drops behind her.

He was hyperventilating.

“Loki,” Pele said. “Talk to me.”

“The peasants in Asgard” on one breath; “knew about Sleipnir” on the next. “They laughed at me.”

“This is not Asgard,” she said patiently. “These are not peasants. They are your neighbors.”

“And how do they regard me?” asked Loki, desperately.

“They admire your success. They are grateful for your help.”
“And if they knew …this?”

“They wouldn’t believe it,” still in that calm voice. “And they wouldn’t laugh at you, even if they did. They are used to the ways of gods being different than theirs.”

Pele is not entirely the delicate child she appears to be. “Stay, please,” said Loki.

Pele looked at him carefully. “Yes.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

**Hiva Iotuna**: Literally “the Jotun’s ridgepole,” figuratively the Jotun’s Roof.

**Flutter stops moving**: A fertilized horse ovum travels its mother’s uterus and fallopian tubes for about 16 days before implantation. A human fertilized ovum travels about 10 days before implantation. (From Lose, *Blessed are the Brood Mares*.)

**Dua**: The three alien protagonists in Isaac Asimov’s 1972 novel *The Gods Themselves* are named Odeen, Dua, and Tritt (for one, two, and three in Russian). There is no way Loki would name a child Odeen.


**Turtle rock with petroglyphs**: An image is in this blog: [http://blog.mailasail.com/snowleopard/90](http://blog.mailasail.com/snowleopard/90). Examples of Marquesan petroglyphs, from the Wisconsin Historical Society, are shown here: [http://images.wisconsinhistory.org/700099990794/9999011444-l.jpg](http://images.wisconsinhistory.org/700099990794/9999011444-l.jpg).

“Hikokua has a carved tiki in the shape of a phallus…” is from *Frommer’s Tahiti and French Polynesia*, 2009 edition.

Dua

Chapter Summary

A pleasant interval.

Dua’s “baby belly” portrait was as saccharine as Loki could make it: the flat-chested new mother staring down in wonderment, one hand protective on his expanded belly. Totally straight faced, and so a total mockery. Pele loved it.

-x-x-x-

Loki has had enough of this bulky shape. He reaches up, stretches, changes—the babe in his gut is somehow right—comes down on four feet, rears again, then races down the beach, Pele’s white bitch at his/her heels. Comes back at a happy, proper tölt, slows to walk up to Pele. Breathes softly in her face. Thank you. Spins off, horse and dog racing each other up to the meadow.

Pele smiles. This could be much more fun than changing a scornful not-quite-lover into a tree.

-x-x-x-

Pele fetching mail or information or just gossip is a frequent sight on Nuku Hiva while she tends Loki-mare. The locals ask after her cousin Monsieur le Parisien, who is said to be away on a business trip. The man from Paris? Well, he speaks elegant French, stands tall, dresses elegantly, and is very arrogant, so…obviously from Paris! (In years to come, it will become widely known that M. Laufeyson suffers from some sort of recurring dropsy; perhaps when he disappears for months at a time, it is to a private clinic in Switzerland where they replace his much-clone liver.)

-x-x-x-

Loki is happy as a horse, cropping grass, finding the occasional windfall fruit, playing touch-and-go with the dog, exploring her island. There is a certain hormonal satisfaction that comes with Dua’s growth. Loki investigates the dry leeward side of her island, finds unexpected strands, stony highlands. One day she discovers a flock of feral sheep (Pele will still allow her neighbors’ sheep hunting).

Loki-horse writes runes in the sand on isolated beaches, letting the tides carry her words away.

-x-x-x-

Pele’s white dog shares Loki’s maternal condition; she grows fatter and slower, panting on their walks together. (Loki is still high-headed and arrogant in her pregnancy.) One day the dog does not come away from Pele’s side; she is missing the next day, but Pele is fragrant with interesting carnivorous scents. Pele drives Loki-mare away, and she goes to climb the highlands again. The sheep now have active lambs. In Loki’s womb, Dua stretches her own legs.

When Loki returns, Pele is in the shade. On the mat next to her is the white bitch, smelling of milk, with several pale tiny squirming creatures. Loki is permitted to sniff them all; gives the dog a tentative lick. The puppies make high-pitched, happy noises.
One night, with Pele in the candle-nut-lit darkness, unsurprised Loki rests on the ground. Dua is born easily.

Stormy weather, and a white horse turns into a man, conjures clothing. Dua shivers behind him. A bright rainbow arcs across the sand, leaving blowing dust and pattern. From the dust, Thor appears, looking sheepish.

“I brought you a … present?”

Loki bristles. “Is this some sort of commentary?”

“No!” with raised, placating hands. “Mother suggested … I brought you a goat.”

Loki blinked. Support he had not expected, for this mad scheme. His reserve returned, and he said, half to himself, “Let’s see.” And seeing, smiled on the princely gift of a Heidrun nanny, due to kid soon with twins.

“Shall I name her for mother? And one offspring for you? Or both?”

“One kid should be a doe, Mother says.”

“I shall name that one for Sif, then.”

Dua is younger than the puppies, but was born with open eyes and is quick on her feet. When the waddling pups escape their mother’s attentive care, Dua chases after them, herding them back. Pele starts to train the pups, while Loki allows them (and even encourages) bad manners. He earns Pele’s glares.

Empty-bellied again, Loki goes walkabout, preferring the Nordic realms that have always respected him. In Iceland, he goes to Godafoss, recovers the “idols” thrown over that falls: Odin he almost destroys (of course he finds no statue of himself), but then he finds a much-worn, much-loved stone representation of his mother, and for her sake (Loki tells himself) the statues are whisked to a dusty back drawer in the National Museum, where they may someday be discovered.

The next day he finds the stallion who will become Tritt’s father.

**Notes:**

**Tölt:** A fast, smooth single-footed gait performed by Icelandic horses. It is comparable to the trot or canter in speed, but with a different pattern of footfalls.

**Heidrun:** a goat in Norse mythology, famed for the plenitude of the milk (well, mead) she produces.

**Godafoss:** A waterfall in Iceland. From Wikipedia: “In the year 999 or 1000 the Lawspeaker Thorgeir Ljósvidur made Christianity the official religion of Iceland. After his conversion it is
said that upon returning from the Althingi, Thorgeir threw his statues of the Norse gods into the waterfall.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go%C3%B0afoss; the character ð, or thorn, has been changed to th to make this easier to read)
A busy week in Jotunheim

Chapter Summary

Loki the feminist?

Before he started raising horses, Loki had come to Jotunheim many times, bringing treasures from Midgard. Eventually, his shipping locations had stabilized portals, and deliveries of seed stock could be made without his personal intervention. But this was a special occasion, and so he came.

Thorvinna is to be sworn in as Jotunheim’s first heir at this name-day. His niece is growing up.

Loki has sent ahead gifts from Iceland: crowberries and snowberries, salmonberries and low-bush blue berries (their tiny stems each holding two leaves and one bright blue globe). He sent surprised young fish: salmon and arctic char; and tiny flies, to pollinate the berry bushes and to feed the fish. He arrives at the traditional Bifrost site, alone but for 10-month-old Dua, leashed to him by lead rope and halter. It is a mild day as they walk to the town, with the sun shining on ice and snow. They are hailed at the city gates with the traditional “Who comes?”

“Bestljarson’s fosterling, and companion,” says Loki. The gates open, and they walk through.

-x-x-x-

Already the return of the Casket of Ancient Winters has changed Jotunheim. The castle and its plaza are surrounded with snow-paved roads and new ice buildings—inns, taverns, open markets—and parks with patient-shouldered snow-shrouded fir trees; with bridges and frozen-over ponds. Some of Loki’s freight from Iceland has already arrived, and is being parceled out in the castle forecourt as he arrives with Dua. Loki teases, “Where’s that stable boy? Where’s Torvi?” And is assaulted by an overwhelming hug at Thor-height. “Uncle!”

She’s dressed as a girl. “Niece! See to my horse, will you? We are visiting together.”

-x-x-x-

After cleaning up, Loki repaired to the stables—much better than the cow byre that had been there before—to see his niece and his child. Thorvinna curries Dua, who is sighing, and drooling, with her eyes closed. Mutual affection, then. All to the good.

“Uncle, what a beauty! Is she Sleipnir’s?”

“She is not. Why would you think so?”

“Well, because she resembles him. And she came with you, as Sleipnir did before.”

“Do you think her as good a horse as Sleipnir?”

“Well.” Thorvinna looked with an appraising eye. “She is finer-boned, and is more elegant; but she is at an awkward age, is she not?”

“Yes, just a clumsy child. But which is better?”
“Sleipnir!” Dua snorted, and the girl kissed her nose. “Meaning no insult to you, little one; but I know Sleipnir’s worth. You must grow into yours.”

“So you like her, then?” Loki asked.

“Oh, yes.”

“Then you may tend her while she is here.” Loki scratched under his daughter’s chin, rubbed her ears, and left the two together.

-x-x-x-

On the way to his chambers, Loki is taken aside by Helblindi.

“Elder Brother. May we talk?”

Loki replies, “Certainly; of what?”

He is led to a quiet room with two chairs. Helblindi sits in his; Loki climbs into his.

“Let me start with your mother, Farbauti—do you know her story? The most beautiful of Jotuns, desired of Laufey…well, Laufey cast her out when you were born, for birthing a runt; so she returned to her homeland, Utgard. After word went out that you were dead, she wed Ymir Ymirsson. She soon bore another son, which she also named Loki, not willing to forget the son she thought lost, you see.”

It was like hearing an old story, or reading genealogies. Loki wondered. “Tell me: does my mother live?”

“I am sorry, brother, she does not. Not for many years.”

“But the point of your tale is that there is another Loki in Jotunheim?”

Helblindi nodded. “Yes, Utgard-Loki; he calls himself Skrymir. And he is here, for Thorvinna’s coronation.”

-x-x-x-

At the first reception, Loki shows off some of his newest finds.

Byleistr asked, “Berries? Will you turn us into Vanaheim, then?”

“No, Majesty, but I would not deprive you of this.” And Loki pushed a plump blue berry into his brother’s mouth.

A new face is there, looking over his: a handsome frost giant who towers over the brother-kings. “Come, Loki,” greets Helblindi. “This is your mother’s son. This is Skrymir.” His half-brother was much taller (naturally), with even features and wide-set eyes. It was obvious that Farbauti had been a beauty; Loki’s own sharp features—and lack of height—must have come from Laufey’s side of the family.

-x-x-x-

On the day of her coronation, Thorvinna was receiving guests (and gifts), one by one in her
chambers. The formal ceremony would come later.

Loki’s daughter Dua had a maternal streak, wide as that in a girl whose only favorite toys were dolls. She adopted puppies and baby goats; had there been rabbits on Loki’s island, she would have adopted baby bunnies; and in Jotunheim she adopted a princess. (Actually, the adoption was mutual.) So it was quite a surprise to Princess Thorvinna that the filly was not the present her uncle Loki had brought.

No, said Loki, but I will give you three presents: a name, a secret, and, once your father gives approval for your going, I will give you a job.

“A name?”

“Surely you grow tired of being named for my Asgardian brother. I would not inflict you with that. And ‘Torvi,’ however much you answer to it, is not a proper name for a Princess.”

“So, Vinna?” She wrinkled her nose; this was clearly not the part of her name that she applied to herself.

“Not exactly. There is a Midgardian vine that wraps itself around the halls of learning. What do you think of ‘Ivy’?”

She stood from her bench, bowed at his feet like a young man waiting to be knighted. “I would be honored.”

Loki kissed her on her forehead. “Rise, Princess Ivy.”

She settled back on her bench. “You mentioned a secret.”

“Yes. Hah. How to explain this…. You noticed that Dua resembles Sleipnir?”

“I knew that she was his offspring!”

“Not exactly. But they had the same mother.”

“Who?”

Loki checked; yes, they were alone. They’d better be. He loosened a belt, lifted over-and under-tunics. Above his pants, Dua’s tattooed feet were barely visible beneath the slight rise below his navel.

“They have the same mother this little one will have.”

“Uncle?”

“You can touch, if you like.”

She knelt again, listened at his belly.

“Or are you my aunt?”
“I am still your uncle,” Loki said, putting his clothing back together. “But here is the secret: There is who you choose to be; there is who you choose to love; there is what you choose to do. *None* of those should put limits on any other, Princess.”

“But surely love requires compromises?”

“Choices, commitments…perhaps I am not the best person to ask,” said selfish Loki. “But remember my advice when someone tells you that you must throw yourself away, for them, or for their beliefs, or their cause. Make your own choices, *always*.”

Time was running short; there were other meetings ahead for both of them.

“You mentioned a job?” said Ivy.

“You wish to travel?”

“Yes.”

“And you like my horses.”

“I do.”

“When you are free to do so, you may visit my ranch on Midgard. I will make you a position there.” Loki stood, *lese majeste*; pulled the Princess to her feet. “And now I must go. Birthday wishes, Princess Ivy.”

“You give ambiguous advice, Uncle Loki.”

-x-x-x-

Skrymir opens the door to the tavern, beckoning Loki to enter before him. “Little mother.”

Loki hisses. “Do *not* call me that.”

“Come, brother. There is more to you than Jotun. I can *smell* it.”

They sat in the ice-built tavern like a movie star and a child fan in an Ice Bar in Reykjavik. And talked. Loki was *older* than this brother, damn it.

“So, Farbautjarson, why do you not rule here? There are three Laufeysons, after all.”

Loki, riposting over beer: “Because I am a parricide?”

Skrymir snorts. “That entitles you to the job.” Then sniffs, “Because you are a freak?”

Loki snorts in return. “This is Jotunheim. That is not at all relevant. Because I tried to kill you all?”

“Youthful enthusiasm. You *are* a runt, though.”

“Yes, and between Laufey and Odin I am a foreigner to you all, and thus quite unsuitable to Jotunheim’s throne. Besides, I don’t want it.”

“What kind of son—of either Laufey or Odin—does not wish to rule?”

Loki ticked off on his fingers. Finger one: “One who has tried it, and found it confoundedly
frustrating.” Finger two: “And boring.” Finger three: “One who is still having to fix the results of that adventure.” Finger four: “Among other things.” And five: “One who approves of and enjoys Jotunheim’s current enlightened rulers, and—,” conjuring a sixth finger for the next point, “who wishes to aid them in their goals.” Loki closed his fist; when it opened, it had only five fingers. “Does that answer the question?”

Skrymir laughed. “So. Too much on your plate?”

“Yes! And I am a picky eater, so it could take a while.” He took a sip. “So tell me about our mother.”

“She mourned you, always.” (Loki winced.) “She was …”

And here, the author will leave them in peace for a little while.

-x-x-x-

“How do the Jotuns regard me in Utgard?” Loki was curious.

Skrymir sipped his second beer. “It is the same, everywhere but here. Jotuns are reluctant. The old ways were harsh, but they were understandably so. All these changes are coming very fast, and you are the author of these changes.”

“Jotunheim would have ceased to exist had I not acted!”

“Yes, but…their lives have changed. It was always one level of cold, or slowly chilling; now it is far colder here, and hot there. And the markets have vegetables.”

“And new meats. And fruit!” Loki argued.

“Yes, fruit is always welcome. But they call it a trifle, and say that it weakens us.” Skrymir shrugged, apologetic. “You asked.”

“So they would not welcome me?”

“Some would, as a figurehead. For others, a prize. A considerable prize, and a source of leverage, to make things go back to the way they were.”

“But as a leader?”

“No. But I have no doubt you would eventually rise to that position, no matter where you landed.”

Loki stared into his mead.

Skrymir continued, “What I have said…this is true everywhere but this capital. You are very kidnap-able, Prince. Were I you, I would not wander the hinterlands alone—I would take a large escort.”

“I am no man’s pawn,” Loki bristled.

“In some ways, we are not yet men,” Skrymir responded genially; and finished his beer.

-x-x-x-

The next morning, while the castle’s occupants slept off the coronation and their resulting hangovers, Loki quietly met with the brother kings.
He told them, “I think Jotunheim is well on its way to prosperity. Let us now pursue honor.”

“And where is that to be found?” Byleistr took the lead.

“As with prosperity, we must look to Midgard, the home of change.”

Byleistr continued, “We went to war with Midgard before. Things went poorly.”

“Oh, we’re not going to fight the Midgardians. We’re going to protect their weak and innocent.”

Helblindi asked, “So honor is women’s work?”

“Please, do not take *all* your notions of gender from Asgard. In Midgard, men do women’s work as well.” Loki paused, pacing, thinking. “Still, it won’t do to frighten them. Let me take only your shortest and weakest Jotuns to protect Midgard. It rarely hurts to be underestimated.”
Pele is back on Loki’s Island; he leaves Dua with her and goes to talk to the other side of the family. (Dua dashes away to reacquaint herself with her goats.) Visiting Thor and Sif in Asgard: young Magni thinks himself already a warrior at six; another babe will be here soon; and what of the eldest? Pouting late-pre-teen Freya reminds him of (slightly older) Ivy: another girl having to create her own place in the world.

“And what do you want to be when you grow up?” he teases.

“A doctor,” says Freya determinedly.

“A healer? Surely you have run across no objections to that.”

“A biologist. No-one here even knows what that means.”

Just as he promised Ivy, Loki says, “I can bring you books. And if your parents are willing, you can visit Midgard with me.”

Good lord. Dua must be rubbing off on him; Loki is collecting little girls.

-x-x-x-

Returning from Iceland, from Jotunheim, from Asgard; Loki goes to Taiohae to get Tritt’s tattoo. He shows Jacques an Icelandic symbol for success—eight Viking ships, sterns together, radiating out in a star—and lets the man create his own interpretation. On a gourd, in marking pen; then in candlenut ink, on the blade of his left shoulder. Let any itch there be an omen of success.

-x-x-x-

“Another one?” Pele screams at him. “You already have a horse child here, and she is not yet grown. And you’ve started another one?”

“Had I the time, I’d make two dozen. Possibly more.” Loki is pouting like a teenager caught red-handed.

“You’ll kill yourself.”

“You underestimate me.”

“You’ll exhaust your island. You haven’t got enough land for all the horses you’d make.”

“I have a planet! I have three planets! Why is this a problem?”

She huffs at him, spins on one heel, and leaves with her pack of half-grown dogs. Late in the evening, Pele returns, but still won’t talk to him.
The next morning:

“I’m busy,” Pele says with her back to Loki’s approach.

“Doing what?”

“Trying to find homes for my remaining puppies.”

“There is the ranch here.”

“I would not trust you with a dog,” she said coldly; ended her text message, and walked out.

The next day, Loki makes her coffee and places it at her side, saying nothing.

She ignores it and it grows cold. Finally Loki sighs. “What is the problem, exactly?”

Pele snarled, “You refuse me! You’ll fuck any horse available, but you’ve always refused me!”

“You picked a form I would have to refuse!”

“I picked this form in Hawaii so you would pick me up!”

Loki said coldly, “I stopped for the dog.”

They stared at each other, mutually seething.

Loki spoke first. “I am an object for your amusement, is that it?”

Pele’s voice was pure ice. “Remember which of us is the deity.”

“Have the Hawaiians so tamed you? Are you so fixated on missionary sex that no alternative is acceptable? Will you accept no other token of affection than to be taken roughly by a hairy, stinking man?”

“It is my favorite,” Pele admitted.

“I would rather keep you as a friend than fail you as a lover,” said Loki.

“And you did take pity on my dog…”

“And I continue to need your help.”

She patted his belly. “Because you keep making horses.”

“They are my favorite,” he admitted; and stuck his tongue out at her.

She kissed its tip. “I will still help you.” She shook her head. “But you have lost your chance at wonderful sex, Loki Laufeyson. Bring me a big, hairy, stinking man someday, and I may forgive you.”

Notes:
**Two dozen:** Loki originally wanted 27. I had to talk him down to twelve; then Odin stuck his nose in and talked him down to 11 (see chapter 2).

**Fail you as a lover:** Loki is pumping up the female hormones and skimping on the male ones for his baby at the moment. This does not reflect upon his usual performance or abilities.

**Hairy man:** Maui is the *beau ideal*. Although Pele does not get along with him in Polynesian myths, he is still her ideal of male beauty.
Laufeyson Ranch

Chapter Summary

In which Dua gets evaluated, and Loki’s empire grows. Next chapter will be Chapters 1-3 plus context, and then we get to the Avengers.

Dua had been beloved at three days, lively at three weeks, lovely at three months; is ready for her yearling inspection. Loki’s first tattoo, her baby mark of a foal sleeping on its back, becomes Laufeyson Ranch’s logo. And Loki and Pele prepare for the promised visit from Mr. Demarest and two guests.

Tritt’s baby-belly portrait (already a tradition) showed off the ranch in the background, where naked Loki stood wearing a large-brimmed straw plantation hat, the moon of the hat brim hiding his downturned head, the moon of his belly mostly hiding his pubic region; bare elbows casually propped on the fence behind him, bare legs crossed at the ankles. And young Dua as sniff at him, on one side.

Loki is lumpy and nervous at meetings his daughter’s father’s owners.

-x-x-x-

“Mr. Demarest.” Loki in good slacks and a loose shirt reaches out his hand.

“Mr. Laufeyson.” Demarest is tweedy, in a jacket with suede patches and a very English hat despite the tropical weather. He shakes hands, then says, “This is Mr. and Mrs. Carmen, the owners of Simon Says.”

“Bill,” says the man, hand out.

“Emily,” says the woman.

“Loki. I apologize in advance if I have to leave you early; I’ve an unavoidable medical appointment. My assistant, Ms. Pele, will also help.”

The group rounds the corner and Pele is there, with immaculate Dua on a lead rope.

“Beautiful!” says Emily, clasping her hands. Dua twitches a nervous ear at her. Emily’s husband pulls out his cell phone, starts taking pictures.

“Sh-sh-sh,” Loki croons, and his daughter relaxes. Ever to the point, Demarest asks him to set her up. Loki takes the lead from Pele, and lifts it up; Dua’s head follows. Demarest is stalking her, his eyes like the camera of a fashion photographer, taking in every line, curve, and angle.

“Now walk her.”

Loki leads Dua to the round pen, gives a command; his daughter walks away and then back to him.

“Let’s see a trot, both directions; then a canter, both directions.”
Loki makes the right noises and his daughter obeys.

Demarest turns to his companions. “Well? Are you satisfied?”

Emily says, “I’m not sure how much is Simon, and how much is her dam. Is the mare available?”

“She’s not presentable, just now,” Loki warns.

“Oh, we’re used to horses in field condition. I’m just curious.”

“Very well.”

Pele gives him a sharp look.

Loki continues smoothly, “I have to get going, but Pele here can show you the mare. Pele?”

“Yes, of course. Give me a few minutes.”

“We can watch this one—Dua?—while we wait,” says Bill.

Loki and Pele inconspicuously dash back to the house.

Pele is grinning mischief while Loki peels off his clothes. “What is your horse name again?”

“Lopt. It means Loki.”

“Lopped. Like a rabbit. What do I say if they have any questions?”

He pauses while still in his pants. “Whatever you like. I trust you.”

“You’re no fun,” Pele says, sticks out her tongue. “Is there a halter?”

“In the back,” he says; she rushes off again, Loki finishes stripping, contemplates the open door behind her—wide enough—takes a breath, and changes.

-x-x-x-

Loki tries to behave as a horse, but it is a challenge. “She’s a little skittish,” apologizes Pele. Dua, in the pen, has not seen her mother in horse form before, and is quite fascinated (although Loki still smells the same).

“That big man on this little horse!” Emily exclaims.

“Yes, they’re inseparable,” says Pele. “But she’s sturdier than you’d think.”

“Nordic of some sort,” guesses Demarest. “Bill, Emily, look. Dua has a flatter shoulder and a deeper hip. She got those from Simon. It’s a good cross.” He turned to Pele. “Do you think Mr. Laufeyson wants to sell?”

Loki snorted. “I’m sure he doesn’t wish to,” Pele said.

“What about a repeat breeding?”

“Actually, Lopped is already in foal for this year. But perhaps later.”

“Well, I’d like to keep an eye on Dua and any foals she has. I’m sure there’s a market, if he’s interested. And if this little mare can continue to produce such quality foals…Do you know the
“I’m afraid I wasn’t consulted on this breeding, either. I might not have approved.” Loki reaches to bite at Pele’s hair; she pushes his face away.

-x-x-x-

The guests were gone. Pele sighed: If she left this place a mess, it would likely stay that way for months. She put away Loki’s clothes, washed the tea things, unhaltered the horses. Opened the pen and let Dua out to accompany her free-ranging parent.

-x-x-x-

Dua tries to mother Loki as he becomes more pregnant; in horse-form he must drive her away with shows of heels and teeth so that he can draw his beach-runes in private.

-x-x-x-

Time varies between the realms, travelling in loops and leaps and stutters. Those who are bound to one realm do not notice; those who travel between realms are (often) inconvenienced. But Loki, who knows the backroads of space and time: in these gaps, Loki dances.

-x-x-x-

As Pele is not available, Loki-person attends to Tritt’s birth himself.

-x-x-x-

There are changes underway in Jotunheim. A voluntary service program has been announced, involving rebuilding in the provinces and, rumor has it, military duties on another world. Power shifts in Utgard.

Skrymir, in sunglasses and temporary exile, becomes Monsieur Tapuva’e, and with some companions establishes Loki’s ice business on several islands. The Jotun skill at turning any water into clear ice has possibilities that Loki can exploit.

-x-x-x-

Not long after this, Freya is the first of Loki’s nieces to come visit. Then Ivy stops by for a while before her military deployment.

-x-x-x-

Loki takes a short trip (from the perspective of those at the ranch), visiting Paris—and making diplomatic arrangements—and travelling on to Hungary, where he liaises with a plain but sturdy Shagya Arabian stallion. He returns humming. (That foal will be named Venn.)

-x-x-x-

The girls are bored; Freya wants her own summer job to make some pocket money. Loki and Skrymir make ice, so could she have a lemonade stand? But Loki has under-occupied goats as well. Ivy and Freya experiment with making goat’s milk ice cream, flavored with cocoanut and local fruits.

“I’d eat this,” Ivy says, after a successful batch.

“I’d pay money for it,” says Freya.
“Let’s sell it!”

They start an ice cream stand in Hiva ‘Oa.

-x-x-x-

Ivy has military duty: the right height, sufficient age, and commander-in-chief Helblindi’s niece: how not? She leaves from Loki’s island.

In the Sahel, there is an elite troop of United Nations peacekeeping forces, usually called “‘Yotes.” They are as tall as Masai and as blue as Tuaregs. They wear dark blue berets and red-lensed dichroic sunglasses. It is thought that their popular name comes from the mascot whose face winks from their shoulder patches – a green-eyed coyote called Trickster. They are patient and multilingual, skilled at treating fevers, adept at purifying water, and fond of candied fish, which they share as a treat with any nearby children. (And the children are fascinated by them.) Every campaign season, the height restriction for the ‘Yote troops creeps upwards.

**A long note on the ‘Yotes:**

New troops are assigned to the “Ice House” until they acclimate. The Ice House is an enormous underground cavern filled with blocks of ice; the troops monitor the ice (and renew it) on a regular schedule.

Once they are adept at repairing ice blocks, the next duty is to make new ice by progressively refining salt water. (The salt water arrives via tanker planes from the ocean, and is deposited in plastic-lined ponds.) Refined blocks are stored in the Ice House until needed for cooling and fresh water; the salt is also retained in brine-rich *salidas*, to be marketed by the local refugees.

Cooling vests are also stored in the Ice House, for use in night patrols (a definite step up from ice-making duty) and then, for the most heat-adapted, day patrols. A Jotun who can draw ice from even the scant moisture in the Sahel air often accompanies these patrols as a healer.

The patrols bring in refugees and watch for attacks. *Ifriti*—“ifrits,” or demons—are the troops who patrol the refugee camps, and, among other duties, prevent feuds from breaking out within them. The tallest Jotuns are usually *ifriti*: a combination of police, medics, and teachers.

Day patrols are the most glamorous service (but not the most respected: that is the *ifriti*). Ivy often went out on those, with veteran soldiers who had not grown too tall for this duty. (Small Jotuns need less water.)

A few very old Jotuns had joined the ‘Yotes—despite their size—to act as strategists and teach the troops traditional Jotunheim styles of fighting. Their quarters were in the Ice Houses.

-x-x-x-

Loki is still exploring space and time to find resources for Jotunheim. Eventually, the realm will host, in addition to polar bears, crushes of wooly rhinoceroses, *megaloceros* deer, their own small shaggy horses, giant bison, and ground sloths. The rare local *vargs* mate with dire wolves.

-x-x-x-

Loki acquires a few months’ lease on Henri d’Agincourt, a young coal-black Canadian stallion of excellent pedigree and very bad manners. (Until the horse is proven as a sire, and ideally, learns to
behave, he is of no use to his breeder. Hence the lease to Loki.

-x-x-x-

To bear Funa, Loki risked transforming multiple times, breeding with handsome Henri in mare’s form: preferring to knock some respect into the stud before letting him at Dua.

Then, human Loki oversaw the breeding of Dua: his bright, curious, maternal daughter becomes a flirtatious hussy; Henri, remembering his lessons, is a suddenly mannerly peacock of a beau.

While Pele and her dogs guarded young Tritt and Venn at the far windward end of the island. This operation needed more people…

-x-x-x-

… just not this one.

Loki was working with Henry in the round pen.

Thor appeared, looking confused.

“Heimdall didn’t tell you?”

“I came from New York.”

“Oh. This is my new son-in-law, Henri d’Agincourt. Manners, Henri. Stand still. Don’t show your teeth. Bow!” And the horse complied, bowing to Thor.

But what was this odd body armor Loki was wearing?

“As you can see,” Loki panted, “I’m busy.”

“Training horses?”

“Keeping this amorous gentleman from my daughter Dua. If he mounts her again, she’ll abort.”

Thor mustered his arguments. “Jotunheim’s orbit is stable, its ecology is healing, and its troops are a success thus far in the Sahel. Adventures await. Have you completed your task yet?”

Loki turns with the horse. Beneath his loose shirt is no armor, only flesh.

“Brother?”

“Oh.” Patting his belly. “This is Funa. Incubating. As you can see, I’m busy. Go run and play, Thor.”

Thor looks disappointed. “Brother?” he says again, quietly.

Loki matches his tone. “It is no enchantment. Please go.”

Thor departs; Loki will mend relations later.

Loki gets his cellphone camera, a mirror; sends “This will have to do” to Pele – and changes. A second white mare chases the black stallion away from her daughter with teeth and hooves.

-x-x-x-
Thor returns to Asgard, reports to his father, “It is possible Loki has become carried away by one of his projects.”

“Oh?”

“I fear Loki’s hobby has the better of him. He’s obsessed.”

Funa’s baby-bump picture is rude: Loki wearing only a wicked smile and a tight, short belly shirt that says *My Eyes Are Up Here.*

Ivy comes to the island from time to time, on R&R. She brings some friends with her. They make goats-milk ice cream.

The friends are allowed to come even in the absence of Ivy.

Funa is a filly; but Dua bears a blue-eyed black son. Henri d’Agincourt’s owners do not want him; more importantly, they do not want him *entire,* as in their opinion a half-bred stallion in Henri’s line would harm their horse’s reputation. Mr. Demarest, however, is delighted to be the agent for a son of Dua, and sells him to a Canadian wild-animal trainer. Some years later, the gelding Captains Courageous (known, for short, as Cappy) will become a popular star in Canadian children’s television.

Ivy brings a clutch of small frightened silent children from the Sahel. After six weeks among the horses, being mothered by Dua, they are chattering happily. She returns them to their homes.

Each daughter foal rides low on Loki’s tall body: first a bump, then a thickish belt, then a round growing pearl, ungainly on his long form. Then Loki changes and she settles into place. His body is working, his mind calm and focused. A surge of effort as each is born, already much beloved. Saxa’s father is a Nordic small draft. Dua’s child is a warmblood colt; Tritt’s is Halflinger-like.

The Jotun soldiers (*shush, people do not need to know that!*) start offering their ice cream in other islands. Their stands are called “Iotuna Vahine” (Jotun Maid), and the logo is a blue girl in native Marquesan dress, with each hand holding three ice cream cones. It is very popular.

Hetta is Loki’s next filly, by a Croatian Lipizzaner. His grown-up daughters are also bred.

More children arrive, regain themselves, depart. The flock of blue girls running the ranch begins to resemble a pony club more than a military encampment.
Some of the children that arrive are green.

Loki’s eighth foal is the Camargue-sired Wheat. Nina’s father is a largish Caspian stallion. Diva’s sire is in contrast a short but talented warmblood, Neapolitan in ancestry and adept at dressage; Elf’s sire is a Welsh cob. The “baby bump” pictures are ever more outrageous. Loki’s daughters and granddaughters stay on the ranch, enjoying their times with the visiting stallions; any grandsons (and great-grandsons) are marketed by Mr. Demarest: dressage ponies, mud-colored eventers, circus horses: all manner of performers.

The sheer size of modern draft horses daunts Loki. He looks at the smallest draft horses, the strongest warmbloods, the least cartoonish ponies. He looks at pulling horses—Japanese sledge runners, Austrian Halfingers—trying to find Svadilfari’s type. One day in Paris, on a whim he visits the 

*Musee des Arts et Metiers* and sees an eighteenth century steam tractor. It is obsolete, impractical, and one thousand years younger than the type of horse he seeks. Needs (and so breeds) have changed on Midgard. There is no horse like Svadilfari left.

Notes:

**Lopped:** Bunnies with eared that are flopped down, not upright. See 
[http://exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbits/tp/LopEaredRabbits.htm](http://exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbits/tp/LopEaredRabbits.htm).

**Entire versus gelding:** Male horses are commonly neutered (de-balled) to make them more useful (other than for breeding), with more tractable personalities. Such horses are called *geldings.* A grown male horse that still has its balls is a *stallion*; he is also said to be intact, or entire.

**The horse breeds of Loki’s baby daddies:**

1. Dua’s father is an eventer named Simon Says: part thoroughbred, part Arabian, part Shetland Pony. See Chapter 13.
2. Tritt’s father is an Icelandic Stallion (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/icelandic/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/icelandic/index.htm)).
3. Venn’s father is a Shagya Arabian (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/shagya/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/shagya/index.htm)).
4. Funa’s father is a black Canadian Horse (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/canadian/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/canadian/index.htm)) named Henri d’Agincourt. Dua breeds with him also. The Canadian Horse may be the ancestor of the Morgan in America.
5. Saxa’s father is a small Nordic draft, possibly a Nordland (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/nordland/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/nordland/index.htm)), a Døle (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/dole/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/dole/index.htm)), or a Gotland (see [http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/gotland/index.htm](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/gotland/index.htm)). I think Loki may be trying to reinvent the Fjord. Dua and Tritt breed also.
7. Wheat’s father is a Camargue (see
8. Nina’s father is a Salerno stallion (see http://www.petcaregt.com/horsecare/horsebreeds/salernohorse.html). More daughters are bred. Granddaughter breeding may also occur.
9. Diva’s father is a large Caspian stallion (see http://www.discoverhorses.com/all-about-horses/caspian-horse/). More daughters are bred. Granddaughter breeding may also occur.
10. Elf’s father is a Welsh cob (see http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/welsh/index.htm). More daughters are bred. Granddaughter breeding may also occur.

Svadilfari, in my mind, was a far-travelled Solutrian-type horse, like a small Ardennes (see, e.g., http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cheval_ardennais_de_trait.jpg). Horses like this were described by Julius Caesar. The breed has since changed considerably, for pulling power and meat production.

Will it go ‘round in circles…

Chapter Summary

And now we’re back to where the story started. Rerun of chapters 1-3, and a bit more.

The time: Years after the first Avengers movie, but not as many years as you might think.

“God of Mischief,” Odin said.

“Allfather.” Loki—sometime Odinson, sometime Laufeyson, sometimes child of no one at all—gave his putative father his widest, least sincere smile. “You have need of me.”

It was a family meeting in the smallest conference room on Asgard: Odin and Thor in their “business suit” leathers, as Loki thought of them, practically-but-not-quite armor; cousin Tyr in new leather, Frigga in satin, Sif in absentia, Freya Sifsdottir dressed like her current hero on television (Rachel Maddow); and Loki, just arrived from his island, in board shorts and a ratty message T-shirt; covered in tribal tattoos, with one flip-flopped foot propped on the edge of the conference table. He had looked worse before; there were a number of meetings—none recent—in which Loki had been literally what the goats had dragged in: Toothgnasher and Toothgrinder being the goats in question. Still, Odin gave him the stink-eye and he straightened in his chair, fading out the tattoos and converting his outfit into the appropriate green leathers. “Better?” with his head cocked towards Odin, like a bird.

Odin started the meeting. “Thor insists on going to war, beyond the nine realms, and Asgard needs a diplomatic representative in New York.”

“And with the Avengers,” Thor added, “to help defend Midgard while I am gone.”

“Let’s unpack those statements,” said Loki. “Brother, you could be years following your hammer to fly to the Badoon—or I could open for you a direct path. And Father, you have finally decided to treat with Midgard as allies, rather than subjects —to join their United Nations—and you find they do not reach to you with open arms, but rather must decide whether to accept Asgard as a member of their association. I suppose it must rankle, seeing the political and economic successes my Jotuns have had on Midgard.”

“Your Jotuns.”

“You gave them to me, did you not? My box of broken toys, to repair and not to rule? And I have done that; I do not rule Jotunheim, but there’s not a soul there, up to the very kings, who would deny their success was due to me.”

“Because Thor gave you access to Midgard!”

“Possibly. In any case, however, if your successor-king Thor is not there to represent you in New York, if their diplomats have more issues to resolve, who there shall see to our family’s interests? Sif does not care to; Tyr is no diplomat; Frigga will not come alone; would you send your student princess, who does not even bear your name, or would you do it yourself, King?”

“Freya would consult with you, anyway; and she is too young for such responsibility,” Odin said.
“And were I to come, at this juncture, they would see me as a petitioner rather than a king. Asgard does not grovel.”

“But a second son in New York would ruffle no feathers, being neither too high in rank nor too low.”

“And the Avengers?” prompted Thor.

“If they can tolerate me, I suppose I can tolerate them.”

“And so we come to what you want,” said Odin. “You want Sleipnir, my horse.”

“Just a breeding lease. For one year. For my ranch on Midgard.”

“As you say, let us examine this further. You know that Heimdall keeps me informed of your activities.”

“I’ve made no secret of them. And Thor has been my guest from time to time.”

“You need a stallion for your horses.”

“For my mares. I’ve a herd of white mares, and their daughters. Every year or so, I bring in a stallion for them, to develop the breed.”

“And where did you get these horses?”

“As I said, I bring in a stallion….”

“No, Loki. The mares. Where did they come from? Had they not mothers?”

“Ah. Well…” Loki looked down, swallowed.

Odin reached into a nearby pile of papers, pulled out a magazine turned to a black-and-white photo, and tossed it across the table to Loki. “Does this simplify your explanation?”

It was a picture of tattooed, naked Loki, seen from the rear, with a fiendish grin on his face and a whip-handle shoved up his ass. Homage to a famous Mapplethorpe self-portrait. In it, Loki boasted an impressively bloated belly.

“It’s been censored.”

“What goes on at that ranch of yours?”

“Fine. My white mares are my daughters. My daughters, as Sleipnir is my son. Does that explain things?”

“You have congress with stallions?” asked Tyr, appalled.

Loki shrugged. “I can become a mare, easily enough. And there are artificial means for which the stallion himself need not be present.”

“This is argr,” Tyr continued. “You shame us all.”

Odin asked, “Would you have congress with your own son? The result would be a monster.”

“It would be a centipede,” said Thor, under his breath.
“Father,” Loki addressed Odin rather than the chaos around him. “I won’t seduce your precious horse. I am already gravid.”

“What?!?” from both Thor and Tyr, almost simultaneously.

“I found a stallion. And ... tried him out. But he colicked, and died, before he could be sent to my ranch.” Loki paused. “For years, I have searched for a horse like Svadilfari. Believe me, I’ve looked.” Loki patted his still-flat belly. “There is none like him on Midgard. And only one on Asgard.”

“Which you are not worthy to approach, my disreputable son.”

“Look again,” Loki said, tossing the magazine back at Odin, “I’ve never used your name. ‘Mr. Laufeyson, of Jotunheim and French Polynesia, breeds rare sport horses on an island in the Marquesas.’ There is no mention of Odin, or Odinsons, or Asgard at all. No shame, no disrepute, falls on you.”

“And it will not, if you represent us on Midgard until Thor’s return?”

“It will not,” Loki promised.

“A year’s campaigning lost while my war horse dallies with your oversexed daughters. Is that it?” Loki nodded. “Then let us discuss terms. What is the usual fee you pay?”

“First choice of the colts, or its value.”

“I’d want all the colts, not just one. You may keep any fillies.”

“Done.”

“And you may not bear any child of Sleipnir’s.”

“Well…”

“No, Loki. In fact, this foal you carry now shall be your last.”

Loki looked down, sighed, looked back at Odin. “Very well. Have you any other conditions?”

“One; but perhaps it is not only for you.” Odin shifted to catch Freya’s eye, then again to Loki. “Your mother and I have noticed just how calm you have been these last many years. Helpful; possibly even reasonable. But we only see you a few weeks, then you are gone again for a year or more. We would be honored to have a calm, helpful, reasonable, sane Loki in our councils at any time. But now, it seems this new maturity is only due to the mad schemes you are engaged in elsewhere. I’d like you sensible—as you are now—but not gravid. Can you do that?”

It seemed more bargaining was possible. “Would you accept half sane, half the time?”

Odin sighed. “I am willing to accept mostly sane—say, three-quarters sane—all of the time; nothing less. And I challenge my grand-daughter, your niece here,” another sharp look at Freya, “your protégé, to help you attain this long-term maturity, and to demonstrate it to me. Thor,” who startled as Odin addressed him, “is not Midgardian science able to accomplish such things?”

“So I am told,” said Thor, who had engaged in many previous discussions on this topic with both of his parents, and who had asked various SHIELD therapists, quietly, for advice.

Loki bowed his head in acquiescence, then asked “Are we done? I’d like to examine Sleipnir now,
and see if he measures up to my recollections.”

-x-x-x-

Frigga sat silent through the entire meeting, sometimes meeting his eye with a concerned look. As they stood, she came toward him.

“Loki? So my baby is having another baby?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Mother,” said Loki, scanning the group for Freya. “It’s just another horse.”

Frigga sighed. “I wish I understood you, Loki. Why…”

“I think you know perfectly well why,” he said, overriding her. But he hadn’t meant to snap at his mother; not really.

She looked up at him, said quietly, “I meant for what purpose. You always have one.”

“Ah. Well. As Father says this is to be my last foal, ask me afterwards. All right?” Trying to smile in a way that was both endearing and reassuring; but then he caught Freya’s eye.

“Niece!”

“Uncle?”

“Come with me; you’re to be my chaperone.”

-x-x-x-

On the way to the stable, Freya Sifsdottir said, “I looked at that picture. You’ve got a terrible self-image problem.”

“Really?” Loki, having gotten his way, was temporarily drunk with satisfaction. “You may have input on the next one.”

Lecturing as they walk to the stable arena: “Here are the things to look for in a stallion: Conformation. Performance. Personality. Potency.”

“Personality?” asks Freya.

“A horse can be a bastard if he’s a charming bastard: look at Anthony Stark, for example.”

-x-x-x-

Freya runs ahead to the big arena, and stakes out a spot nearby in the stands. In walks Loki in his jams, T-shirt, flip-flops, with the great grey horse loose at his heels. Sleipnir is not over-tall but is big: space-filling and solid, short-backed but longer through the hips than one would expect (necessary for the extra legs). Loki leaps onto the bare back; then suddenly is in green-and-black leather, bronze and horns on a fully caparisoned war-horse, pointing a suddenly-present spear at the horde of demons that materializes at the far end of the arena.

Sleipnir takes off running, plows into them from an extended canter, pivots like a cow horse on his hindmost legs to chase the scattering demons. Loki spears a fallen enemy with casual brutality,
holding the horse still as he fastidiously shakes the lance free of the body. A cluck of his tongue and
they charge into action again; wide feet wading through bloody mulch. A final giant demon behind
them is stunned and overcome as Sleipnir leaps, then goat-kicks behind: a capriole, mounted, in full
armor.

Loki turns him away at a trot, using only his legs to guide the horse. Another lap of the ring and
Sleipnir is sniffing, suspicious, at the lack of bodies.

Loki dismounts from an unbridled, saddle-less Sleipnir – back to surfer gear and flip-flops, and a lack
of armor. “Steady on, old son. Let’s walk that energy off.” And to Freya in the stands, spellbound:
“That’s what a war horse does.”

-x-x-x-

Freya asked, later: “Why haven’t you tried to seduce me?”

Loki considered. “First, I had to swear the most brain-splitting oaths to your father Thor. Second,
your mother Sif let me know what would be the consequences were I to violate any of those oaths.
And third, you didn’t ask me. Would you like me to seduce you?”

“Not right now,” said Freya.

“Perhaps later,” said Loki.

-x-x-x-

Notes:
The chapter title is that of an old song by Billy Preston.
Chapter Summary

Freya meets some of the Avengers.

It being early in the morning, only Bruce was in the lab when Thor came in with a tall, short-haired blonde girl wearing blue jeans and a blazer.

“Friend Bruce? I need to be gone soon”—Thor had warned them of this previously—“and Loki will be here for tomorrow’s meeting; so before I go, I wish you to meet my child. This is Freya Sifsdottir. She needs your help.”

“Dr. Banner,” she greeted, holding out a hand. “And I could use your help, but I don’t exactly need it.”

Bruce shook it, gave his shy smile. Thor gave a nod, and walked off.

“What can I do for you?”

“It’s complicated. I need access to a medical lab and testing equipment for a long-term experiment. And it needs to be done in private. It’s for Asgard.”

“Oh? Why would Asgard come to us?”

“Because you’re …discrete? And it concerns you. Would you like my credentials?”

Just then Tony Stark walked in, cocky and toting a coffee pot. “Who’s this? How’d she get here? You getting some on the side?”

“Hey, Tony. No. Thor brought her. I may be doing some work for Asgard.”

Tony shifted the coffee pot to the counter, raised a hand to shake with her. “How do you do, Miss…?”

“Sifsdottir. Freya Sifsdottir.”

For so early in the day, Tony’s smile was incandescent. Well, Loki had described him to Freya as a charming bastard.

Bruce, reading: “…our expert in physiologies Asgardian, Jotun, equine, or any combination of the above.”

“Mother must have written that,” said Freya.

“What, equine? I thought the Sleipnir thing was just a story.”

“No,” said Freya, “He’s my cousin.”

“Really?” asked Tony, who’d been eyeing her appraisingly. “Are you part equine, too?” Which would be exotic, but somehow less interesting.
“No,” said Freya again. “Loki’s my uncle.” Now there was a big reason to back off the Stark charm.

“So we can see why you might be useful to us. But what can we do for you?” Bruce again, calm.

“I’m supposed to devise a way to keep Loki sane without…”

Tony, interrupting: “Loki and sane don’t belong in the same sentence.”

Bruce, also interrupting: “He’s sane now?”

God, it felt like her orals again, but without Hank McCoy’s supporting presence. “Dr. Banner, how do you define sane?”

“Let’s see: able to anticipate and evaluate the effect of one’s actions; having and showing good sense and good judgment; making logical inferences and reaching reasonable conclusions from them?”

“Well, he’s that now, but only because he’s pregnant”—

“My head just exploded,” Tony said—

“and the Allfather doesn’t want him to make any more baby horses.”

“There went mine,” said Bruce.

“Right. Anyone want a drink? Let’s break for a bit.” from Tony.

-x-x-x-

Bruce had made her green tea; Freya sipped it in the little kitchen. Tony—his glass had ice cubes in it, and amber-colored liquid—was kinda sorta sweet-young-thing curious. “You said Loki’s your uncle? It’s not honorary, or something?”

“He’s my real uncle,” Freya said.

“But the name Sifsdottir? Is Sif related to him?”

“No…”

A gulped sip, almost a leer, and “So who’s your daddy, then?”


Yup, hands off. “Well” – a backslap was okay, wasn’t it – “like father like daughter. I’m sure we’ll get along fine, kid.”

-x-x-x-

“Freya, what the hell is going on?” Tony asked, when they reconvened in a conference room.

“Well.” A big inhale. “I had an internship at the New Bolton Center one summer. There are some mares—female horses—that are just brilliant in performance, but they are very nervous, high strung. You can’t predict what they’ll do. But when they become mothers, it calms them right down. Levels them out. They’re still smart, still able…they just lose that edge. And once they have the baby, once they’re not pregnant anymore—the edge is back. Same high-strung nerves, same unpredictability.”

Banner: “And Loki’s like that?”
She could exhale now. “Yes. Uncle Loki is like that. And Grandfather Odin says no more making baby horses. So we need to find another way to level him out.”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “But … horses?”

“Loki’s other children have not been treated well. And his horses are quite good, actually.”

-x-x-x-

“Again,” said Bruce, “what can we do for you?”

And Freya was back at her oral exams again, and suddenly in her comfort zone. “I need a scale to measure sanity,” she said; “applicable to this case, not necessarily for general use.”

“And…” Doctor Banner prompted.

“An agreed-upon set of protocols to test. But first we need a scale, and a baseline.”

“And Loki will cooperate?”

“Oh, yes,” she promised, with the Trickster’s own sharp-toothed smile. Tony escorted her out.

-x-x-x-

And returned for his coffee pot. “I thought you said Loki’s mind was a bag full of cats,” Tony told Bruce on his way out again.

-x-x-x-

Tony stewed over the situation that evening. “Why does Loki need to be level? He’s up to something. What’s he up to?”

“Loki has re-appeared?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah. On our side of the Badoon war, supposedly. At least Asgard thinks so.”

“If Asgard thinks so…maybe it is simple. Can we take his presence at face value?”

“Pepper,” Tony exhaled. “This is Loki. Some people have issues. Some people have volumes. Loki has libraries…hell, he’s got the Internet.”

“Maybe he’s changed?”

“Why would he change? Supposedly he’s using a new tranquilizer. Well, an old one. But he’s using it now. But why?”

-x-x-x-

Notes: Bruce’s definitions of sanity are mostly based on Merriam-Webster definition of “sane” and related terms. (Although Loki is giving me the stink-eye right now….)

The New Bolton Center is a very prestigious veterinary hospital in Pennsylvania. The racehorse Barbaro had surgery there. See http://www.vet.upenn.edu/veterinary-hospitals/NBC-hospital.
The Asgardian representative.

Chapter Summary

Enter the Avengers, stage left. Enter Loki, stage right, with pizza.

It started like this:

NASA and the ESA had sent some unmanned probes into Badoon space. They were destroyed.

Taking a lesson from the early Voyager missions, the next set of probes contained message disks: *Here we are. This is who we are. We come in peace.*

They got a reply. *Here we are. This is who we are. If you can get to us, we can get to you. You look tasty.*

-x-x-x-

Future probes kept a distance from the Badoon worlds, watching and relaying information on troop buildups from afar. Then relay stations on the paths between the Earth and the Badoon started going silent. Thor was asked to be sent as an observer to the Badoon worlds: although not a diplomat (but much improved in diplomacy in recent years), he at least could get there. Which left Midgard temporarily short one Avenger; Thor’s proposed solution (“Loki has become quite responsible of late”) was to deputize his brother.

-x-x-x-

So it was that “quite responsible” Loki showed up at the Avengers Tower in his surfer pants and an “Asgard out of Jotunheim” T-shirt, sunglasses and baseball cap, carrying a large stack of pizzas. The receptionist at the lobby did not react to his presence, and the elevator he required was both empty and willing to arrive at a floor outside of its programming. He took the pizzas to the conference room and sat down.

-x-x-x-

“Sir, the Asgardian representative…”

“All right, guys, meeting time, let’s go…”

“Sir, the Asgardian representative…”

“Right, Jarvis, Thor’s off at a Badoon monster truck rally…Hey, Pizza Guy, you’re in my seat!”

Loki raised his head with a smile.

“Sir, the Asgardian representative is here.”

Tony looked at Loki.

“You brought pizzas?”
“I thought it best to start on the right note.”

“Yeah, except…you’re in my seat.”

Five wary Avengers, and one substitute; six pizzas. Tony sat first, asserting dominance, close to his chair. Rogers the leader sat next, then Romanov the fearless—opposite Loki; Banner the calm on Loki’s other side; Barton the suspicious, last, between Romanov and Banner.

“What’s this?” Tony demanded, gesturing at the stack of pizzas.

“Well. Seeing as this is the first time I’ve been invited here, I thought I should bring lunch. Hospitality for hospitality. I brought you each a pizza; let me know if you desire more.”

Loki dealt one to Banner—“You are a vegetarian, yes? This is vegan”—gestured to the rest of them—“Please, help yourselves.”

A pause for implements, drinks, and the like; and then quiet eating.

“Good pizza. Not Ray’s, though,” Tony said.

“What is the purpose of this meeting?” Loki asked.

“No, Sparky, I run this,” said Tony. “But to answer your question, every week we get together to make sure we know what’s going on, and to avoid stepping on each other’s toes.”

“And is Director Fury not part of this meeting?”

“No need.” Tony pointed to Natasha and Clint. “They’re SHIELD.”

Captain America cleared his throat. “So, does anyone have anything to report?”

Head shakes all around. Tilting his head in Loki’s direction, Tony said, “Just his bro.”

Steve asked again, “So, anything from Badoon space?”

“No,” said Tony.

“I’m curious,” said Natasha. “We sent Thor because he could get there. But how? How did he get there?”

Loki shrugged. “That’s an easy question. I sent him.”

“Oh?” from Bruce. “You made an Einstein-Rosen bridge?”

“Hardly.”

“What?” from Tony. “You just punched a hole in the space-time continuum?”

Loki, fastidious, wiped his lips and put down his napkin. “A small one. It will heal.” Stood up.

“Anything else? I have another appointment.”
He gave a shallow bow, and was out the door, and gone.

-x-x-x-

When the God of Mischief brings you pizza… but they’d eaten it all, surprised and pleased by the unusual flavors. And no Avenger had turned purple, or rushed suddenly to the bathroom. It was a start.

-x-x-x-

Playing cards, post first meeting, and ruminating over their newest “member”:

Tony asked, idly, “So what’s Loki’s alignment now?”

Steve, confused: “Alignment?”

“Gygax? Dungeons and Dragons? Where is he on the order-chaos axis, and is he good, evil, neutral, or what?”

“Chaos,” said Natasha.

“Definitely Chaos,” said Clint, and the rest of them nodded.

“Right,” said Tony. “Now morality?”

“Evil,” said Clint.

“You ate his pizza,” said Bruce. “You even said it was a good pizza.”

“But it wasn’t Ray’s,” said Tony.

“Who was the last person who called you spoiled?” Bruce asked Tony.

“Probably Pepper. So, any votes for good?”

No hands. Even Steve wouldn’t commit to that.

“Evil?”

Only Clint raised his. He looked around, elbowed Natasha; she raised her hand half-way…then lowered it.

“Does that make him Chaotic Neutral?”

“Oh, Loki’s not neutral,” Bruce said. “How about Chaotic Bipolar?”

There were many nods; but Steve said, “I think he’s his own force. Not good, not bad, just… Loki. We had some partisan groups like that in the war.”

“So,” Tony summarized, “his alignment is Chaotic Loki?”

“That’s kind of redundant,” said Bruce.

-x-x-x-

Note: ESA = European Space Agency.
In which the specter of zombie pizza is raised, and two Avengers play doctor.

Second pizza day, a week later:

(Yes, Loki is still sitting in Tony’s chair.)

Tony finally spoke up. “This is delicious.”

“Yes,” said Loki. “Ray made it.”

“Ray made it? But Ray’s been dead since 2008.”

Loki waved a hand. “This is what you wanted, yes?”

“So this is zombie pizza?”

“What??”

“You raised Ray from the dead to make pizza?”

“No!”

“Then where did it come from?”

“There was a misplaced order in 1964, during the World’s Fair. I just took advantage of it.”

“Oh, that’s worse.”

“What?”

“Excuse me. You’re using time travel to deliver pizza! You’re violating the fundamental laws of physics for this?”

“I’m ignoring the fundamental laws of physics. The trick is to be inconspicuous.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to eat this,” Tony said dubiously. “I’m allergic to chronons.”

Loki goggled. After all this trouble?

“EAT. THE. PIZZA.”

Tony ate.
“There’s news from Thor this week,” Cap said. “It turns out there are several factions among the Badoon. Only one is actively hostile. Unfortunately, it’s the dominant one.”

Natasha asked, “Is there any need for action on our part?”

“Not yet.”

-x-x-x-

As they stood after the meeting, Loki asked silkily, “Same thing next week?”

“Uh, you can go back to the other pizza. Last week. That one’s fine.”

Loki smiled.

-x-x-x-

Bruce caught Tony’s eye, and the two accompanied Loki as he walked out.

“You know, we’ve heard things. From Thor. From Freya. About you,” Bruce began.

“I can imagine,” said Loki.

“Would you mind a physical examination in the Helicarrier? Your doctor can be present.”

“Let’s get it over with here and now,” Loki said. “And she’s busy counting sperm, I expect.”

-x-x-x-

The medical facilities in the Avenger’s Tower are remarkably complete and unsurprisingly advanced.

So here is Loki sitting cross-legged against the headboard of a hospital-style bed, in a (green) patient’s gown, the gown gathered in his lap and baring his headboard-protected backside. He is alone there with Stark and noted third-world clinician Dr. Banner.

“What are you up to, anyway?” asks Tony, as casually as he can.

“Raising horses,” Loki says, with wide innocent eyes. And then a giggle. “Using old world craftsmanship.”

-x-x-x-

Cut to fifteen minutes of Bruce trying to fill out a tablet of medical forms.

Full name? Loki Laufeyson? Odinson? “Loki” was enough.

Date of birth? He raised an eyebrow at that – no answer.

Gender? “Male, presently.”

Purpose of visit? “Prenatal.” Hold on, “male” on the form does not allow for that.

Number of previous pregnancies? Eleven or so.

Number of children? Sixteen (including Fenrir, Jormundgandr, his beloved Hel, and two human children that he dare not go near…) “That I am aware of.”
Medical insurance? Loki looked at Stark, who said, “I’ll cover it. Although so far you sound like a welfare bureau’s nightmare.”

Allergies? “Yes, but I will not tell you them.”

Medical allergies? Loki scanned the medicines available in the pharmacy. Some interesting things, there. “No.”

Date of last period? That was another stumper.

“Well, do you know when you got pregnant?” Loki did, to the minute.

Is the father’s medical history available? “I’ll try to recall, but he died recently. Colic.”

“Do people die of that?” Banner asked. “Indigestion?”

“Horses do,” Loki said somewhat frostily. But the Finnhorse’s death had won him Sleipnir for his daughters; so it was not an unmitigated tragedy.

Father’s name/age/nationality/religion? “Jasko; four; Finnish Universal.”

“Four,” said Bruce.

“Horse, remember?” Loki showed teeth in a smile.

“Just use the overrides, okay, Bruce?” Tony’s cavalier attitude to paperwork was a saving grace.

Any complications from previous pregnancies? “Complications?” asked Loki.

“Side effects?”

“Well, Sleipnir was hard to birth, but none of the others were. There were jokes, slurs, and attacks on my masculinity, though.” Loki paused. “Oh, and temporarily improved sanity. Be sure to write that one down.”

-x-x-x-

The first touchy examination done (pulse, blood pressure, oral temperature), they discussed further tests.

Nothing that could endanger the baby, was Loki’s final negotiating position.

X-rays? No.

Ultrasound? Yes.

Amniocentesis? No.

Blood collection? From extremities only, not his torso.

A placental sample? Samples? Possibly after the birth, check with Dr. Freya.

Fluids only as volunteered, no probing, thank you.

The next step was “gynecological” examination, then an initial ultrasound.

-x-x-x-
Loki on the examining table, feet in stirrups, long legs scrunched; the table canted ass-up to keep his male genitalia out of the way. Between balls and anus was a dark-lipped mare’s vulva.

Bruce wanted to stick a finger an inch or so inside two orifices.

Loki said, “I’d rather you didn’t,” still in that cultured, calm voice despite the ridiculous position. And suddenly yelped; Bruce apologized.

“What was that?” from Tony.

“Clitoris,” said Bruce.

“He has a fun button, too? That is so not fair!”

“May I check your prostrate?” Bruce was back to examining the patient.

“Not now. Possibly next year.”

“Could I at least take photographs?”

“Yes,” said Loki; after all, Elf’s baby-bump portrait, now censored in a national magazine, had originally shown far more.

-x-x-x-

Bruce with a stethoscope, listening to breathing and gut sounds. He centered the chestpiece on Loki’s flat abdomen, held a hand up for Tony to stay quiet, listened carefully. “I hear a second heartbeat.”

Tony had wondered whether Loki was serious about all this horse nonsense until he saw the resulting smile.

-x-x-x-

After the ultrasound, Tony asked suddenly, “You know what else we need? Sperm sample. Can you do that, Pizza Guy, or would it bother the egg you’re hatching?”

“Tony…” from Banner.

“What? We’ll need it for the longitudinal study, the before-and-after. Why not?”

Loki glared at him. “I can do that. I’d prefer privacy.”


“Here’s a container,” said Bruce. “Come on, Tony, let’s step outside a minute.”

Outside, Bruce asked Tony, “So, do you really want the Easy-Bake Oven, or just the extra knob?”

-x-x-x-

They leave Loki in bed while Bruce accumulates test results, Tony goes back to his own business. The green-gowned patient closes his eyes, waiting for the next try at *What are you up to, Loki*. After several minutes, he senses another presence in the room, snaps: “What is it, Banner?”
“How do you … give birth?”

“How do you ask?” As cold a question as he can form.

“Well, do I need a better operating room? Temperature control? Some special breathing apparatus?”

“You mean you do not ask out of dewy-eyed fascination with the Unnatural Madonna and the Miracle Of Birth?” He sighed, relenting. “I’ll be in horse form. Really, Doctor, I have done this before.”

-x-x-x-

“How did it go today?” Pepper asked, a glass of white wine in her hand.

“Well, Loki’s pregnant by a four-year-old Unitarian who died of indigestion. And I ate zombie pizza from 1964. You tell me.”

“Tony?” As he put ice in a glass.

“Hell of a thing when the world’s best liar tells you the absolute truth and you can’t wrap your head around it.” Tony poured. “Oh, yeah. Dad was a horse.”

“A Unitarian horse?”

“Just another typical day for the Avengers, right? Bottoms up.”

-x-x-x-

Note:

Supervillain sanity

Chapter Summary

In which art history becomes a useful major for would-be SHIELD agents.

Loki to Asgard: *I am doing my part. Where is my horse?*

Asgard to Loki: *There is a complication…*

-x-x-x-

The next day, Freya came over from the Asgardian consulate, to work with Bruce and Tony.

“We need to check arbitrary decisions,” Freya said. “Decisions – to see how he thinks; arbitrary – because Loki is very goal-oriented now, so every decision will be colored by his goals unless it can’t be. What’s arbitrary?”

Steve, in the kitchen where they were talking, was building a sandwich. “Art. All taste in art is arbitrary; you like it or you don’t.

“Aren’t there art cards? Like my trading cards that Coulson had? Show him a deck.”

“And let him put them in order,” said Bruce. “See how repeatable the order is.”

-x-x-x-

That evening:

“Uncle, we’ve found a non-intrusive test,” said Freya, sitting at the table with him, with a deck of cards. “Which do you like more, this one or that one?”

Loki nods, chooses quickly; usually poker-faced, but smiling at some choices and frowning at others; Freya records the result, shuffles, lays out the cards again.

-x-x-x-

Freya, to Banner, the next day: “The good news? His choices are very consistent. The bad news? Here are his top ten.”

She laid them face-up on the table, one by one.

Bruce sighed. “Okay, we have to prune the deck. No horses.”

-x-x-x-

By the next day, Freya had a consistent, horse-free ordered deck of images.

With Bruce, she showed the results to Tony and Steve. Bruce said, “We’ve got a sane deck. What’s next?”
Steve, getting into the professional role: “How do you measure crazy?”

Freya said, “We need a set of bad decisions.”

Steve: “In art?”

Tony frowned, recollecting. “Where did we find him again, in Stuttgart? Wasn’t that an art museum? I’m sure SHIELD collected the videos. What did he look at then?”

Bruce said, “What did he look at longest? What did he seem to enjoy?”

“Yeah, add those. And the big bull table where he de-eye-balled that guy. I want my name on the paper too, you guys.” Looking from Rogers, to Banner, to confused young academic Freya. “Come on, you have to publish this. Freya, you write it up.”

“She gets top billing,” said Bruce.

“Fine,” said Tony, “if I get to choose the title.”

“Subject to veto and revision,” said Bruce. “And I get to pick the journal. Steve, you’re in, too.”

“Done,” said Tony. “Freya, back to testing, then get writing. Supervillain Sanity Test. We can publish that, if SHIELD doesn’t classify it. And if they do, you’ll get job security there. SHIELD super-vet.”

-x-x-x-

Next week: The room is hot, and the agenda is frankly boring. The Asgard representative must be present for the meeting, but not necessarily awake throughout it. So here is Loki, dozing—a downside of this sanity method is that he is sometimes very tired—and when he rouses himself, the others are still squabbling about pizza. And time travel, apparently. He fails to see the problem. Loki closes his eyes and is out like a light.

Wakes up at a careful nudge from Tony, who must have decided he’s invulnerable. Bruce clears his throat and asks, “Can’t you go back in time and not have met with the Chitauri?”

Ah. “No; what happened, happened.”

Tony protests, “But you stole a pizza from the past!”

“Yes, apparently that also happened.”
War plans

Chapter Summary

Which is worse, fire giants or bureaucracy?

The next week, the next set of tasty-but-totally-natural pizzas, and Loki finally had information to provide.

Tony asked, “Is there anything new about the war with the Badoon?”

“Yes,” said Loki. “It’s not only the Badoon. They have allies in the Nine Realms. Muspelheim.”

“Muspelheim?” Steve asked.

“The fire giants. Their leader is Surt. They want more lebensraum, and the Badoon have offered them the Earth’s mantle.”

“Can we fight them?”

“Not easily. They are beings of fire, and their realm is hotter than liquid gold. Perhaps Stark has a suit that would work there.”

“I can build one,” said Tony. “Could we get the Human Torch?”

“The Fantastic Four are still in the Negative Zone,” Natasha reported.

“Well,” Loki said. “I’ve an ally who could work under those conditions; I’d have to see whether she is available.” He paused. “If you can help me with my phony war, I can help you with your real one.”

-x-x-x-

“What phony war?” This from Cap, who remembered it as another World War II term: sitzkrieg.

“Who’s sitting where?”

“As some of you know, I’ve a horse ranch in the South Pacific: a herd of mares and their foals, but I keep no stallion. Father has allowed me to borrow his.”

“Sleipnir?” asks Bruce.

Tony laughs, “Your…”

Loki cuts him off. “Yes, Sleipnir was my horse before he was Odin’s. But he is Odin’s now. And I find your petty regulations prohibit me from importing him.”

-x-x-x-

A quick flashback to a very recent meeting between Odin and Loki in Asgard:

When immigration protocols were first being set up for the Asgardians, a certain Henry Peter Gyrich
had messed up some paperwork: Sleipnir was listed as a human/animal hybrid.

(Freya Sifsdottir had known to get Loki’s mares acknowledged as fully equine from the start.

“Were they conceived by a mare?” asked Odin.

“Usually,” said Loki.)

But Sleipnir as a hybrid can only be used for its original purpose; then the “cell-line” must be destroyed, per U.N. Protocols.

“And you agreed to this?” Loki was aghast.

“It was hard enough getting diplomatic immunity for you,” said Odin.

“Well, what was the “original purpose” of this cell-line?”

Odin double-checked the paperwork (and you are welcome to visualize him wearing reading glasses). “That part is fine. Sleipnir is my war horse.”

“So?” said Loki. “Declare war on my island. I will be held hostage for Sleipnir’s return. But I shall need to warn my allies, first.”

-x-x-x-

“How does this affect us?” asked Tony.

“I need neutral observers on my island, to make sure the Asgardian invasion does not go too far. There are visiting children at my ranch. The island also is headquarters for my ice and ice-cream businesses, and I do not wish those disrupted.”

“Horses and ice cream.” Stark evidently found this humorous.

“A small kingdom, but my own. Odin will not accept a one-horse invasion as legitimate, and I do not want his troops running riot. Plus, we can’t jeopardize Asgard’s United Nations bid.”

“It sounds like your kind of diplomacy, not ours,” said Natasha.

“You only need to keep both factions from antagonizing each other. Otherwise, it’s a vacation in Polynesia: sunshine, good beaches, tropical drinks. And a chance to snoop into my doings, if anyone is so inclined.”

“I can go,” Natasha said.

“Me, too,” said Clint. “Vacations are my favorite kind of mission.”

“Then I may contact my ally,” said Loki.

-x-x-x-

After Loki walks out of a nearby restroom, Tony pulls Bruce aside, saying quietly, “Does that guy smell like walking sex to you?”

Bruce sighs. “You’re heterosexual, Tony.”

“And?”
“And he’s peeing almost pure estrogen. Ever hear of PMU – Premarin? That’s what older ladies take to stay feminine. He’s peeing it.”

“Damn. We collecting this? I could make a mint—okay, another mint. ‘Estrogen of the Gods… Goddesses?’

Bruce sighs again. “Just… just don’t, okay?”

-x-x-x-

There are paths in space and time, and Loki Skywalker knows them.

The Avengers (and Loki) continued the meeting the next day, with Director Fury in attendance. This time, Loki wore his “Been There, Done That” T-shirt. Except…the next time Tony glanced at it, it said “Done There, Been That.” The two messages alternated all day, but he never caught it in the middle of a change: always Been/Done or Done/Been, never Been/Been or Done/Done. What the hell?

“And we can trust you?” were the first words Fury spoke upon entering the room.

“Have you found me guilty of any improprieties since my return from Asgard?” Loki replied. “Then let us talk.

“Here is my proposal: I will open gateways for you, to get your soldiers and your diplomats to the Badoon. I will also enable you to reach Muspelheim to deal with Surt. In return, you will reclassify Odin’s warhorse Sleipnir as a horse, not a collection of hybrid cells, and you will get him diplomatic immunity.”

“And how do we know this second front, this war with Muspelheim, is real?”

“You have geological surveys, do you not? I believe there has been an upsurge in volcanic activity, in the usual places and in some unexpected ones. That is Surt and his fire giants, probing for invasion sites.”

“Then we’ve got a deal,” Fury rose, hand out.

Loki shook it. “Send this.” He passed a postcard to Tony.

Although Pele and Loki—profane but platonic friends—sent each other rude and/or obscene images on a regular basis, SHIELD had not realized these were a coded conversation. This one was a carefully—and explicitly—redrawn Christmas card, saying “Oh cum, all ye faithful.”

-x-x-x-

A little later:

“We can’t send that!” said Cap. “It’s obscene, and you know it.”

“Repeat after me, said Bruce wearily. “This is Loki we’re talking about.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

Lebensraum is space to live. It was a demand of the Germans in World War II.
Sitzkrieg means “sitting down war.” In World War II, it meant hanging around at the front, doing nothing. The opposite of blitzkrieg, or “lightning war.”
Chapter Summary

In which we get some villains to play with.

Loki’s hormones were up. He’d prefer to minister privately (if not quietly) to his own urgent needs; instead, he brought pizza to Thor’s dull companions (Banner, Stark, Barton, and Rogers; and the not-so-dull Romanoff). He wondered if anyone was suitable to seduce without damaging them, breaking his oath to Thor: probably not. He sighed, tucked into his own pizza, feeding at least that need, while they argued trivialities, wondered as usual where Thor was. With yet another medical examination to follow.

-x-x-x-

Interrupted by an alarm at Avengers headquarters:

Steve, listening to the comm bud in his ear: “Suit up. Let’s go.”

Loki sat while the Avengers dashed out. He was still hungry; finally, he snagged Tony’s last slice of pizza. He was still chewing as armored, clanking Tony came back, and said, “You too. I brought your glow-stick.”

Loki stood, sighed, gestured with a bare hand; his formal leathers appeared in a wash of green magic. Damn, they were tight: pressing hard on his guts and forcing his excellent posture to still greater rigidity. A vein in his side thrummed as Loki followed Stark out.

-x-x-x-

Loki lowered his horned helm to climb into the Quinjet, raises his head inside to meet Cap’s eyes.

“You’re with us? Good,” said Rogers. In the front, Clint and Natasha piloted the jet from the tower.

Tony announced, “I’m schooling the noobie, okay?” He knelt by Loki.

“There are civilians – we protect those.

“There are the bad guys – we try to bring those in, intact, to face justice. But if it’s you or him…” Tony shrugged.

“And there are devices – fiendish toasters and the like. Blast away, big guy. But if you see any fiendish Lamborghiniis, you might save those for me.”

“And teammates?”

“Yeah, we watch out for each other.”

“I have fought alongside the Warriors Three. I can adjust, Stark.”

“That’s another thing. On missions, we use code names, okay? Iron Man, Cap, Hawkeye, Widow, Big Guy, variations thereof…”
“What’s my code name, then?”

“Umm, Loki?”

“And my brother’s?”

“He’s Thor, yeah…”

“And I believe you have proclaimed your identity in public?”

“Umm…”

“Then I fail to see the problem.”

-x-x-x-

Something was rotten in upstate New York. At Bear Mountain, a lovely suspension bridge crosses the Hudson River, the largest in the state outside the New York metropolitan area. Today traffic was suspended as well, with a roadblock across the lanes in both directions, guarded by armed, uniformed men. In addition, a strange rhythmic *crunching* noise was coming from the structure itself.

“What’s the status?” Tony asked.

From Natasha, in the front of the plane: “We’ve got closed gates in the middle of the bridge. There’s a man with a large box at the center, and a dozen Hydra agents with machine guns on the ground.”

“There are more in the rigging,” added Clint.

“I just saw the Red Skull come around the box,” Natasha added.

“What’s that noise?” Cap asked.

“Marching…*hats*? Along both sides of the bridge,” said Clint.

“I think I’ve seen this before,” Tony said. “It’s an old Mythbusters trope. You can destroy a bridge by rhythmic vibrations at the right frequency. Whoever did this even copied the marching robots with helmets and boots.”

“Why put yourself in the middle of a bridge you’re destroying?” Natasha asked.

“Maybe there’s more than one enemy here,” said Cap. “Stay sharp.”

-x-x-x-

“There,” said Loki. “A man in a metal suit, under the bridge.”

“Stilt-Man,” said Tony.

“Right,” said Cap. “Tony, you tackle the mechanical menaces. Bruce, hulk up and start getting people off the bridge. Start at the far end. Grab as many as you can at a time, and leap to safety. Clint, get up high and cover us. Natasha, start getting people to retreat at this end, then join me at the roadblock. Loki?”

“I’ll go with Stark.”

“We better get moving,” Tony said. “The bridge is starting to sway.”
Once the plane was on the ground, Bruce started to stretch himself and his trademark purple pants, turning green in the process. Loki shrank back in his armor, but Hulk’s attention was all on Cap.

“Smash?”

“No. No smash,” Cap said. “See the people on the far side of the bridge? Rescue them. Maybe there’s a puppy over there.”

Cap was marching toward the center of the bridge, with his inimitable stride of moral righteousness; Natasha was going from car to car, gesturing broadly toward the shore behind them; Clint was climbing the nearest suspension tower. In the distance, Hulk leaps, grabs armloads of people at a time, jumping with them to safety atop a far cliff. Time to get to work.

The marching robots, however, were too close to the civilians, in and out of their cars, for Tony to get off direct shots with his repulsor beams. He reached up, grabbed Loki by both shoulders, and spun him to face the nearest bridge railing.

“Okay, there are the toasters. Hey, Reindeer Games, did you ever shoot skeet? When I say ‘Pull,’ send one up.”

Loki gestured, and walker-bots lifted into the sky, first one at a time, then two, then three…Tony blasted them with repulsors. One side of the bridge was clear.

“Stark! How many can you shoot at once?”

“How many can you pull?”

All of the walker-bots on the far side of the bridge lifted at once in a lazy arc. Tony lined up a single shot, and they were gone.

Clint was signaling look down from the bridge tower above them. A man in a silvery metallic suit, with improbably long telescoping legs, stands on rocks near the shore, bashing with the heel of his hand at a control box that apparently no longer responds. Tony said, “There’s our Mythbuster. Ready to roll?”

“Let me handle it,” said Loki with a lazy smile. Another gesture, and the man under the bridge dropped the control box and began gyrating in a crazy dance. He lurched toward the policemen waiting at the shore.

“What was that?”

“Itching powder. In his suit.”

“You mean you could have done that to me? You’ve been holding back!”

“Now let us help the Captain, yes?”

As they were running across the bridge, from the far tower a shot rang out; a bullet cut across Loki’s front as he turned to avoid it. He’s bleeding from the gut area of his too-tight leathers. They’d threatened his child.
They’d threaten his daughter? Loki went cold, precise.

Clint warned, too late, in their earbuds: “We’ve got more hostiles!”

Loki collapses, his left arm over his bleeding gut, his right still holding the staff. Uncoils like a discus thrower, light pulsing in a staccato arc as he fires the staff. Green light goes zinging in all directions, circling girders, fizzing past Clint on his tower. All the bad guys above the bridge deck are hit, burned to black ash.

Cap subdues a stunned big bad. Perhaps it’s a glamor, or a test run; the Red Skull is not on the bridge after all, despite appearances. His image winks out suddenly as the large box, the energy projector, is destroyed.

With his team-mates annihilated, the latest Zola clone surrenders.

Tony is running towards Loki, who has shrunken again in his pain. The staff in his right hand holds him from falling. His breath is loud, harsh; his eyes are not focused. Tony pulls him vertical.

The smaller man was in his space, mailed glove patting his cheek.

“Stark. Stark, if you touch me again, I will flay you.”

“Easy, big guy. We’re done here.”

Notes:

**Bear Mountain Bridge:** I needed someplace besides New York City to set this scene, and I found this bridge using Google Earth. It’s very pretty in pictures; unfortunately, I’ve never been there. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_Mountain_Bridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_Mountain_Bridge).


**The latest Zola clone:** Arnim Zola works as a mad scientist and close associate of the Red Skull (See *Captain America: The First Avenger*). In the Marvel Comics Universe, he is a master of making clones and transferring the original consciousness into them; he has also cloned himself this way.
“What the hell was yesterday about?” Tony, with coffee mug in hand, and a mild and non-disabling hangover.

Steve had coordinated with the SHIELD interrogation team. “Well, Stilt-man was trying out a new technique…”

“Opening off-Broadway, right.”

“…and Hydra decided it was a good time to try out some of their new toys also. The Red Skull was never there, just a projection. They were quite willing to ‘hijack Stilt-man’s gig,’ is how it was explained to me by Stillwell.”

“No honor among thieves,” Tony *tsked*.

“So they had a badass contest?” from Clint.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “And we won it.” A pause. “How is our resident badass?”

Bruce said, “He’ll be fine. He just wanted to beg off this morning.”

“Okay, tonight is going to be party time. We will be celebrating Talk Like a Pirate Day,” Tony said firmly.

“By talking like pirates?” from Natasha, with a raised eyebrow.

“No. Debrief this morning, party tonight. Come on.”

“Is today Talk Like a Pirate Day?” asked Steve.

“No,” said Bruce quietly; although Clint, nodding his head, said “Arrr!”

-x-x-x-

There was a long, low couch in Tony’s living-room area.

There was a long Loki at rest on the couch, supine, head pillowed on his crossed arms *here* and long legs crossed at the ankles *way over there* – and a raised lump in between.

“You missed the meeting.”

“I was indisposed.”

“How are you doing?”

“Fine, Stark.”
Looking at the lump: “Off your diet?”

“I’m fine, Stark. My niece favored using this bandage for some reason.”

“Your niece. Your veterinarian.” And thinking: What did she use, a Maxipad?

“My doctor.”

“Your horse doctor. Ummm … I’m thinking of a party tonight. Blow off steam. Want to come?”

“I was almost killed,” Loki pointed out.

“Comes with the territory. Party. Women. Starkettes.”

“You mean short women.”

“Ha ha. Please?” Tony tried out his puppy-dog eyes.

“I am a known villain. Surely you don’t expect me to go.” Loki, in his jams or Asgardian casual wear or full armor, is obviously Loki.

“You’re going in disguise,” Tony said. “You’re a rock star who wants to go incognito.”

-x-x-x-

So Loki is decked out a plaid flannel shirt (from Steve), one of Tony’s T-shirts (“Yours are too provocative.” “Mine?” “Oh, yeah, Kardashian.”), Bruce’s glasses, his own slim pants (“Natasha’s?” “No, Stark.”). With his hair washed and blow-dried to maximum fullness. And sunglasses, of course, indoors and at night.

-x-x-x-

Bright noise, loud lighting in a ballroom on a lower floor of Stark Tower. Dancing people, in sparkling short gowns (mostly women) and other fashionable clothes. A smattering of piracy: Natasha in an eye-patch, Clint in an Errol Flynn blousy shirt, Steve with a plush parrot on his shoulder (promptly deposited on a high cabinet). Tony co-tending the bar, ambulating among Avengers with mysterious glasses filled with undisclosed this-and-that, which he scrupulously selects and hands out one at a time.

“Hey, Stacy Brown.”

“…What?” confused Loki realized that he was being addressed.

“Is it okay for you to drink? Alcohol? Got any fetal alcohol transmogrifiers, or should I Shirley Temple you?”

“What?” Perhaps the loud music was slowing down his internal Stark-to-Allspeak translator.

“Leave him alone, Tony,” said Bruce. “He’s a mom, he’s on the wagon.”

“Is there a wagon in here?” And why was Bruce speaking Stark? “Could you please speak English?”

Bruce took him by the elbow, pulled him into a quiet corner. “Ethanol – drinking alcohol—can harm a developing fetus. Tony wants to know whether you drinking alcohol would be safe for your baby.”
“Oh.” This had never been a consideration in Asgard, where the drinks were considerably more potent, so… “It should not be a problem.”

“Be right back,” Tony said.

“Boy, will I want to examine that placenta,” muttered Bruce to himself.

-x-x-x-

One of Stark’s back-up dancers (a Starkette? She was not short) came towards Loki, her own martini glass half-empty. “Hello, tall, dark, and … pot-bellied?”

Pot-bellied? Surely his daughter did not show that much yet. Loki looked down. Oh. “It’s a bandage,” he said.

“A bandage? Were you out hero-ing with Tony yesterday?”

Loki was still incognito, yes? “I had an … accident.”

Tony re-appeared with something honey-colored in a glass. “He cut himself … shaving.”

“Shaving,” she said dubiously.

“Here ya go, Stace,” as he held the glass out to Loki; then took the dancer by the elbow and led her away.

Loki heard, “Stacee Jaxx. Come on, you’ve seen his stage act, right?” and the girl’s befuddled agreement.

-x-x-x-

Outrageous deeds aside, Loki never cared for being a laughingstock. He dashed back into the private part of the tower, found a bathroom with a large mirror, pulled his shirts up and started removing the idiotic bandage. Surely he’d healed enough by now…

A voice behind him. Clint. “I thought this was Pirate Day. What the hell are you supposed to be?”

“Stark said that I’m a rock star in disguise.”

“In disguise? You look like a combination of late 70s Rod Stewart, Buddy Holly, Kurt Cobain, fat Elvis, and David Bowie. All you need are Hammer pants.” A pause. “What are you doing?”

“I am taking off this unnecessary bandage. I am not fond of being laughed at.”

“Here, let me help.” Clint released the two catches in the back, and Loki spun out of the layers of wrapping. Hissed as his T-shirt brushed against the wound.

“You’ve got some serious road rash there,” said Clint.

“Stark called it an injury while shaving.”

“Yeah, if you shaved with the Long Island Expressway. Hold on, I’ll get a bandage.”

Clint dashed out; Loki peered at the mirror and was appalled again – this time at his pile of fluffy hair.
Back with the bandages, Clint watched Loki trying to wet down his hair from the water-filled sink. “I’m back. Hold still.”

“Why are you ministering to me?” Loki asked, curious. “I’ve harmed you.”

“Yes, you have,” said Clint while he worked. “But yesterday you saved my life, and we’re on the same team.” He finished taping a thin gauze pad below Loki’s ribs, stood up, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Now go break some hearts.”

-x-x-x-


Stacy Brown: There is an old Shel Silverstein poem/song that was popularized by Bobby Bare: Stacy Brown Got Two. The poem has a better last line, in my opinion. (Tony is evidently still envious of Loki’s additional “fun button.”)

Stacee Jaxx is the rock star in the musical/movie Rock of Ages.
Morning After Blues

Chapter Summary

In which the Avengers start joining the war(s).

There was the party. There was the after-party, with Tony and Loki playing air guitar like demented heavy metal guitar gods, back to back. There was the after-after party and the after-after-after…at some point, Clint lost count of how many afters he’s attended. There were Starkettes: all tall and undismayed by nearby explosions, some impressed with his muscular arms and archery skills (that might have been the fourth after party; he was both too drunk and too sober to try any William Tell stunts). And now, for some unfathomable reason, there was a 9 a.m. briefing for their next mission.

Clint hated briefings on general principles: Tell him the goal, give him his targets, and he was ready; forget all this “general background” crap. And the sunglasses that hid the dark pouches below his eyes also could hide the fact that those eyes were, actually, closed. So he dozed, off-and-on, next to Natasha; she could be relied upon to fill him in later. He woke briefly when she whispered a soft bozhe moi; woke more strongly and finally when she elbowed him.

“Eh? Oh, sorry sir. Yes, sir.”

Fury left.

And to Tasha: “What did I miss?”

As she explained to him, Odin has declared war on Loki’s Island. Odin will lead the invasion, on Sleipnir, then depart leaving a peaceful(ish) Asgardian occupying force until Sleipnir is ready to return. Loki’s hotheaded cavalry of little girls should not attack in return, but one never knows (with either Viking gods or foolhardy children). Peacekeepers will be needed.

Asgard is not yet a member of the United Nations, so SHIELD has agreed to send peacekeepers: that is, Natasha and Clint. At first, Natasha will put the fear of God (or Fury) in the Asgardians; Clint will watch over Loki’s boarding school/riding camp for little girl Jotuns.

Why not switch roles?

Fury doesn’t want either side attacking the other, and Tasha would teach the girls bad habits. Clint, having been in the circus, can keep them entertained and distracted. “And take care of the ponies,” Tasha tells Clint. “Don’t let anything happen to them, or it will be war for real.”

“How?”

“Loki insists they are his children.”

“Right…”

-x-x-x-

When he finally has a chance to examine Loki, Bruce asks whether he has ever considered therapy.
“Therapy? I have no broken bones that need to heal properly.”

“No, I meant…since we care about your mental condition, do you think that talking to a sympathetic, neutral party would help? Someone who can listen without judging?”

“Why, Doctor, can’t you do that?”

“I meant a professional.”

“Who might share his findings with your superiors. I trust your discretion far more than some stranger’s.”

“I was thinking of Leonard Samson.”

“Ah, I’ve seen pictures. No, thank you; our colors clash.”

“I thought you liked green.”

“Not lime,” Loki said disdainfully, wrinkling his nose.

“So that’s a no. Out of curiosity, how does someone persuade you to do something you don’t want to do?”


-x-x-x-

Natasha and Clint caught a commercial flight to Faaa, Tahiti’s main airport; after an overnight stay in Papeete, complete with a crashable wedding party, loud music and good dancing, they took a turboprop to the Atuona airport on Hiva Oa. The shuttle into town was a truck-turned-painted-wood-school-bus; their destination, near the post office, was an Iotuna Vahine ice-cream stand.

“Haole special: Vanilla goat milk ice-cream with chocolate sprinkles,” Clint read. “I’m game if you are, Tasha…”

One blue(!) girl in native dress, behind the counter, nodded to another and came outside. “You are SHIELD? I am your guide.” She led them to the back door of the small shack.

On the other side of the door—and on a completely different island—was Loki’s ranch.

-x-x-x-

With two fewer Avengers, and two fewer pizza, the weekly meeting was quieter and more serious: Tony lacked a foil for his humor, and for once, Loki wasn’t playing. Instead, Steve took charge.

“We’re committed now to your sitzkrieg, and Thor is out of contact range. What’s your plan, Loki?”

“Do you know how to destroy an alliance of convenience? You give both parties what they want.”

“Muspelheim wants land, right. What do the Badoon want?”

“Let’s discuss Muspelheim first. Stark, that will be your job. There is plenty of unexcavated rock in Muspelheim; all they’ll need for their realm is some engineering.”

“That’s not so simple,” Tony said. “Where do I get the materials, the workmen, the infrastructure? Does their electricity run on 60 cycle alternating current? How do I plan if I don’t know what to plan
“Assuming I can answer all these question to your satisfaction, may I appeal to your pride to provide the Fire Demons what they need?”

“You didn’t say they were demons!”

“Well. They are,” Loki said. “Will you?”

“You’re coming with me?”

“No. I do not like the heat, but I know someone who does.”

“Someone with your sparkling personality?”

“Oh, she’s nicer than I am.” Loki smiled with too many teeth, and cast a holographic image above the center of the table of Pele and one of her large, wolfish, white dogs. She was wearing a white flower in her black hair, and, as a dress, an oversized red T-shirt with a cartoon imp on the front; it said “I’m Hot Stuff.”

“Lilo and Stitch, huh?” Tony says, musing.

Cap wants to adopt her.

“So what does she do?” Tony suddenly demands.

“Pele? She’s a volcano designer. And architect. And builder. Whatever you can plan, she can build. Your role is to make sure that what she builds will not fall down.”

“What kind of builder doesn’t care if her work falls down?”

“Pele sometimes prefers it when her structures collapse spectacularly. You may have to be wary of her enthusiasms.”

-Laufeyson Ranch had a main house, a dormitory for the students, a luxurious barn, various guesthouses and outbuildings; fenced pastures, a round pen, a roofed arena, and several fields growing hay; it connected to the lee-side desert grasslands of the island. The building complex was tucked under mature forest trees, uphill of the pleasant beach. Their guide, a girl named Andi, showed them to a guesthouse to drop off their bags; then introduced them to Ivy, the Ranch Manager.

Finishing his pizza, Steve asked, “Now what about the Badoon?”

Loki said, “Thank you for waiting for Ms. Romanoff’s absence before we breached this topic. For the Badoon worlds, your mission, and Thor’s, is to destroy their military capability.”

“Excuse me,” said Bruce, speaking up for the first time in the meeting. “How does this give the Badoon what they want?”

“Ah,” said Loki. “I forgot I was among Americans. Are the wishes of a people the same as those of their leaders?”
“They should be,” said Steve.

“Ideally,” said Tony.

“Not always,” frowned Bruce. “In practice, maybe we need some confirmation of that assumption.”

“And while I would not trust Thor to investigate such an idea—it is, after all, contrary to his upbringing—I would expect the Sentinel of Liberty to be capable of such a determination,” Loki said.

Steve was starting to puff up under the unexpected flattery; Loki promptly demolished it.

“Unless you are prejudiced.”

“I fought in the War alongside black Americans, Japanese Americans, partisans of all nations, German refugees, women… why would you think I’m prejudiced?”

“How do you feel about lizards? Big ones?”

“I’ve seen alligators. I don’t hate them.”

“The Badoon resemble alligators. If I gave you a taste of the All-speak, you could talk to them. But you must be willing to tell individuals apart, and to understand their motives. Dare you be sympathetic to alligators who consider you a hideous enemy?”

“I can try.”

“Very well, then.”

“Wait,” Bruce spoke again. “Why didn’t you want to talk about sentient alligators with Natasha?”

“It’s not the Badoon; it’s what we will be doing to them. The West crushed the Soviet Union into dust by requiring them to put more and more of their efforts into sustaining military power, and then allowing their economy to collapse. We must do the same to the Badoon, to purge them of their poisonous leaders.”

“We did the same thing to the South in the Civil War, and to the Nazis,” Steve said. “But after World War Two—correct me if I’m wrong, Tony—wasn’t there something called the Marshall Plan? Didn’t we rebuild the economies of our enemies then?”

“Yeah,” said Tony; “we did. My dad was proud of his participation, even if he cared more about finding you.”

“Can we rebuild the Badoon economy, afterwards? Turn their swords into ploughshares?” Bruce asked.

“That is next stage of the plan,” Loki said.

“Do they use ploughshares?” Tony asked. Bruce stared at him.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

Leonard Samson is a gamma-powered psychiatrist in the Marvel Universe. He is often the go-to guy to analyze superheroes (a classic case was X-Factor (first series) # 87). He has light green hair.

**Ranch Buildings:** The buildings at Laufeyson Ranch are based on the ones at [Will Rogers State Historic Park](http://willrogerspark.ca.gov/) in Pacific Palisades (near Los Angeles), California. The barn was used as a set in the movie *Seabiscuit*.

**Badoon “alligators”:** Although green and reptilian, the Badoon do not really resemble alligators. They are a traditional race of Marvel bad guys. See [http://marvel.com/universe/Badoon](http://marvel.com/universe/Badoon) for their usage in the Marvel Universe.
Loki is dozing on a couch in the reception room of the Asgardian consulate when Pele and her dog arrive: a scamper of clawed feet, a dance of sandaled ones.

“Well,” she says, “I see that you are eating enough; but are you getting enough exercise?”

Opening one eye, he growls at her; the dog growls back.

Pele slaps his haunch. “I thought fat men were supposed to be jolly.”

Sitting up: “I’m not jolly, you impudent brat. I’m occupied.”

“Horses again? Or have you moved on to elephants?”

“One last horse.” And an admonitory finger. “One. This is Cordelia; or will be.”

“I see she is not yet immanent. So why did you call me here?”

“Ah. Sit.” Loki patted a spot on the couch next to him.

-L-X-X-

Loki asked, “You have noticed the increase in volcanic activity?” She nodded. “Is it yours?”

Pele frowned. “It is not.”

“The people of Muspelheim want your realm, little Pele. Surt wants it. Would you give it to him?”

“Loki…”

“He needs more land for his people. Hot, volcanic land, such as you make on Midgard. If he has not enough of his own, he will attempt to take yours.”

“Let him try! I will fight!”

Loki puts his finger to her lips. “Or…”

Pele relents. “Or?”

“Or you could create land for him, in his realm. You would visit another world. And Surt would be in your debt.”

She begins to smile. “I like this idea better.”

“I will provide you a mortal engineer, who can plan this growth safely; but you must keep him from harm.”
“Are you sure? Mortals are fragile, you know.”

“Please. I need these allies.”

-x-x-x-

They need Pepper to dress Pele professionally. When the two first meet, Pele is wearing a T-shirt that says “Natural Red-Head” (Pele, of course, has dark brown hair). Pepper, who is a natural red-head, asks, “Does Loki pick out your clothes?”

Pele laughs. “Teach me what is appropriate. I trust your judgment.”

(Later, Nick Fury will be warned not to mack on professional Pele.)

-x-x-x-

Loki sends a message to Surt. “What you desire can be yours.”

The reply: “Liesmith. I will not deal with you.”

Loki sends: “There is no need to. Send a trusted associate to meet with my allies. I shall not be there.”

-x-x-x-

And so Pele and Tony have a meeting to attend. Surt had been persuaded (probably by Loki, in retrospect) that a proper war required a declaration of same; and so had sent an envoy, Baki, under the auspices of the Jotunheim embassy. Also, Surt’s lawyer belonged to the law firm that Jotunheim’s embassy used: a very cozy relationship between fire and ice. That lawyer expedited a meeting between Baki of Muspelheim and Pele of Midgard; with Mr. Stark of Midgard as Pele’s escort to liaise with the lawyer. All very pre-World-War-I courtly diplomacy, to Tony’s way of thinking.

Still, here were Pepper and Pele, the former debarking gracefully from Happy’s car, the latter also climbing out, to spin around and show off her new outfit: a bright red satiny business suit (of the short skirt, long jacket kind), gold matte tank top underneath, dark hose and ruby slippers(!). Tony was stunned at the result.


Pepper said, “Tony, I know she looks elegant, but she’s just a little girl. A millennia-old little girl. Be nice, Tony. Be appropriate.”

“Fine. I won’t corrupt Princess Pearl here. We’ll just tell knock-knock jokes on the way, okay?”

But Pele’s jokes leave him speechless (and once Happy almost runs the car into a concrete pillar, he is laughing so hard). Tony rolls up the window between driver and passengers. Then the really gross jokes start—all knock-knock jokes, though.

-x-x-x-

As they reach their destination, it’s Tony’s turn.

“Knock, knock.” He’s got a good one planned.
“Who comes?” asks Pele, imperiously.

He can’t continue.

-Pe-le-

Pele goes to her meeting in the private club, in a large bright ballroom, with dark-suited, red-complexioned Baki and a half-glimpsed handful of other participants (demons?); Tony and the lawyer convene in a dark wood antechamber, part library, part smoking room, drinking port (well, scotch) and smoking cigars. Sometimes a double door would open across the hall, to a scene you’d expect to see inside a furnace—never a reactor—a bright orange glow shading sometimes red and oftener yellow; dancing flames, and within them a girl like a red foil cut-out, quite at home, head tilted, listening to the roar of the flames. The door closes again; Tony pours more, waits.

The door opens a mere crack and Pele dashes out. Asks Tony, “Can you design for adverse conditions?”

“How adverse?”

“The throat of a volcano?”

“Try me,” he grinned.

“The magma chamber?”

“Is it all liquid?”

“No; at the edges, rocks are being eroded and pulled in.”

“Sounds worse.” Tony wrinkled his nose in thought. “But I can come up with something.”

“Good.” She kissed his cheek and rushed back to the ballroom.

Tony touched his fingers to his still-warm face.

-Pe-le-

She leaves the meeting in a swirl of kisses, even for the lawyer; Happy pulls the car around to the porte cochere and she scrambles in, leaving Tony to fold himself into the back seat after her. Laughing Pele smells of brimstone.

“How’d it go?” Well, he could guess from her happy mood, but it’s best not to make assumptions about gods.

“A new world! To shape with our own hands…” Pele gives a happy sigh.

“It’s engineering, kid, not art. What we build has to work.”

“You’ll make it work, right?”

“Within reason. We’ll be building with taffy, here. No collapsing allowed.”

“None?”

“We don’t get to mess up. We can’t afford disasters.”
“What about planned disasters?”

“A good demolition is better than fireworks? You think like I do. If Surt says it’s okay; otherwise, no.”

The long-suffering sigh of a daunted spoiled brat. “You, sir, are a wet blanket.”

“Yeah, if we have some way of quenching things, that should help….” Tony makes notes on his cell phone, and suddenly Pele is ignored. She sighs again.

-x-x-x-

The next day Pele, dressed professionally (if less flashily than the previous night), joins Loki (in robe and pajamas) at the consulate for morning tea.

“Have you found a dog-sitter yet?”

“That is my next step.” Loki’s smile is private, inwardly focused; and as he sat down, Pele had noticed that his “fat” has resolved itself into a small but unmistakable baby bump. “How did the meeting go? I expect you were the belle of the ball.”

“Yes, Surt’s people all set out to charm me, successfully. We can expect detailed maps soon, for your engineer.”

“My engineer? Was Stark ill-behaved?”

“Once he has an idea, he ignores me! Your mortal seriously tests my patience.”

“Yes; he is impetuous; just as you are known as a fickle god. But you can work with him, yes? And allow him his engineering decisions?”

Pele stared at Loki for a long time; then blew out a breath. “Fine. But beyond the opportunity to visit another realm, you owe me.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

**Shield volcanoes**, like the volcanoes in Hawaii, grow as broad mounds (shields) instead of narrow cones. One reason for this is that the lava that forms these volcanoes is quite fluid and doesn’t easily support steep slopes. Olympus Mons on Mars is a big one. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympus_Mons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympus_Mons).

**Baki**: There are very few fire demons named in the Marvel Universe, and most of those were not particularly diplomatic. Baki is from Gene Wolfe. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_Knight](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_Knight).

**Short skirt, long jacket**: Pele is changing her name to Karen. (No, not really.) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5KmB8Laemg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5KmB8Laemg).
Ivy was tall and blue-skinned, with her hair in pigtails and exotic markings—tattoos?—on her exposed skin, in a checked shirt and capri-length blue jeans. A proper cowgirl would have a cowboy hat, bandanna and boots; but this woman had bare feet, flowers in her hair, and red sunglasses. And military posture.

Andi said, “Ms. Byleistrdottir, here are Agents Barton and Romanoff of SHIELD. And now I should return to my duties?”

The woman waved her hand. “Go.” Turned to the agents. “I’m the barn manager here. Call me Ivy.”

“I’m Clint, she’s Natasha,” Clint said. They all shook hands. “What’s the situation here?”

“You know we have a stallion coming? Well. Last week we had a round-up, and sent the colts to their new owners. We have two groups of horses left: the breeding mares and the young stock. Someone will have to watch the little ones—Loki does not like to breed them too young, but sometimes they and the stallion have other ideas.”

“Don’t you have staff? Students?”

“Yes, you’ll meet them second. First you must meet Dua.”

“Dua?”

“Our lead mare.”

-x-x-x-

A whistle from Ivy, and the horse was suddenly there.

Clint had had some experience with horses in the circus; hell, you got some experience with all the acts if you did not wish to declare yourself expendable whenever a new talent showed up. Green-eyed Dua was the right color for a circus horse (white), but was neither a tall broad draft horse (to pull a circus wagon and carry several sequined vaulters around and around a ring), nor a snorty, troublemaking Shetland pony (to perform with a mob of its fellows). Dua was more like a polo pony: confident, aware of everything, very much in charge. And currently giving him the once-over, before doing the same to Natasha.

Who spoke Russian to the horse, and patted her cheek. Tasha was probably saying something like Yes, he’s an idiot, but he’s part of my team; the horse gave him a second look, and blew snot into his hair. Really?

-x-x-x-

At Avengers Tower, in a sub-basement room, Loki briefed Steve.
“This is a portal for you, and for anyone you choose to accompany you. If there is someone you do not wish to come through with you, they will not arrive here; or there, as the case may be. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Remember, your role is to make the Badoon think they have almost won; that with just a little more effort, they will best us.”

“And to see what the public there really wants,” Cap reminded.

“Yes, that too. See who we can work with, when the time comes to negotiate the peace. Off you go, then.” With a pat on Steve’s shoulder.

“Wait.” Steve turned to face Loki. “You’ve been looking a little seedy lately. Make sure you get enough rest, okay?”

Concern from the Captain? Loki blinked, nodded agreement as his own shoulder was patted. Steve marched through the doorway. These affectionate, meddling mortals. I can take care of myself, Loki thought; then, looking down, And you, as well.

-x-x-x-

The gaggle of blue girls surrounding Tasha and Clint had unpronounceable names (to Clint, at least), and inexplicable nicknames. For instance, Gullveig was Blondie—although her hair was as black as Ivy’s. The big girls wore riding clothes, the little ones uniforms, and they all wanted to show him their favorite horses. The smallest/youngest pinnafored Jotun, who held his hand with a sticky one and babbled excitedly, was known to one and all as Teddi.

-x-x-x-

Conveniently (of course), Freya had persuaded Sif to visit New York, bringing along eight-year-old Sam(antha) Sifsdottir. Loki, in tunic and comfortable pants, invites them all to lunch in his consulate chambers.

As the consulate servant retreated from delivering their meal, Loki continued his request to Sif that Sam take care of Pele’s dog:

“I promise not to corrupt her.”

“I promise Pele won’t corrupt her.”

“I promise Sleipnir won’t corrupt her.”

“I promise the dog won’t corrupt her.”

“I promise my horses won’t corrupt her.”

“I promise my degenerate Avengers allies won’t corrupt her.”

“Hey,” said Freya, “That’s more promises than I got.”

Loki pointed a thumb at Freya, said to Sif, “That’s the only ally I have who I can’t promise won’t corrupt her.”

-x-x-x-
The empty field between the ranch and the expected Asgardian camp was laughingly referred to as Vigrid. Ivy and the older girls, with Clint and Natasha, waited on the ranch-ward side of Vigrid on a clear, slightly breezy morning in which birds sang and the air smelled fresh. A shimmer of the Bifrost: At the far side of the field, on new-patterned earth, an armed king on a substantial horse, with two nines of accompanying foot troops. The king dismounted, led his horse and troops toward them.

“Princess Thorvinna.”

“King Odin.”

“We come in amity.”

“Strange words from an invading force.”

“This is an odd invasion, yes. Are these the observers?”

“Agent Romanoff will accompany your troops. Agent Barton stays with us.”

“Hmph.” Odin passed Ivy the loose-hanging reins. “For now, Sleipnir is in your keeping.”

“My thanks, King Odin.”

“Don’t abuse him.”

The Asgardians (with Natasha) marched off; Odin returned to the charmed circle. Another rainbow shimmer, and he was gone.

-x-x-x-

“As if I would abuse Sleipnir!” Ivy snorted. “I was his stable boy, once.”

“Stable boy? Princess? Who are you, anyway?” Clint asked, as they walked back to the paddocks.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

**Gullveig** means “the way of gold” and supposedly was a Vanir deity burned three times by the Asgardians, coming back to life each time; it is suspected her story is actually a formula for refining gold ore. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gullveig](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gullveig).

**Vigrid** is the plain on which the last battle of Ragnarok will be fought. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigrid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigrid).
Chapter Summary

Mostly concerning Clint Barton and jailbait ponies.

Give the big horse his due: he knows what he’s here for. Still, Sleipnir is relaxed as Ivy leads him to the barn, pulling off harness and rubbing off sweat. Clint decides not to point out that the horse has too many legs, suspecting she already knew that. Ivy puts Sleipnir in a stall by the open breezeway, closes the lower half of the Dutch door. In a paddock higher on the hill, several horses wait, watching with forward-pricked ears. Ivy whistles once and a girl leads haltered Dua to the corridor outside the stall. The two horses touch noses; Dua whisks suddenly and pisses on Sleipnir’s face. He looks surprised, blinking as if in embarrassment before he rocks back onto his hind legs in the stall. Dua whickers and runs, the short lead rope dangling from her halter. Sleipnir ducks his head to avoid the low roof and leaps through the stall window opening, whinnying shrilly as he chases the mare up to the paddock, over the fence and then away.

-x-x-x-

In New York, Tony works on drawing up plans with Pele, with Loki sometimes there to translate their world views to each other: Tony can work with diagrams, equations; Pele needs to see things in three dimensions, and ideally, the correct colors. Loki and Pele work on a side project, a large heat-shielded canister of some sort that Pele insists is essential for her participation. (Tony, on the side, designs heat-proof computers and Starkphones, as well as modifying some Iron Man suits for high temperature.)

-x-x-x-

Tasha had wanted the opportunity to snoop; instead, in the days that follow, Clint had that honor. Ivy takes him to Loki’s other operations, on other islands: there are ice factories and water purification plants, and the ice cream stands. The ice cream factory is on Loki’s island, a leisurely walk or quick horse-back ride away from the ranch, farther for the Asgardian troops. Clint has a different flavor of ice cream for dessert with every meal.

Who is Ivy? Clint finds out at their first dinner together. She is Loki’s ranch manager and operations manager; a veteran of peace-keeping forces in the Sahel, and former stable-hand. Stable boy? Well, she was disguised as a boy when she met Sleipnir in Jotunheim; a dreamy girl realizing that she would have many duties as she grew up, and wanting to see the worlds in the meantime. For her, Loki’s then-steed Sleipnir was escape incarnate. Why didn’t she just ask Loki to take her away, Clint wonders. Ivy snorts. “He’s my uncle! He wouldn’t have, then.”

But the princess part? “My father is a king of Jotunheim.” Oh? “Don’t look surprised; there are eleven other Jotun royals on this island right now. My cousins.”

“All those girls?”

Ivy laughs. “None of them.”

Clint says, straight-faced, “You’re shitting me.”
“Maybe it’s a riddle for you to figure out, Agent Barton.”

-x-x-x-

Over time, Loki’s shirts get tighter, then shorter; then suddenly his belly starts to protrude. He takes to absently rubbing it, like a mare nipping at her own flanks. Bruce catches him telling it, “Don’t be so impatient, child.”

-x-x-x-

Clint is bored, though. Most of the pony troopers have their own duties. He makes suggestions for ice cream flavors (and bravely tries all the experimental flavors, even the fish-flavored ones). Sleipnir and the mares are in the far grassy fields of the island, having a good time. There isn’t much in the library that he cares to read. There are many paintings and photographs of (mostly) white horses on the walls of the ranch house, and some weird erotic art he shies from after the first glance. If Loki keeps any interesting papers in his study, Clint has yet to find them.

He practices archery, with grubby Teddi watching him; swims daily (until he notices the local sharks), goes for hikes and spies from the hillsides on the Asgardian troops. (The Asgardians seem equally bored, spending most of their time in weapons practice and calisthenics.) Then Teddi asks him about the circus, and Blondie asks him about circus horses, and he has some ideas…

-x-x-x-

Clint’s lesser idea is to invent mead floats. He is experimenting with honey-lemon, earl grey tea, and lavender ice cream flavors when Natasha comes by for a visit.

“How are the Vikings?” he asks as she tastes various spoonfuls of ice cream.

“Boring. And bored. They are running out of things to do. I’ve taught them poker.” She pulls out a large handful of gold coins. “How are the girls?”

“I’m stuck on an island of jailbait and ponies, so…I’ve been training the jailbait ponies.” Yeah, that was the big idea.

“To do what? You can’t ride them at that age.”

Clint poured mead into the three ice cream bowls. “Now try it.”

The three bowls earn not bad, hmmm, and I like this one.

“Ever been to the circus?” He refilled the third bowl.

“In Moscow. They had bears.” Another spoonful. “And I thought you showed me your routine, although not the sparkly outfit you wore.”

“And I’m still not gonna show you that outfit. Did the ringmaster in the Moscow circus have a pony act? Lots of little ponies racing around, rearing on command, a big whip?”

Tasha licked the spoon. “You didn’t.”

Clint grinned. “I did. How long are you here? Got time for a show?”

-x-x-x-

Loki’s baby bump, having made its appearance, grows rapidly: it is, after all, equine and not human,
and Bruce has to remind Tony that it would not be so obvious on a horse.

Tony to a (rather pregnant) Loki: “How do you pee? Standing up? How do you even see to point?”

“It’s prehensile, Stark,” says Loki with a tired sneer. “Shall I demonstrate?”

Later, from Banner: “You told Tony your penis is prehensile?”

“It shut him up, at least for the moment.”

“Umm, he asked me to investigate.”

“I think not,” said Loki. And then grinned, evilly. “Make something up. Use your imagination, Doctor. After all, I am a famous liar.”

-x-x-x-

With Blondie’s help, and several little girls sitting on the fences, Clint sent the small herd of young horses into the rectangular outdoor arena. They sorted six white and grey horses to one, the remaining six (bay dun, roan, and sorrel) to the other, pens on the sides of a low wooden central ring. “One ring circus,” Clint said, walking to the side with the white horses (while Blondie stood with the others). “We’re starting small.”

Clint and Blondie picked up long whips—really sticks with string on the end—raised them to each other, and stood straight, a line of ponies behind each of them. “Ladeez and Gentlemen! Laufeyson Ranch proudly presents The Delicious Dozen” (clapping from the fences), “starring Goldie the Jotun” (cheers; Blondie had been briefed in advance that she needed a Stage Name), “and …”

“Lord Hawk!” Tasha shouted, to more cheers.

“Right,” said Clint. “Now we need two helpers.” Several girls raised their hands. “Matti, help Goldie; Bobbi, you’re helping me.” The girls went to the two side pens, and the show began.

Raised whips, and horses raced in from the left and the right of the ring, circled in a mad whirl and ended in a mixed line of colors, facing Clint. He casually waved his makeshift whip and they ran free again.

“See, all ponies are evil little shits,” he said to Natasha as he sent the fillies running. “It’s well known in the circus community. But with the grown-up horses off having fun, I figured these would get bored without something to do.” He raised the whip again and the horses stopped. One had found her way into Bobbi’s pen; meanwhile, Goldie and Matti had quietly left the area.

A wave of the whip, and the horses ran again. “Not to mention me. Not to mention the kids here.” The whip was raised again; the horses stopped, with two in Bobbi’s pen now. A swish; and they ran. “So I started circus class. I figured a little education wouldn’t hurt ‘em.” Whip up, whip down; over and over and the main ring slowly emptied out. Natasha noticed that the remaining horses in the ring lined up in patterns each time they stopped.

Blondie/Goldie and her assistant were on the way back to the ring, with a large flat cart carrying a wine barrel, a low round table shaped like a drum, and a large flowery hoop. Goldie was wearing a ringmaster’s top hat. Clint raised his whip one last time and the four white horses still in the ring stood in a line: short, tall, tall, short.
“My star pupils. Up!” The whip was raised; the four rose on their hind legs.

“Down!” with the appropriate gesture, and the horses back on four feet. As Clint and the horses showed off, Goldie and the two girls were setting up equipment behind them.

“Circles!” The two horses in the middle pirouetted apart while the outer two trotted in a larger ring; they lined up again.

“Stay.” They did so. Clint took the top hat from Goldie.

“Wheat.” The tallest filly followed Clint to the barrel. He gestured, and she put her forefeet on the barrel, then walked them backwards as she rolled the barrel around the ring to the children’s applause. Goldie pointed gracefully to the moving horse. “Thank you,” said Clint to Wheat; she nodded to him and went back to her place in the group.

“Nina.” He led the other tall horse to the low drum, where she first put up her forefeet, then leaned forwards with a small jump and put up her rear feet as well. Clint circled the whip and she slowly shifted her feet, turning in a circle. Then, on his command, she rose on her hind legs, and lightly jumped off the drum. Again Goldie pointed, again Clint gave his thanks and the horse nodded and returned to the group.

Goldie and the assistants rolled the barrel and drum away, and pulled the hoop into center stage. It was decorated with grass streamers and flowers. “Diva.” At this point, both the small horses walked: one following Clint, one shifting away; the girls in the audience started to point at the escaping filly, but Goldie shushed them with a broad gesture. Clint walked with Diva to a short distance from the hoop, and said “Jump!” She took a running start, and leaped through the hoop, emerging covered with flower petals. Goldie clapped; Diva circled and jumped again, trailing petals; finally Clint thanked her, she nodded, and returned to the group.

The last horse was shadowing Clint, walking behind him. Again Goldie shushed the audience. “I thought I had four horses,” Clint announced to the crowd, puzzled. “Now I have three. One”—Wheat nodded—“Two”—so did Nina—“Three…”—so did Diva.

“Where’s Elf?” He turned around slowly, asking the audience while Elf circled behind him. No-one spoke, although there was considerable laughter. “Let me try again.” He counted horses, one, two, three, and then stood perplexed. Clint took off his top hat and wiped his face with one hand, just as Elf, behind him, reached forward and…

Snatched Clint’s hat with her teeth and went running around the ring. Applause and laughter. Clint responded by bowing and leaving the ring, followed by Goldie, Wheat, Nina, Diva, and finally Elf, still carrying the hat.

-x-x-x-

As Natasha joined the group taking the horses back to the barn, she noticed something about one of Clint’s star pupils. “Clint, what happened to Diva’s tail?”

“Well, she was jumping through a flaming hoop and it …kind of caught fire. Just the longer hairs, though. We put out the fire, no damage, no trauma.”

“Do you remember the briefing before we left? What these horses are?”

“Evil circus ponies?”

“What else?”
“…Extra evil?”

“Clint, you set fire to one of Loki’s daughters…” Clint was sure he heard air quotes around the last word.

-x-x-x-

Before she returned to her Asgardians, Natasha took Clint inside for a talk.

“Clint, do you remember why we’re here?”

“Peacekeepers. Image keepers. It’s not a war. I guess we’re protecting Loki’s horses.”

“Not his horses. His *children*.”

She led him along the corridor with the erotic photos he’d been avoiding. “Look.”

“Seriously? That’s messed up.”

She pointed out Elf’s baby bump portrait, the “Mapplethorpe,” the uncensored version: a whip in Loki’s anus, his vulva in full view.

“That’s seriously messed up.”

“Well, that’s our ally now. Don’t do anything stupid with the ‘evil little shits,’ okay?”

With a kiss to the air in his general vicinity, Tasha walked away, back to herding Asgardians.

-x-x-x-

Clint dined with Ivy in the ranch dining room; afterwards, she retired to her office to get some paperwork done. (Reports were coming in from some of the girls accompanying the main herd, and she faithfully recorded breeding dates.) Clint poured himself a brandy and wandered the building, examining the various pictures in more detail. The oil painting of a white mare over the fireplace, for instance: before he’d figured the horse was important to the ranch, but now he looked at the tidy label on the bottom of the frame. *Lopt fra Jotunheim.* In the portrait, the mare had a look of mischief in that familiar green eye.

He went to the kitchen, put down his drink, grabbed a bag of carrots (imported and thus exotic), and a flashlight, and went to the stable. “Sorry to bother you, guys,” he said as he came in, then used the light to rouse, one by one, six white horses. Each had its face examined by flashlight, a pat on the nose, and a carrot for its patience. Clint walked back to the house.

Drink in hand, he knocked on the door of Ivy’s ranch office.

“Yes?”

“Just wanted to check something.”

“Come on in.”

One end wall was papered with the photos of proud stallions; the long back wall was covered with pictures of mares and their offspring. (The other end wall was covered in paper notes; the fourth wall was a wide window, overlooking the arena where they’d had their circus.) Clint examined the wall of mares, slowly. Turned to Ivy.
“Are you busy?”

“Yes, but I don’t mind interruptions.”

“Oh.” He looked down at his brandy. “Want one?”

“I was planning to have one later. What’s on your mind?”

“Some of these pictures have a crown stamped in one corner. Why?”

“It’s a long story,” said Ivy. “Get me a brandy and I’ll tell you.”

- x-x-x -

“What do you know about horse breeding?” Ivy started, when they were both sitting with their drinks in her office.

“Oh, each horse has a mommy and a daddy?”

“Yes. And if the stallion—or stud—and the mare—or dam—are the same breed, then the resulting foal is usually in the same breed.”

“Breed?”

“Like Thoroughbreds, or Arabians, or quarter horses; often there is a breed organization who decides whether a specific foal is eligible. Some breeds allow studs from related breeds; some have performance criteria; it varies. But suppose you wanted to start a new breed?”

“Could you just start an organization, and use horses you like?”

Ivy laughed. “Sometimes. But the traditional way is to breed your mares to a specific stallion, or a few stallions, and base the breed on that. Morgans, for instance, are all descended from one stallion. Thoroughbreds are considered the most valuable horses; they are called that because all their ancestors have been documented, and restricted to being in the same population, for hundreds of years back to the foundation horses. Most descend from three stallions.”

“What about the mares?”

“Well, that turns out to be a good question. Originally, most breeders concentrated on the stallions. But if they bred to local horses—and most breeds start out as local populations—the mares are often related to each other as well. And Arabian breeders have always cared mostly about the dam line, the list of mothers, grandmothers, etc., of each horse. Lately more of the Thoroughbred community has taken up this approach. Are you bored yet?”

“You said this was a long story. Keep going.” Clint thought he knew where she would end up.

“It turns out that many of the fastest thoroughbreds are descended on the dam side from an early group of the finest English mares, owned by the King and his Master of the Horse. Those are now referred to as the ‘royal mares.’”

“So, you’re building your own breed of horses, and you are starting with your own ‘Royal Mares.’ Is that why the crowns?”

“Yes. In part.” Ivy smiled.

“Let me keep going. Here’s what I figured out today. Your Royal Mares are all white.”
“Is every white mare here a Royal Mare?”

“No, but they all have green eyes, too; and they have different fathers, but they all have the same mother. This Lopt horse.”

“Lopt is not here at present, or I would show her to you.” Ivy’s smile had turned predatory.

“Oh, I’ve met her. Him. Your prize mare is Loki, isn’t she?”

Ivy’s smile was broader, happier. “Keep going.”

“Well, Loki’s your uncle, right? So your Royal Mares are your first cousins.”

“Very good. And, like me, they are princesses of Jotunheim. Although they are outside the line of succession.”

“Figured it out.” Clint grinned back, and sat back in his chair. “Although…”

“Although?”

“Sleipnir’s their brother, right? That’s kind of icky, but…why isn’t he a prince of Jotunheim?”

Her face lost all visible emotion. “Because he is a possession of Asgard.”

“Oh. Sorry. Sore point.”

“Very.”

Clint rose, and left her to her work.

-x-x-x-

Horsey notes:


The Home Front

Chapter Summary

In which Tony and Pele go to Muspelheim, and Cap learns about the birds, the bees, and the Jotuns.

Loki is asleep in his nest of pillows, one hand on his foal, who kicks softly as she dreams. He smiles as he sleeps, deeply content.

-x-x-x-

With Thor and Cap off-planet fighting the Badoon, and Clint and Natasha preventing a tropical mock war from becoming a real one, weekly Avengers meetings would be sparsely attended if not for the new brevet members Pele and Freya. (Hey, they are around, so why not attend meetings? It’s free tasty pizza.) Today it’s apple pizza for breakfast: all preparations for Muspelheim are complete, and the meeting comprises only a last discussion of contingencies. Time to suit up and get going.

Loki stands suddenly, almost faints. Tony uses his talking-to-a-dangerous-animal voice. “Hey, Pizza Guy, hey, Surfer Dude; do you really have to do this?”

Loki whirls, his belly a slower satellite being carried along. A hand supports an aching back. “I am no damsel in distress, Stark. I am Loki of Midgard, and I am burdened with…well, with this. She will be glorious.” Looking down his aristocratic nose, and daring Tony to deny his words.

“Okay,” Tony says instead, watching Loki wince. “Hang in there, buddy. Pele and I will try to get this job done chop-chop.”

-x-x-x-

The portals to other worlds and realms are on the basement levels: Tony sees no reason why he shouldn’t have his own subway system. Although the Badoon portal is stable, Muspelheim is a tricky gate; it is not safe to leave it open to the fiery realm on the other side, or to the dubiously trustworthy inhabitants of that realm. Surt is not yet an ally, for all that there is nominally a truce.

So Tony and Pele, leaving for Muspelheim, both dressed in red—he in red armor, she in a casual long T-shirt—wait for a panting Loki to open their portal. He bends down clumsily and touches Pele: forehead to forehead, nose to nose, breathing together.

“This doesn’t mean what you think it means,” she warns him.

“I know. Be safe, my goddess.”

And the two go, each hauling a fire-proof cart loaded with necessities.

-x-x-x-

The group is down to one real Avenger (Bruce), one (and a half?) replacement Avenger (Loki), and a part-time student doctor (Freya), who is learning all she can on endocrinology, brain chemistry, and reproduction: as they relate to humans, mostly human-analogous aliens (Asgardians), somewhat
human-analogous aliens (Jotuns), and mammals of all kinds; not to mention trying to apply all she learns as fast as she learns it. The three develop a daunting catalog of chemicals and techniques to try once Loki is post-partum. (He looks like this will be any moment.) The weekly pizza meetings are abandoned in favor of daily tea and pastries at the Asgardian consulate before Freya heads off to classes, and Bruce goes to his lab. Loki concentrates on diplomatic recognition for Asgard; good behavior of their troops on Hiva Iotuna would be a great help. He gets daily missives from Natasha, frequent visits from Sam with Pele’s dog, countless naps.

-x-x-x-

Cap was back at the Tower, on a flying visit—debrief, brief, and go—and lurking Loki was as round as an apple as he disappeared around a corner.

Cap, to waiting Bruce: “What’s with Loki? He’s…” a two-handed gesture indicating a round profile: “pregnant? How…?”

“Yes,” said Bruce. “Let me…” lifting his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose; “let me explain. Once I get tea.”

In the kitchen, Cap with coffee, Bruce with his fresh cup of green tea. He took a deep breath. “Cap, you know about the birds and the bees, right?”

“I thought so…”

“Humans have two kinds of sex chromosomes: X and Y. If you have 2 X’s, you’re a girl and you can have babies. (I’m simplifying here.) If you have an X and a Y, you’re a boy and you can’t. If you have 2 Y’s, you’re dead. Clear?”

“Yes” from Cap.

“Now birds also have two kinds of sex chromosomes, called Z and W. If a chicken has two Z’s, it’s a rooster; if it has a Z and a W, it’s a hen; and if it has two W’s, it’s nonviable: dead. The opposite of people.”

“Okay; so if you turned a chicken into a human?”

“The rooster could get pregnant and the hen couldn’t, by human genetic rules. But of course chickens aren’t human.”

“Thor told me Loki is a frost giant?”

“Jotuns seem to have their own rules. From what I can tell, they decide their own gender when they are ready to, and don’t make babies before they’ve decided. But more importantly, Loki is a shape changer.”

“And that means?”

“Just like everything else about Loki, it means he does what he wants.”

-x-x-x-

“Bruce told me you do what you want. So you want this?” Cap, waving at hand at Loki’s unseemly bulge.
“Passionately,” Loki said.

“Well. If you need anything, let me know what I can do.”

And Loki watched as the (fundamentally decent) super-soldier dashed away to his next duty.

-x-x-x-

Later, as Cap returned, Loki said, “There is a favor you can do for me, before you go.”

With cups of tea (Loki) and coffee (Steve), they sat in the deserted conference room. Loki sat straight for once (it was no longer possible to put his feet up on the table in these chairs, thank you), wide-legged and a little apart from the table. Cap always sat straight.

“Tell me about the Badoon.”

“You mean their military status?”

Loki waved a hand. “I’ve read your reports; very thorough. But you’ve an artist’s eye, Captain: tell me about the people, about how they live.” Then listened with sleepy-eyed complete attention as Steve talked.
Change of state

Chapter Summary

Solid melts to liquid; liquid evaporates to gas; gas condenses into solid. These are changes of state. Also, Cordelia is getting pretty big…

For a week, Loki dozes in his stall-sized bed in his Asgardian consulate apartment, on his side; his horse-filled belly resting on pillows beside him. His guilty hope—not shared with Freya—is to bring this, his last foal, to term in human shape; to not lose his quickness of wit until the very last minute, when he can allow his mare-form to give birth. As it is, half his blood is going to his foal; his spread hand caresses poll or neck or flank, and the baby curls into his touch; his fragile balloon of a uterus rubbed within and without by affectionate touches. He could lie like this forever, except…

Except Pele and Tony Stark are still in Muspelheim. He’d told them earlier not to hasten, relying on this desire—no rush to become a horse—and Pele’s common sense against Stark’s irresponsibility. As it was, they were late.

Communication with Muspelheim was chancy at best, relying on very limited devices. There was a pulse code: one pulse meant “get ready to open a portal;” two pulses meant “we are ready to come through;” three meant “get us out now, dammit.” And time flowed erratically between the realms (so one plus two always meant three). Loki could open the insecure portal with a spell, fast; could close it against pursuers only with another, slower enchantment.

The phone rang at sunset; one pulse had arrived from Muspelheim. Loki called for Freya, rose slowly, dressed; a truss to cradle his belly, leggings, boots, tunic. A call for the consulate’s car, and then go.

Loki waited with Freya (and some faceless armored guards) in a secure but uncomfortable basement level of Stark’s tower. He longed for his comfortable bed at the consulate; here, the late-night cold seeped into his bones, the chairs were uncomfortable, and the only couch was narrow, with slippery-surfaced evasive cushions. There was a machine with old, vile-smelling coffee. Freya quietly worked on her data pad. At odd intervals, the guards shifted, perhaps rotating in and out of service. Loki was sleepy and all-too sore; he needed his wits about him, dammit.

After midnight, Pepper breezes in, fully dressed from some formal event. She disappears, reappears in comfortable clothes, with a camelhair throw to wrap Loki in. Vile coffee, warm blanket, swelling feet; and Pepper with them, waiting for Tony.

Two pulses, a quiet word, and the Muspelheim portal is open. Through it come Tony (his most reflective hotrod-colored Iron Man suit for fire-fighting); and Pele in her red silk professional outfit—very short skirt and all—with high-heeled work boots and a bright yellow hard hat.

Loki, stands wrapped in the camelhair blanket, chanting to close the portal, and is suddenly a shaman: a mediator between light and dark, with ghostly feathers in his hair, half-seen brass pots rattling against his back. Then the spell is complete, the portal closed, and he sinks back onto the couch, exhausted. Coffee racing in his veins, behind his eyes.
Pele, with stricken eyes, talking in a low voice with Freya. A mailed hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, Octomom! How’s the parasite?”

Loki winces. “Restless.”

“You need a bed,” Tony says on a second look.

“I have one,” Loki points out.

“Mine. Now.”

Loki collapses into Stark’s giant bed; Freya stacks piles of pillows around him, turns out the light.

Loki lay in the big bed, surrounded with unfamiliar pillows, covered by the camelhair throw. A white-noise susurru from the ventilation system, a door ajar to voices: Pepper, Tony, Freya, Pele. He resolutely kept his eyes closed, but coffee hummed through his nerves and he couldn’t sleep. Worse, Cordelia was as coffee-alert as he was, and moved restlessly, repositioning. Loki raised his knees, trying to comfort as much of his little horse as his arms could reach. The wall between inside and out seemed very thin in the predawn twilight. Eventually, they both slept.

Loki woke as a sharp cramp rippled through his gut. (The voices were still outside his door, but daylight lanced through partings between the heavy drapes.) Loki stilled himself, caught his breath, and yelled for Freya.

“You’re having false labor pains. Braxton-Hicks. Your body thinks you should be done with gestating, Uncle.”

“But she’s not ready yet, is she?” He carefully patted his belly, not wanting to start another of those hellish contractions.

“No, she’s not.” Freya sighed. “I’ll start preparing for the changeover.” And closed the door behind her as she left.

Loki finally emerged from the bedroom: braced, dressed, and exhausted.

“You still look like crap warmed over,” Tony said from the kitchen. “Baby keep you up?”

“Two of them did. And one ally.” Loki walked in with a dazzling smile for Pele—returned—that suddenly turned into wide-eyed distress as another spasm hit him.

“Uncle, sit down!” from Freya. “Here. Alfalfa shake and your pills.” (An ungodly handful of them.) “Bacon is coming up.”

Tony started to say something; Pepper cut in. “Debriefing is at eleven.”

Tony: “The Badoon portal will stay open, right? We don’t need anything else from you?”
“It’s open until I close it, yes.”

“Wait ‘til you hear how awesome we were.”

“Tony…,” from Pepper.

“Right, I’ll wait for the de-brief. Do horses eat bacon? ‘Cause, … this is good stuff.” Extracting a piece from Loki’s plateful.

“Tony!” from Pepper, again.

“Right. Off to check the lab, moms; don’t wait up.”

Pepper sighed, turned to Loki. “Do you need any help? Anything?”

“My doctor is here,” Loki said. “I’m fine.” I think.

-x-x-x-

The debriefing after Muspelheim was with Bruce and Director Fury, Pele and Tony, and their barely attentive mischief god. As they are getting started, Loki beside Tony (and still in his chair) mutters something to him about the state of the Badoon economy.

Pele had secured an ice-cream franchise. Sulfur-sprinkled goat-milk ice cream cones are an amazingly popular treat in Muspelheim.

A quick moment of explanation, self-congratulation, and she is back to watching Loki.

Tony starts in on explaining their self-sustaining construction strategy, when Freya signals from the door, and Pele stands and goes to Loki. “We have to go, now. My apologies,” she bows to the rest of the room. The two women wheel Loki’s (Tony’s) chair out the door.

-x-x-x-

To a waiting photographer, who has a black paper background set up in an adjoining room; with lights, a box of props, and a large camera. “Uncle, can you stand?” asks Freya.

Loki struggles up (as he had, ages before, with Sleipnir), sits back. Winces at the rupturing he can feel. “No.”

“Move the chair here,” says the photographer, who starts lowering the height of his camera. “I’ve an idea.”

“Clothes?” asks Freya.

“No,” says Loki, and she and Pele help peel them off him.

“Cold?”

“No.” He shakes his head, and Pele, watching, elbows Freya.

“Ready?”

“Almost,” says Loki, while Pele is whispering something in the photographer’s ear. Loki fades in his tattoos, including the latest: half of his face is tattooed black in the Marquesan style, a lamentation for the Finn horse, Cordelia’s lost father. Pele comes forward, ruffles his hair. Loki blinks.
The photographer stalks around him, then consults with Freya; she nods. Loki sits exhausted while the chair, the lights are adjusted.

“Don’t watch him, uncle,” says Freya, finally. “Look at me.” He straightens in the chair, winces, raises his eyes, follows her with a turn of the head as she moves. Clicks of the camera, then a pause.

The camera hooked up to a monitor, a printer. “Is that what you had in mind?” Both women coo agreement. The dark image is printed out, and handed to Loki.

Low light, dark tattooed skin like oak against a black background. Loki sits like a mountain, shown in quarter profile from the belly up. A thin vertical line of sharp focus picks up a segment of forearm, and black flyaway hair framing a thin flash of bright green iris. A significantly more monumental portrait than Elf’s baby shot, the wickedly playful Mapplethorpe. “Who was your inspiration this time?” Loki asks Pele.

“Vavra.”

Loki collapses back into the chair. From the unused prop basket, Freya grabs a large scarf, wraps it around him and helps to lower him to the floor. “Take deep breaths!” she says—he can’t—he’s being kicked internally. Freya croons a lullaby to the panicked foal, and it finally relaxes. Loki takes three deep breaths. Changes. Struggles up on four legs, a small round white mare, and grunts as the baby shifts into position.

Tony comes racing into the makeshift studio space, now occupied by two women, a photographer, and a horse. “What was that about the Badoon economy?”

Loki dumps a bacon-rich not-quite-horse turd on Tony’s expensive Italian shoe. Tony looks from his shoe to the horse, to his shoe—pause—to the horse again. “Oh. Got it.” Pats Loki-horse on the nearest shoulder. “I’ll take care of it.”

-x-x-x-

Notes: Yep, the Badoon economy is now approximately horse-shit.
Ho Ho Ho.

Chapter Summary

Because every fic needs a holiday episode.

A Yule party at the Asgardian consulate, with several Terrestrial diplomats and Jotunheim’s ambassador Skrymir to be in attendance. And, representing the (human) Avengers, well-dressed Tony Stark. With Pepper Potts, of course.

He was greeted at the door by tuxedoed Freya, and a smaller white-dressed girl holding onto a large dog buried under red flower wreaths. “Mr. Stark. Ms. Potts: This is my younger sister, Samantha Sifsdottir.”

Tony held out his hand to the girl; she said, “Sam. I’m Sam,” and kept both of hers on the collar of the dog. “We’re going downstairs now,” she told Freya.

“Okay…?” Freya smiled helplessly as the girl departed. “Sorry. She does what she wants to, sometimes.”

“Yeah, it runs in the family,” Tony said; and smiled no offense meant.

-x-x-x-

For all he was the only Avengers representative, there were a lot of familiar faces at the party. Mostly diplomats (and Pepper knew them all by name); but he’d previously met “Baki!” and remembered that a slap on the back would not only be impolitic, but also painful. “What brings you here?”

“Pele is my date,” said the fire demon. “She brought a treat!” Baki’s martini was a …martini float?

But Freya’s hand was on Tony’s elbow, leading him away to meet someone else.

He had not expected to find Loki’s mother here, yet here Frigga was, walking up to him in greeting.

“Your majesty?”

“Lord Stark. In some ways, I feel I know you. Are you not my son Loki’s Midgardian counterpart?”

“Yeah, except”—his mind quickly censored out the horse part—“except I’m an engineer.” Babbling at her confused beauty. “I mean, for me, things have to work. Loki would use a pencil to hold up a building.” He described it with hand gestures: skyscraper here, tiny pencil at a lower corner, the collapse and crunch. “Wouldn’t work.”

The proud mom blinked. “He would make it do so.”

“Yeah, no; not if he quit paying attention. Now a bank—with a pencil, Loki could hold up a bank, easy. Will that do?”

To her silvery laugh, nod and departure. Tony blew out a breath, and went to find Pepper.

-x-x-x-
Pepper was politely listening to Pele, who was describing her adventures persuading fire demons to try ice cream; in her new role as an avid salesperson, she wore high heels and a long red “Muspelheim Swirl” T-shirt, with a sparkly ribbon acting as a belt. Pele had even brought a gallon of the new flavor, stashed in the bar refrigerator. Nothing would do but Pepper must try it.

“It’s cruelty free,” Pele coaxes, handing Pepper a spoon.

Pepper gives a careful sniff, puts the spoon in her mouth, and tastes. “Interesting flavor,” she says with a bright-eyed carefully not-wincing smile. “What’s the crunchy part?”

“Sulfur,” says Pele happily, and Pepper turns to (hopefully) cough into her hand just as Tony arrives. She clears her throat. “Tony! You’ve got to try this!”

He recognizes the stuff from Muspelheim. “Already tried it.” Turns to Pele, “Did you add Tabasco sauce yet? It needed a kick.”

Pepper yanks Tony away, demands his handkerchief, and returns it to him with a red-and-yellow-swirled tongue print. She reaches for a glass from a passing waiter; he mutters “Champagne will work better,” and she takes a different glass instead.

“Thank you,” says Pepper darkly after her first sip. She plants a heel in his ankle, pushes.

“Ow! What was that for?”

Pepper gestures and Tony leans close. She says in a soft voice, “It needed a kick.”

“Just wait. Muspelheim ethnic will be the next hot cuisine.”

“The next hot cuisine,” she said flatly.

“Yeah.” Tony glanced at her frowning face. “Another champagne?”

“Please.”

-x-x-x-

An hour later, Sam is in the mare’s stall with Pele’s dog, all asleep in the straw. Her decorations consist of red flowers everywhere, mainly fallen from where she braided them in Loki’s mane and tail. Freya comes down to the stable/garage, quietly wakes the dog, and carries Sam up to bed. The dog follows.

-x-x-x-

In the middle of a mostly-not-off-color anecdote, Tony’s phone rings. “‘Scuse me. Yeah?...You want what? Do you know what time it is? No, my time, not your time. Yeah, I’ll tell Pepper and we’ll get on it in the morning.” He turns off the phone, pockets it.

“Hey, Pepper? You’re going to remember this, right? Clint wants a Quinjet for Christmas. Send one out tomorrow, okay?”

-x-x-x-

Late that night, the party is winding down, getting to serious face-to-face politicking that does not involve him; so Tony goes wandering with a bottle. Finds Loki-mare standing asleep in a stall, Pele’s dog’s flowers falling down from her mane. Loki looks like a holiday ornament made by a drunk.
“Hey, surfer dude.” A brilliant green eye opens, making the horse’s resemblance to a drunken Christmas ornament nearly complete.

“Want any? It’s Laphroaig. Scotch, I mean, if you can drink it. It won’t cause fetal alcohol problems at this stage, will it?”

Loki acts intrigued, desirous. Tony pours half the bottle into a nearby bucket of grain.

“I never thanked you for the Surt business. I mean, Pele came up aces.” Tony takes a slug from the bottle; Loki takes a lady-like sip from the grain bucket.

And Tony keeps talking, until with the bottle almost empty at 4 a.m., here comes Pepper to round him up and take him home.

“How are you doing?”

“Scotch and … oats, I think.”

“You’re getting a horse drunk? Hello, pretty,” — this to Loki, who attempts a simper but doesn’t succeed at it — “why are you getting a horse drunk?”

“Pep, this is my old unreliable buddy and pizza delivery guy, Loki. He engineered this year’s successes, seemed a pity to leave him out of the party.”


Tony gives Pepper an owlish look.

“Yes. He’s a serious businessman.”

“A serious businessman,” repeated Pepper dubiously.

“He found the key to defeating the Badoon.”

“He defeated the Badoon?”

“Well, no; Thor and Cap are doing that now. But… and he sent Pele our way in that Surt business.”

Pepper turned to the horse. “You mean you’re the one responsible for that girl’s horrible fashion sense?”

Tony had the satisfaction of watching a drunk(ish) Pepper berate a drunken (and horsey) Loki. It would have been just what he wanted for Christmas, had he only remembered to turn back on his Starkphone.
The (is)land down under

Chapter Summary

A.k.a. “Wenches, assemble!”
In which Clint rallies the Asgardian troops.

Thorgunnarr led the Asgardian rear guard, and Thorgunnarr was not a happy man. Natasha had arranged for him to meet with Clint.

“We are on an island of wenches,” he explained to Clint over a couple of meads, “but we sleep alone. This is unnatural.”

It was; and as a peace keeper, Clint had to do something about it. So he told the girls at Loki’s ranch that in three days there would be an assembly with Odin’s troops. “Let’s do a little rounding-up in the meantime. I don’t need the mares to come in, but we’d better fetch Sleipnir.”

-x-x-x-

It was a hung-over and pizza-free morning meeting in New York the day after the Yule party: Tony, Bruce and Freya, and, for once, Pepper, who brought croissants and coffee and tea.


“No,” Tony said. “The invasion’s not over yet, apparently. Clint wants the jet for some other reason.”

“You’d think Sleipnir would have fulfilled his duties by now,” said Bruce, looking to Freya, the resident horse expert, for confirmation.

“As long as Sleipnir is at his island, Loki can’t go home,” Freya said. “I think my grandfather does not trust my uncle.”

“Yeah, well…” from Tony.

“I’m going along as far as California. Do we need to send anything to the island with the jet?” Pepper asked. “We have an opportunity.”

“Actually,” Freya said, “I’d like to go with it. I need to check the mares and do some more research at the ranch.”

“Loki’s okay with you gone?”—from Bruce.

“He’s stabilized,” Freya said, and Tony snorted. “And Ebbi has come from Asgard to tend to him. But I think Pele may want a ride to Hiva Iotuna as well.”

“Go get your things and your friend, then,” said Pepper. “We’ll meet at the Quinjet hanger in an hour.”

-x-x-x-
Freya and Pele and Sam:

“So, we are welcome to come along on the trip to the ranch,” finished Freya.

“I do want to return,” said Pele. “And I’ll take my dog back, if you don’t mind.” A smile to Sam, who frowned.

Pele turned to Freya. “It would be so much simpler if I could bring my dog handler as well,” she said, watching from the corner of her eye as Sam’s frown shifted into uncertain hope.

“Mother likes us to have new experiences,” said Freya. “But let me check with Grandmother Frigga.” She dashed off to do so.

Pele smiled at Sam. “Go pack.”

-x-x-x-

After dropping off Pepper at the Santa Monica airport, the Quinjet lands on Vigrid plane, and a goddess, a dog, and two Asgardians walk out. They are greeted with flower leis; there are whispers and laughter as Freya and the Jotun girls on the island renew their acquaintance. Clint watches and waits as they approach.

Freya said, “I am told you go by Lord Hawk now. Lord Hawk, this is the goddess Pele.”

Unorthodox etiquette, as he’s pretty sure Pele outranks him by quite a bit, so he should have been introduced to her; but the girl in the ratty T-shirt and dog drool gives him a straight look and a nod.

Clint bows his head in return.

Freya said, “And this is my sister, Sam.”

“Sam?”

“Would you want to be called Thrud? She chose Samantha instead.”

“Sam.” With a handshake for the junior scientist, who then races off to see the horses.

Clint loudly reminded his Jotun wards, “We’ve got more Asgardians coming tomorrow! Let’s get back to work.”

-x-x-x-

Thorgunnarr and his men—all men—showed up at the ranch the next day, as asked. His men lined up looking hopeful, abashed, and recently scrubbed: hoping perhaps for feminine companions today. That wasn’t exactly Clint’s plan.

Across from Thorgunnarr’s men and behind Clint, Natasha walked to a point just past the center of the Asgardian group, stopping with her arms crossed. By not moving to the exact center of the group, she could throw her knives at any of the troops, without hitting Clint. He turned and grinned.

“Wenches, assemble!” said Clint. His first reflection was that hah! Tony Stark didn’t get to say this; his second sadder reflection was that Stark probably got to say this all the time. Another point against Stark.

On Natasha’s left filed in Ivy and her Jotun Girl Scouts. Those that could shape-change stood nine feet tall; but all were equally blue. The non-shape-changers wore pinafores and their hair in pigtails.
From her right filed in: Pele, who’d accepted Clint’s invitation; a nervous Sam; and Freya, leading a resentful Sleipnir. He wanted to be with his mares (which was similar to Thorgunnarr’s problem). All here.

Clint turned to face Thorgunnarr’s troops. A hopeful sausage fest. He almost felt bad about what he was about to do to them. “You’ve met Agent Romanova.” Natasha stood silent, unsmiling. “What you don’t know is how she wakes up from a sound sleep.” A few Asgardians started to smile. “There’s a reason she’s a widow. She’s the stab-first-and-ask-questions-later type.” The smiles faded. “So I’d avoid her, if I were you.

“Then there are the girl scouts,” Clint said, waving at the Jotun contingent. “Not to mention that they are all underage, which is just yucky, they are also frost giants. Ivy?”

“Yes, Lord Hawk?”

“What’s your skin temperature?”

“Minus 60, Lord Hawk.”

“And your body temperature?”

She frowned in concentration. “Considerably colder, Lord Hawk.”

“Thank you, Ivy.” He turned to face past Natasha. “Ms. Pele?”

“Lord Hawk?” in an amused voice.

“What is your skin temperature, if you don’t mind?”

“About 850 degrees, Lord Hawk.”

850 degrees?! “Is that, um, is that Fahrenheit or Celsius?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not. And your body temperature?”

“Oh, considerably warmer.”

Clint turned back to the troops. “So, to summarize, anything you try to stick in one of these underage kids will freeze and break off. And anything you try to stick in our ally, here, won’t burn. It’ll vaporize. Any questions? …. Good. Let’s continue.

“Now I know you Asgardians are too virtuous to even consider this,” (yeah, right, I’m from Iowa and I’m skeptical) “but some of your more creative buddies may look at the horses. After all, there’s a precedent.” (Loki, right.) “However, Sleipnir, here”—who lifted his head, ears forward, at the mention of his name—“Sleipnir regards all the horses as *his*. Do you want to pick a fight with Sleipnir? Bad. Idea.”

“As for the goats—well, don’t go near the goats. They have four legs, Sleipnir probably considers them horses.” Clint paused, took a breath.

“But wait! We have two wenches left! Sam, would you like to tell these gentlemen your full name?”

“Samantha Sifsdottir, Lord Hawk.”
“And Dr. Freya, your name, please?”

“Freya Sifsdottir, Lord Hawk.”

“And if you ladies don’t mind, who is your father?”

“Prince Thor, Lord Hawk,” they said together.

“Right.” Clint turned to the troops again. “So, if you molest Thor’s daughters, it’s possible that your old comrade Thor won’t kill you, but Sif? You want to see what Sif will do?” Thorgunnarr’s men by now were looking somewhat green.

“So,” said Clint (deep breath, try not to sound like Tony), “you have an army. With not enough to do, and too much free time.

“We have a Quinjet. And out there”—vague wave—“are islands with bars. And cruise ships. And lonely ladies in the cruise ships, looking for romance. In the bars. Let’s make a deal.”

-x-x-x-

Later, after the first flight departed to Bora Bora, a small hand tugged at his. Teddi, the littlest frost giant, in pigtails and pinafore. “Lord Hawk?”

“Yeah, kid?” To scrunch-faced thoughtfulness.

“Are wenches girls?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Then I think I’m not a wench.”

Clint blinked. “Oh. Okay.”

-x-x-x-

Notes: Thrud is the name of Thor and Sif’s daughter in the myths. Sam doesn’t care for it.

“Thorgunnarr” means “Thor’s warrior.”

“Happy, can you get the tallest van you can find on short order, like, tonight? With snow tires or chains. We’ll need it tomorrow, early.”

“JARVIS, call the deli. We need a picnic lunch for three; plus hot chocolate, apples, anchovies, snacks, two bottles or so of champagne; and find out what winter rations the carriage horses get, and order the best of it. For delivery here at dawn, tomorrow.”

Plans in motion.

-Snow Day-

Snowfall makes New York streets all quiet; it muffles the avenues, takes the edge off the sharp honks of taxis, dulls the hiss of tires on pavement. Snow makes New York sleep, at least to the ear.

In the morning: chimes of snow chains on a tall anonymous van. Happy driving, Pepper on the hump, and Tony shotgun; with a picnic basket and a lot of alcohol—champagne and scotch—and coffee and hot chocolate against the cold; to the Asgardian consulate.

Tony coordinated—“Avengers access to the mare Lopt fra Jotunheim as needed,” as now—into a warm garage/stable, the only horse present breathing softly in the dark. Loose straw around the horse’s stall is arranged in patterns, in concentric arcs.

“Hey,” said Tony, “hey, Pizza Guy, wake up.” A lifted head, cool breath in the warm stable. “We’ve got Avengers business. Do you need this?” a nod to the bridle on the wall; the horse came freely, bridleless, following Tony’s retreat.

“Come on.”

Onto the ramp, into the van; Tony with the white mare in the back as they left. Happy drove, uptown to Sheep’s Meadow—and, all out.

“Come on!”

Loki-mare backed and turned around, snow-covered grass before her, the city behind. “Snow day,” said Tony. “Go on; run!” And she did.

Dancing in the snow; a shake of her head, a bow, a sudden plunge and she rolls, over and over in the whiteness. “Go ahead, enjoy.”

Happy pours coffee, fortifies it. The three watch the horse dance in the meadow.
And…waiting, Happy shoveled a fort. Tony, noticing, stockpiled snowballs. Pepper quietly stole some from Tony, made her own supply.

Tony started the fight; a few desultory lobs at Happy, soon returned in kind. Pepper found him an unsuspecting target. Tony returned fire, to a bombardment from Happy; then a shot went wide.

A sudden snort from the impacted pony. Loki-horse swung wide, bucking and farting; circled around behind. Disappeared into the woods.

“Is that a problem?” Happy asked.

Tony shrugged. “I don’t think so. We brought his lunch.” Sent another snowball into a high arc, resuming the fight.

Until he felt damp at the back of his neck. Happy and Pepper had quit firing snowballs. Tony stepped forward and the silent presence behind his back snorted, jumped away, and circled the meadow again.

“Damn. He drooled on me, didn’t he? Tell me he didn’t drool on me.” Instead, Happy poured him some coffee, laced it with something, passed it over.

-x-x-x-

“All right, you flea factory. Lunch time!” Across the cold meadow, now well-trodden, a white head raised and ears pricked forward. Tony yelled again, “I brought your favorite.” A hesitant trot forward.

Happy had set out two tablecloths: the traditional red-and-white-checked one with “people food;” and a green-and-white one with warm mashed grain, apple slices, and … anchovies. “Yeah,” said Tony quietly. “Think you’re the only one who notices other people’s taste in pizzas?”

Warm lunch; champagne for three (including Loki: Happy is always the designated driver); quiet good feelings. Tony sat on a bench with Pepper and Happy, trying to blow cold air into smoke rings. Loki-horse quietly approached and slowly bowed, deeply, in front of Pepper: a perfect circus-pony Spanish bow.

“Tony?”

“I think he’s offering you a ride, Pep.”

“You mean she’s offering.” Pepper’s face lit up. “Can I? I mean, is it safe?”

“Sure. She’s our ally. Go ahead.”

Pepper patted the white neck, grabbed a handful of mane to steady herself, and jumped aboard. Held the mane as the horse rose, shook his/her head, and trotted into the woods.

“Are you sure it’s safe?”—from Happy.

“Pep’s got her phone, Loki’s our buddy”—rubbing his now-dry neck—“and she really wants to ride. Why not?” A pause. “Have you ever seen her look like that? Like … Christmas morning?”

“I saw you look like that once. After Nat dumped me in the boxing ring.”

Tony remembered how that look felt. I want one. Right.
The meadow was bordered by leafless trees, a creek with a bridge, paths cleared of snow, and more distant, jingling-trafficked roads; it was criss-crossed with bird tracks and the near-path footprints of leashed dogs. Loki high-stepped through the snow, ignoring the paths, on routes he already knew, to the rear of the art museum, to a skating rink—sliding backwards on ice with Pepper's hands clenched in his mane, her at first uncertain then hearty laugh—to skeletal trees and evergreen bushes, bright with red berries and squabbling chickadees, at the natural history museum; over the traffic bridge looking down on snow-tired taxicabs; to a bus-pull-out glade at the edge of a park where flying slush had created icicle-curtained fairy caves in the snow. (Where the two were visible from across the street, and Loki tried to look like a magical unicorn.) Pepper patted his neck in appreciation; Loki shook his snowy head and headed back to their meadow.

Pepper returned with her cheeks bright, on Loki-pony showing off a flying pace across the meadow toward them. (A round furry horse with a head-high single-footing steam-engine-panting fast run.) She dismounted with a lift from Happy, a warm cup of spiked coffee from Tony.

“How was it?”

“Magic,” she breathed.

“Well, we’ve gotta get Magic Pony home now. Sorry, Loki, playtime’s over. Apple?”

The bastard shook like a dog, scattering snow everywhere.
Enter Cordelia, in a low-key sort of way.

The weeks passed without a need for Loki’s thumb to stir the soup: this was fortunate, Bruce pointed out, as Loki was currently thumbless. (And Clint, in his regularly scheduled phone call, debated the wisdom of tasting any soup that Loki’s hoof—or thumb—had contaminated.)

- No crises on Earth required Avengers intervention.
- On the Badoon world, a regime fell; its successor sued for peace.
- On Hiva Iotuna, as reported by Natasha and Clint, much-relieved Asgardians returned from the Society Islands, and wagered among themselves for the next opportunity to travel there; while blue-skinned girls maintained a horse herd, practiced riding, and devised new ice cream flavors.
- At the Avengers Tower, Tony and Bruce indulged in science-bro experiments; Tony and Pepper extended their domain of self-sustaining high-tech skyscrapers; and Bruce assisted Freya long-distance with some esoteric veterinary studies before she flew back to New York.
- And elsewhere in New York, Frigga took over diplomatic duties, with her daughter-in-law Sif as confidante, guard, and sometime attaché. Ebbi, having proved his competence many times over as Sleipnir’s groom, attended the only horse in the consulate’s garage/stable. And in due time…

"Can we touch?" Freya asked Ebbi.

"Mare’s choice; I’m not going against her intentions."

Loki decidedly declined to let them enter the stall.

Ebbi sat back on his haunches along a far wall, with the horses in sight if not immediate proximity.

"What happens now?"

"We wait. I’m told you want the afterbirth."

Bruce parceled out Loki’s afterbirth to a coterie of experts.

The results:
From the National Institutes of Health: Why did you send us a horse placenta sample?

From the New Bolton Center of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine: Looks normal for a full-term birth. Are congratulations in order?

No other contacts even replied.

Bruce, having hoped for more information, was nonplussed.

-x-x-x-

Notes:

Dirty Jobs episodes: Wikipedia says “Dirty Jobs is a program on the Discovery Channel, produced by Pilgrim Films & Television, in which host Mike Rowe is shown performing difficult, strange, disgusting, or messy occupational duties alongside the typical employees.” Episodes Pilot 3 ("Roadkill Cleaner"), Season 3 # 8 ("Wild Goose Chase"), Season 3 # 32 ("Animal Barber"), Season 6 # 9 ("Horse Tester") deal with horses; Season 3 # 27 ("Dairy Cow Midwife") had Mike Rowe delivering baby cows.

The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, have their own laboratories in addition to funding outside research. See http://nih.gov/icd/.

The New Bolton veterinary center is the place to go—or at least one of them—for horse medicine. See http://www.vet.upenn.edu/about/campuses/new-bolton-center-campus.
Whose goat?

Chapter Summary

A Badoon peace conference goes off the rails.

A week later, with colostrum all delivered, the notion of goat’s milk introduced, and Loki’s mare body starting to feel fit again, he changed shapes in the middle of the night.

Morning found a naked human nestled comfortably around the sleeping foal, his arm on her ribs, feeling her lungs fill and her heart beating. Her body smelled wonderful: fresh new baby horse with hints of Loki and milk. Loki was relaxed and proud, successful and sane. And sleepy, with his black disorderly hair full of straw. This body also needed to recover.

“Congratulations, Pizza Guy. Hey, does the new mom get a cigar?”

One weary green eye, watching him. “Not on flammable bedding, Stark.”

Oh. Right.

“To what do I owe this visit?”

“Yeah. Well. The Badoon war is over, but now we need a peace conference.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“And we’ve been stalling the negotiations. But we need you, now.”

The talk had wakened the sleeping foal. First her ear twitched, then her head rose; shoulders followed and then a hitch of the hips, and the filly walked towards Stark on four spindly legs.

“Right,” Loki sighed, and stood up, instantly dressed in his surfer shorts and “Been There Done That” T-shirt, raking a hand through straw and hair. “I think introductions are in order.

“Stark, this is my daughter, Cordelia fra Nyja Jorvik. Cordy, this is Tony Stark. Don’t annihilate him, please.”

Tony backed up from the foal sniffing at him delicately. To Loki’s still horse-sensitive nostrils, he smelled of expensive cologne, metal, and enough scorching to remind him of Pele.

Tony paused to take a better look at the filly. Creamy tan with darker legs and tail, big blue eyes with long lashes, delicate nostrils, lips with Loki’s sneer. A porcelain fawn, delicate and arrogant. Definitely her mother’s daughter.

Loki took a possessive step forward. “You were saying?”

“Yeah, we need you at that conference today.” Inspiration gave Tony an evil grin. “You can bring the porcelain princess.” Besides, he was sure Pepper would be charmed.

“Very well.” Suddenly Loki was (well) dressed in his business clothing, a green scarf, and tattoos; his grooming impeccable. “We’ll come. Stark, you bring the goat.”
Tony and Loki were last to arrive at the conference (in the wood-paneled board room on the ground floor of Stark Tower, not the Avengers conference-and-pizza room upstairs). They came in via the back antechamber, a smaller conference room with a closet where Tony could store his shrugged-off overcoat. After a moment’s thought, he shoveled the protesting goat into the closet as well, and shut the door.

Loki entered the board room with the foal at his heels, and looked over the group: the big square Badoon general Czar-Doon, whose resplendently-bedecked khaki uniform minimized the green hue of his face; two slighter Badoon aides, their khaki uniforms far less ornamented; Captain America, in uniform with his cowl pushed back and his face showing; Director Fury, in his usual black uniform; his second, Maria Hill; and two empty chairs, one at the head of the table. And, fortunately, no impolitic brothers. One Badoon aide winked at him; he looked back, thinking Play your part. Loki strode to the most prominent chair, leaned forward to pick up the foal by its chest and hip; sat down and settled Cordelia on his lap, her back legs straight before him and front legs draped over a chair arm; and went back to sleep.

The general’s shouting woke him up. “I’m talking about heavy industry! Yes, you’ll give us food, and seeds, and small-scale sustainable energy; but what about big projects? What about roads? How do you expect us to rebuild our shattered factories, or keep our trained workers before their knowledge fades away, if you give us only inconsequential toys!”

Loki sat up, then began wordlessly snuffling Cordelia-foal’s short little mane. Such a cute baby… But Cap was turning red. “Food is inconsequential? Your people were starving when I last saw them.”

“And I think our delivery mechanisms will be quite adequate,” Tony added. “They were during the war.”

“Your mechanisms. Not our mechanisms! The people should be fed by their own government, not aliens playing god!”

Fury made a rare mistake, asking “Yeah, what does our alien god think?”

With unfocussed eyes, Loki was sucking on the velvet ear of the foal, who sat on his lap with half-closed blue eyes and drool falling from her open jaw.

Nick swallowed, and quietly said to Stark, “Please don’t tell me he’s going to feed it here.”

“No, there’s a goat in the back room.”

Nick briefly rolled his eye, then turned back to the general. “Your concerns are noted. Is there anything else you want to say, or are we done here?”

“I thought we were bested by honorable men,” Czar-Doon snarled, “not a lucky collision of fools.”

Shortly thereafter, the meeting broke up.

-x-x-x-
Tony walked with Loki and Cordelia in the antechamber, afterwards.

“What the hell was that?”

“Hush, Stark, the baby needs lunch.”

Loki dodged into the closet where the nanny goat had been stashed; she was hiding in the coats (and probably eating them). Loki pulled her out by the collar, led her to jump to a chair, then atop a conference table. He led Cordelia to the goat; and turned to Stark. “You were saying?”

“I was saying: what the hell, Loki?”

“You asked for me, Stark. Not any member of my family, or its head, but me. And at considerable personal inconvenience I came.”

“Yeah, you’re our expert on extraterrestrial political economics, right? Of course we asked for you. What were you thinking while you were a horse, anyway? Anything?”

“Oh, just devising plans to save the world,” Loki sneered. “Straw forms runes nicely, even if I didn’t have hands. What did you think I was doing?”

“Save the world?”

“I’m sorry. No doubt you think I should have said ‘rule the world.’”

Before Tony could reply, the door to the board room burst open, with leather-coated Fury charging into the room, slamming the door behind him. Cordelia skittered behind Loki.

“What the motherf***ing hell was that?”—to Tony; then, facing Loki: “And don’t you know evil masterminds are supposed to have cats?”

Loki said easily, “That general is not on our side. It was better to convince him that we will be ineffectual than to continually block his interference. So now he dismisses us, will depart the new Badoon government, and will no doubt wait to come to their rescue.”

“On a white horse,” said Tony, then blinked. “I think we have a monopoly on those.”

Fury: “So you don’t believe that it’s better to have your rivals inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in?”

“If anyone wishes to piss on me and mine, I prefer that they develop kidney stones,” said Loki. “Trust the Ko Ekes and the next generation of Badoon leadership.”

“Why? They went to riding school?”

“Something like that.”

“And what’s that goat doing there?”

“Stark, we’re done with your goat now.”

A polite knock at the outer door.

“My goat? Why is it my goat?” said Tony. “And come in.”

“Tony?”
“Hey, Pep.”

“What’s this I hear about the meeting with the Badoon general being an unmitigated disaster?”

“Oh, it was,” said Loki with a big smile. “A glorious disaster.”

“Loki! How are you doing? You look wonderful. And I haven’t thanked you yet for that amazing ride.”

He bowed his head, reminiscent of the horse he had been. “Very well, thank you. It was my pleasure.”

“Who’s that with you?”

“Oh, you need to meet my daughter. Ms. Potts, this is Cordelia. Cordelia, Princess, we do not hide from our subjects.”

“What a doll! Tony told me her father was a Unitarian. Is that why she’s coffee-colored?”

“What??” from Loki.

(Take heart, Pepper; Tony confuses everybody.)

Loki continued. “Cordelia’s father was a brilliant young stallion of the Finnish Universal breed, who died much too young. And she will turn white when her adult coat comes in.”

“Hello, baby,” crooned Pepper, scratching the filly in just the right places along the jaw. Then to Loki: “Will she lose those baby blue eyes?”

“They will turn green. All my daughters have green eyes.”

“I can see the resemblance to you already, though.”

“You flatter me.”

Tony had escorted Fury out the other door by then, and approached the little group. Watched Pepper smile at Loki and the foal. “Yeah, she’s got your legs.” Pulled Loki aside. “We need to talk.”

“Indeed?” with a raised eyebrow. “I believe my part in this adventure is done. Thor should be back soon, and can resume liaison duties.”

“You said save the world. What’s going on?”

“We’re done here. Bring the goat.”

“Oh, no, we’re not.” Tony lifted the protesting nanny goat off the table, bundled her into the closet, stood with his back to the closed door. “After all I’ve done for you. The scotch. The field trips. You owe me.”


“Well, you’re not getting your goat back until you agree to talk to me.”

“You’d starve a baby?” Loki’s voice broke.

“I’m sure a man of your many talents can find alternatives. No talk, no goat.”
Avoiding Tony, Cordelia was delicately sniffing at the closet door.

Loki stared at him for a moment; finally huffed out a breath through his nose. “Very well. Set your time, and we will talk.”

“No tricks,” said Tony.

“No tricks.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

This is my favorite chapter.

Cordy’s name: Cordelia is the name of King Lear’s youngest daughter. It may or may not be associated with the Latin word cor, meaning heart; and Cordy is Loki’s last, his heart-horse.

The Islandic, and presumably Norse, way to name a horse is [first name] fra [place]. So Loki is Lopt fra Jotunheim (Lopt being another name for Loki), and most of his daughters are named like Dua: Dua fra Hiva lotuna (Dua from Jotun Home/Island). Cordelia fra Nyja Jorvik is Cordelia from New York (to the best of my crappy and inexact Islandic).


(Also see Thor: The Dark World Prelude #1, in which the Badoon attack Vanaheim. http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com/wiki/Thor:_The_Dark_World_Prelude)

Unitarian coffee jokes: Unitarian Universalism was formerly two liberal Protestant sects that merged together; in its present incarnation, no specific theological belief is required of members. It is a theological movement shared by freethinking people who can laugh at themselves. The kaffeeklatsch after formal worship is the social heart of the church: one old joke is that members of other religions, on first visiting a Unitarian temple, decide that they worship the coffee pot. Unitarians have lots of jokes about the importance of coffee to their religion/philosophy and comradeship.


Q: How does the Unitarian Universalist Association excommunicate members?
A: Take away their coffee.
Tony had long since reclaimed “his chair” in the Avengers conference room from Pizza Guy; he swiveled in it toward the opening door.

“Where’s the baby doll?”

“With Freya,” said Loki. “And I have a medical appointment after this. So if you don’t mind starting…”

“Right. No tricks, no lies, no omissions?”

“No tricks. No lies. Some omissions, perhaps, but none will be material.”

Tony nodded. “Sit.”

Loki chose a chair two to his right, swinging his long legs over the chair between them. Nodded back, face open.

“So why do you want to save the world?” Tony started.

“I live here.”

“Yeah, why is that?”

“Asgard is … not congenial. My working with them is contingent on certain guarantees, and it does not make for a comfortable stay.”

“Guarantees?”

“For one, I may not contact any of my children, on pain of death. Their deaths. And those of their immediate families.”

“Ouch. And Frostyland?”

“That’s another contingent guarantee. The throne of Jotunheim is denied to me. Not everyone there recognizes this fact, so my presence there is … disruptive. Plus, it’s cold there. I’ll take my island, thank you.”

Loki paused. “You know, Stark, you lied to me. ‘There is no throne.’ Pah. There are several thrones! One more is hardly noticeable here.”

“I thought you wanted the whole ball of wax.”

“I have what I need.”

“Yeah, a little island. I’ve got more land than you do. But wait… you have horses. And ice cream.
Oh, and a pony corps. Is that your army now?"

"Are you done?"

"Just getting started. You’ve got the next generation of leaders of Frostyland and the Badoon and Asgard –don’t think I haven’t noticed Thor’s daughters—working for you. Why? Horsies and ice cream?"

"And water purification. And refrigeration. And energy generation, land restoration, politics, peace keeping… it’s a broader education that you’d think. But the Asgardians are not Thor’s daughters so much as Sif’s daughters; and Lady Sif agrees with me."

"Why?"

"Because even when gender is not fluid, it should not hamper talent. Because Asgardian education is painfully limited, and I am not about limits."

"You know, you were short-listed for the Nobel Peace Prize for arranging that action in the Sahel. I was looking forward to hauling your pregnant horse butt to Stockholm. But I got to thinking. Peace isn’t your thing, is it? I mean, chaos is your thing, not peace."

"I just arranged another peace, you know."

"Yeah. But I bet you arranged the war, too. Right?"

Loki deflated. “I needed stronger allies. When there is an infection, your healers lance it, do they not? To bring it to the surface?"

"And the Badoon were infected? With weakness?"

"Yes. And the fire demons. ‘They needed the push’—isn’t that how it goes?"

"Not off the ledge, Loki. You don’t just push two parties into a war!"

"Look what they won. Surtur gets more living space, which his demons desperately needed. The Badoon get a new government. New thinking. Finally, a stable way to build their society."

"And Earth? Midgard? What did we get? Ice cream and ponies?"

"If you have not profited from my association,” Loki said stiffly, “you deserve whatever comes to you."

"Right,” Tony said, and steamed into unhappy silence. Thought. “Allies. You said allies. You keep saying that. Jotunheim, Asgard, Muspelheim, the Badoon…” And sat upright. “When is the invasion coming? What did you do?"

“**You know** what I’ve done!"

“The Chitauri."

“And worse."

“**How soon?**"

And then: “maybe forty years,” Loki said quietly.
“Loki the doorkeeper. You’re like the Tesseract. Making us portals.”

“Yes. And closing them! But past forty years’ distance, there are too many paths for me to close them all.”

Loki hated to explain, but… “You may be willing to avenge the world—or worlds—but someone has to be able to rebuild them.”

“Your pony corps.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, okay…change of subject?”

“What, Stark.”

“Um, the baby doll, your latest, um, child?”

“My daughter Cordelia?”

“Yeah. Uh, how much?”

“You want to buy my daughter?”

“Sure. The world won’t end this year, why not?”

“She is a Princess of Jotunheim!”

“She’s a horse.”

“That as well. I do not sell my children.” Loki paused…was that an evil grin lurking under his anger? Was Tony about to be changed into a toad? “But I will lease you a granddaughter. We’ll talk later. Anything else?”

“No?” said Tony, relieved at still being in his own shape. Loki headed through the door, in search of Freya and Banner and medical tests.

-x-x-x-

At their next meeting:

“So, you’d lease me a horse?” Tony starts out cautiously.

“Caspia. My daughter Tritt’s Caspia. Her father was Persian and her grandfather Icelandic. She is much more elegant than I; she runs like the wind, jumps like a deer, and does that flying pace your Ms. Potts so enjoyed.”

“That sounds fine.”

“With conditions, of course. It is a breeding lease. And she will be bred.”

“Pepper?” Tony was wide-eyed.

Loki sighed. “Caspia. We will own all Caspia’s daughters; you may keep any sons, for a price. To be further negotiated, of course.”

-x-x-x-
Freya, to Loki: “You’d part with Caspia?”

“We need allies.”

“But can we trust these allies? They haven’t been to the ranch.”

“Well.” A sad smile, remembering the scent of snow; Loki recalled Pepper’s winter ride, Tony sharing food and drink and freedom. “That is always the risk that I take.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

**Denouement**: “Etymologically, the French word *dénouement* is derived from the Old French word *desnouer*, "to untie", from *nodus*, Latin for "knot." It is the unraveling or untying of the complexities of a plot.” From

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9nouement#D%C3%A9nouement,_resolution,_revelation_or_catastrophe
In debt to Odin

Chapter Summary

The opera isn’t over until the sane Jotun comes home to Asgard. Anyone want to bet how that goes?

Cordelia having been convinced to drink goat’s milk, the edict was: “Now it’s time for the medical tests.” There followed several weeks in which Loki cooperated with the process: inject a drug, wait for effect, test sanity, inject countermeasure, wait for effect, test sanity; as many per day as he could handle. First hormones, then neurotransmitters and their inhibitors, then analgesics, then resin plasticizers, then botanicals: anything Freya, Banner, or their colleagues at SHIELD and elsewhere could suggest. (Banner had vetoed gamma rays, insisting nothing good could come of their use; Cap, citing the Red Skull as a warning example, strongly discouraged any attempts to reconstruct the super-soldier serum.) Loki moved to Avengers Tower, for convenience.

-x-x-x-

Male and female hormones: testosterone, estrogen, progesterone: Loki’s rapid metabolism flushed them away before any effect could be noted.

Ritalin (Adderall): Loki on speed was a very bad idea.

Ketamine led to dry-eyed nightmares.

Thalidomide? Loki vetoed: “you cannot be that cruel.”

Marijuana – Can you bliss Loki out? No.

Even chamomile: Tranquilized Loki does not equal sane Loki.

And so on…

-x-x-x-

Momentarily stumped, Bruce asked Loki, “How about physical methods? Your body seems to want to be pregnant. Some species have delayed implantation; the embryo stays in the uterus, but doesn’t develop until conditions are right. Horses don’t have that.”

“What sorts of animals do that?”

“Well, mostly small animals that produce litters of young.”

“No litters,” said Loki aloud, and, under his breath, “never again.”

“Umm, right; but there are bears.”

“Really, Doctor Banner; were I to drop my concentration and give birth to a bear, wouldn’t you heroes find that disruptive? Or possibly threatening?”

-x-x-x-
“Well, how does Pele relax?” asked Bruce.

Loki said, “Kilauea. Not a helpful suggestion.”

Tony tried to give him a humming mechanical heart in his gut, but Loki’s body unconsciously shape-shifts around it, finally rejecting it. Tony shrugged. “Yeah; well, Dr. Banner was the one who suggested the ‘My Little Pony’ implant in the first place.”

So back to combinations of brain and body chemicals; dopamine and serotonin and oxytocin and prostaglandins, and their various accelerators and uptake inhibitors.

In the meantime, on Hiva Iotuna Loki’s daughters and grand-daughters are starting to give birth. Ivy attends at the births Freya cannot be there for; Sleipnir acts as a shuttle for Freya between the Island and the New York consulate. Loki’s consulate stall sometimes holds his eight-legged son, while Loki himself is tested and rests at the Avengers Tower, and has access only to the scent of his horse on Freya’s clothing.

Loki’s sanity numbers begin to slide downwards.

A misty early morning.

Freya in the courtyard of the Asgardian consulate, holding the reins of bridled and saddled Sleipnir. She dropped the reins and the horse stood; coaxed foal Cordelia from the empty stable. Loki should have been at Stark Tower, testing already, but…

“You’re taking my daughter.”

“She needs to be a horse, Uncle. And you need to get better.”

Loki doesn’t disagree with the first statement. He breathes softly into his tall son’s nostrils, fondles his daughter’s velvet ear, then hugs Freya and lifts her into the saddle. He lifts the foal in both arms and hoists it before Freya, laying Cordelia across Sleipnir’s shoulders like a trussed deer. And lets them go.

“Do I?” to himself, softly.

[Note: Why the next scene didn’t get written:

Freya: “Sad Loki is sad.”

Ivy: “Loki haz a sad? OMG, Poneeeeee…”]

When Freya returns: “Uncle, I…”

Loki shakes his head, negating her apology. “I know, I agreed.” Pause. “Let’s get back to work.”
“Bad news,” said Banner. “We can’t trust the early tests.”

Freya looked up; horrified. Tony asked, “Why not?”

“Loki’s baseline numbers were too high. We wouldn’t be able to see any positive changes.”

“Shit.” Tony looked at Freya. “Sorry about my language, but…shit.”

“Which tests need to be re-run?” she asked calmly.

“The ones that didn’t work,” Bruce said.

“So… all of them.”

“Shit!” This time, Tony threw something.
Blue and yellow

Chapter Summary

Loki hulks out; meanwhile, back at the ranch…

A bright and sunny day in New York: with the retesting unsuccessful, Bruce had a new idea for drugs to test. So here was Loki in the closed chamber, with a chair, a table, and his deck of art cards; Freya standing by with the injections. “Ready, Uncle?” A nod and a jab, as Tony watched through Hulk-proof one-way glass.

This test started looking very bad from the get-go. For one thing, Loki turned blue, and icy stalagmites began growing from his sharp elbows, his fine wrists; for another, he suddenly broke off one icicle spur, jabbed himself in the arm, and began writing on the cards in his own blood. Not so sane, then.

Next to Tony, Bruce whispered at Freya’s ear-bud; she lifted a syringe in her hand to inject the antidote. Before she could act, Loki leapt from the chair, turning toward her, inflating somehow with strained muscles and in-held breath; his back a carapace of growing icy spikes. He hissed, slowly: “Asgardian, you dare?”

Bruce quietly said, “Freya, get out of there.” Tony manned the door switch, locked and alarmed it at her escape.

“What the hell was that one?” Tony asked.

“PCP,” said Bruce.

“You angel-dusted Loki?” trying not to shout.

“It’s a horse tranquilizer,” Bruce explained.

And failed. “Does that look like a horse?” Pointing to the figure in the window.

In the test room, red-eyed Loki howled in pain, pulling out bloody spikes and carving at the window gasket. Bruce was starting to look a little green around the gills himself.

“Bruce, calm down. Deep breaths. Deep breaths, Big Fella.” And turned to Freya: “So what’s plan B?”

Freya took a deep breath also. “I need some help. Get me to the consulate. In the meantime, raise the temperature of the room and lower the humidity as much as you can. Bone dry, if possible. This could take a little while.”

Tony touched a button on the console. “Happy? Get Ms. Sifsdottir to the Asgardian consulate ASAP.”

Freya nodded, left at a run.

“Avengers assemble?” suggested Bruce.
“No,” said Tony, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “This is our mess. We’ll handle this one ourselves, for now.”

-x-x-x-

Freya sprinted from the car to the stable with a wave at the guard. She led unbridled Sleipnir from his stall with a hand in his mane; jumped aboard and then leaned forward, said into his ear: “Find Ivy.” Sleipnir trotted into the yard and with a mighty leap was airborne, was gone.

-x-x-x-

Black midnight halfway around the world, Ivy in a white labcoat, with Pele (in a red one) and Teddy (in blue) on foaling watch. Tritt was about to deliver Sleipnir’s latest offspring. So far, the rest had been colts, promised to Odin; Teddy hoped for a filly he might raise himself.

Sleipnir’s running hooves, a slide, and Freya was among them. “Ivy, I need you,” said Freya. “It’s Uncle.”

The three islanders stood.


Ivy looked at him, then at Pele.

“Teddy and I can handle it,” said Pele to Ivy; and then to Teddy, “I delivered Dua, after all.”

A nod from Ivy and one from Freya, and Ivy ran to the horse.

-x-x-x-

Sleipnir alit at Avengers Tower on the Iron Man landing pad, and the women rushed to the elevator. (A SHIELD agent to Pepper: “Ma’am, there’s a horse on the roof;” and her sigh, “Of course there is.”)

-x-x-x-

Loki on his knees pounding on the floor, blue and bloody, ice spikes evaporated to needle sharpness, scoring the floor and howling. At the observation post, Ivy shrugged off her lab coat, said “Give me the syringe:” with it in her hand walked to the door. “Make it cold and wet in there,” she said, going in.

The desert air released its grip on Loki. He looked up, and up; started to rise.

“Uncle,” said Ivy, standing before him.

He stood to face her. Tony noticed that Ivy was taller than even Loki. Then, to Tony’s surprise, Loki bowed. “Your Highness.”

“Uncle, your pardon, please.” And injected him with the antidote.

-x-x-x-

In the testing room, Loki was resting on a cot, back to looking human-ish. Tony wordlessly whispered to Bruce: “Your Highness?”

“Crown Princess of Jotunheim. Didn’t you read that report?” Bruce turned to Ivy. “Your Highness,
I’ve wondered for years. With the severe effects of heat like that, how did your troops survive in the Sahel?"

“We traded off on cooling duty, and we had cold vests,” she answered; then turned again to the window to watch over Loki.

-x-x-x-

Back at Loki’s island, Tritt was delivering her baby, with Teddy clearing away the white amniotic membrane from the new foal’s nostrils as she rested between pushes. “I remember when Dua was born,” said Pele. “I was used to dogs. I kept waiting for the rest of the litter. And then when the afterbirth came out, I expected Loki to eat it.”

Mare and clumsy baby stood up. “A fine child. Good work, all of you.” Pele patted the mare, the boy, the yellow foal. But Teddy’s face fell.

“It’s a colt,” he said sadly.

“So? You’re a colt.”

“All colts go to Odin,” Teddy said sadly. “That was the agreement.”

Teddy with Pele, waiting for Tritt’s afterbirth to come all the way out: “My uncle did this?”

“Several times,” said Pele. “But don’t worry, young colt. Loki does things for his own reasons. You can grow to be a mighty stallion without ever giving birth.”

Still the boy moped.

Pele said quietly, “Perhaps it is time for Jotunheim to restore diplomatic relations with Asgard. You could always ask for Tritt’s colt in the treaty.”

“Lord Hawk has a saying: ‘Yeah, right.’”

“Loki writes clauses for horses into treaties all the time. Talk to your father, and your uncles.”

Teddy eventually smiled.

-x-x-x-

Note: Tritt’s foal is a flaxen-maned yellow dun: see, for instance, http://www.icelandichorse.is/Bleikt.html.
When Loki awoke *this* sore, he preferred to find a new baby in his arms, or a foal at his side in the straw. Instead, sitting in a too-small chair by the bedside was his too-large brother.

“That was unpleasant,” said Loki, blinking.

“Doctor Banner asked me to apologize for him,” said Thor.

“Well,” sighed Loki, “spells go wrong, too.”

Mutual silence, then Thor smiled, and Loki felt warm despite himself. Loki offered, “You did well against the Badoon. You have my thanks, Brother.”

“Then you ruined it, I hear.”

“I fixed it. It would have all gone wrong again in fifteen years had I not done so.”

Thor cleared his throat. “After your latest adventure, you have two relieved nieces. And your nephew sent you this.”

Loki opened the card, read aloud. “‘Dear Loki. Get well soon. I want a horse.’ Didn’t Odin say that once?”

“Brother,” Thor caught his eye. “You promised…”

Loki looked at the attached letter. “No, he wants a specific horse – Tritt’s colt by Sleipnir, which belongs to Odin. But his indulgent kings are willing to open diplomatic relations with Asgard to get young Teddy his colt.” Reading ahead: “…and they want my help drafting the treaty.”

“Odin has had me read some of your treaties. They make my head spin.”

“Tell me, do I need to be sane to draft one?”

“I assure you,” Thor said, “no one would be able to tell.”

“Good.”

- X-X-X -

“Well?”

“82 percent.”

“Shit.”

- X-X-X -
Freya has a morning exam at Empire College that she can’t escape; Loki, bored, sits in the Avengers’ testing room, playing solitaire with the art cards (or possibly Tarot: some of the cards are purposely upside down). Bruce watches from the viewing chamber for a while, then walks in and sits down.

“I can see why Odin wanted to keep you in this mood.”

“What mood is that, Doctor Banner?” Loki doesn’t look up from his cards.

“You’ve been friendly. Helpful. You’ve saved some of us, even. And you keep feeding us.”

“It’s part of a nefarious scheme,” Loki smiles at his cards.

“No, I don’t think so. I think while you were pregnant, you kind of *adopted* us.”

“Beware, Doctor; my children meet unhappy ends.”

“And now you’re losing interest.”

“Then *be* interesting, Banner. *Engage me.* Or find a solution that will keep me maternal. Those are your choices, I think. I will risk no more offspring.”

-x-x-x-

“Eighty-one per cent.” Banner announced to their little kaffeeklatsch group: Tony, Freya, and, this time, Loki.

Who cursed under his breath.

“Is it the testing?” Bruce asked. “How would you be under normal circumstances?”

“Under *normal circumstances*”—and he’d meant those words to sting—“I would have my next stallion chosen and available by now. But *that* course of action is proscribed.”

-x-x-x-

Eighty percent.

Pele comes to him, her fragrant hair in a high-rooted ponytail. “Will you make me a pathway to Muspelheim?” She’s wearing patent leather sandals over white bobby socks, gods help her; with a white top and a bright red poodle skirt, decorated with white poi dogs and erupting volcanoes.

“Why?” Loki quirks a half-smile.

“To visit Surt, of course. He’s so dreamy!” and accompanies this with the obligatory joined-hands-to-heart gesture.

“Need I impose a curfew?”

“Don’t be jealous. I offered to play with you, years ago, and you refused me.”

Loki sighed. “I think instead I will show you a safe path to Muspelheim; then you can come and go as you please.” And taking her hand: “Just don’t disrupt any of my alliances, please.”

“*Your* alliances? I created this one!”

“Indeed. With my thanks.” And a pause. “Nevertheless…”
From light to dark.

Chapter Summary

Trigger warnings for sudden violence and animal death. I’m very sorry.

79 Percent.

“What about Odin?” asked Freya, while they played cards and waited for the latest antidote to wear off.

“What about him?” asked Loki.

“Well, I’m supposed to keep you at 75% or better on the sanity scale. So far, nothing helps.”

“Is that despair, little Freya?”

“Mainly frustration; but… yeah.” In a small voice.

“Remember, succeed or fail, you will always be welcome on my ranch. Besides, Odin expects me to fail by now. It’s traditional.”

And atypically, Freya won this round of cards.

-x-x-x-

By the next morning, Freya had left for the ranch again.

“So,” Tony summarized, “we’ve run out of pure chemical methods, Loki’s not interested in plush toys or Barbie dolls, and he rejected the My Little Pony implant. I hate being out of ideas. Got any suggestions?”

“What triggers maternal instincts?” Bruce, the good uncle type, stymied at What Girls Want. Freya would be no help; she wanted anatomy textbooks. Hell, Loki would want to annotate them. In blood.

“Besides Barbie? I’d better ask Pepper.”

-x-x-x-

And later: “Pepper says babies trigger maternal instincts. Does SHIELD have any babies we can borrow?”

Bruce took his glasses off. “I have to veto that.”

“Yeah, I watched him ‘hulk out’, too. (No offense.) No babies. Hey … Hulk! What about puppies, or kittens? I bet the Big Guy would intercede if Loki gets violent.”

“It’s still risky.”

“More risky than Loki with a baby? Come on, let’s try it.”
“I’d like some more safeguards,” Bruce said. “Let’s give him some hormones to ‘encourage’ the reaction we want.”

-x-x-x-

A shot in one arm; an inhaler full of oxytocin; a room with books and an armchair. And a puppy, which Loki ignored. His art-deck performance remained unchanged.

The next day, the same room, the same drugs, and a crying kitten instead of the puppy. With a wave of his hand, Loki silenced it; with a “hmmm,” he created a moving toy mouse for the kitten to chase; otherwise, he again ignored it. At the end of the day, Loki said, “Get this out of my sight.” The cards revealed a slight additional decline in his mental state.

Pepper adopted both animals, but insisted she could not handle an entire menagerie.

-x-x-x-

“Last test,” Tony said gravely, the next morning.

They assisted Loki into a corset that pulsed softly, heartbeat-timed, against his belly; occasionally, it gave a harder kick, like a fetal horse’s impatient hoof. They gave him a shot of estrogen, let him settle, then an inhaler-dose of oxytocin and into the room. The furnishings were the same; what had been added was a newborn colt with a silvery pink coat and pale blue eyes, wildly thrashing his legs as he lay on his side on the carpet. Loki—as loaded with maternal hormones as he could be—knelt down to calm the little horse, reached with one hand to scratch it gently under its chin, then reached with his other hand as well. And broke its neck.

“Not what I was expecting,” said Bruce, behind the one-way viewing window.

Loki glared at the opaque window and made no pretense not to hear him. “I gave it mercy,” he hissed the last word. “Now do the same for me, and let me go.”

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Notes:

Apologies for this and the next few chapters. They were not in the original concept of this work, but Tony and Bruce wanted to try one last thing, and walked Loki into an emotional minefield.

The dying foal was suffering from lavender foal syndrome (also called CCDL, or coat color dilution lethal), which is an incurable genetic disease of some Arabian and part-Arabian horses. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavender_Foal_Syndrome, or, if you have a strong stomach, the video at http://animalgenetics.eu/Equine/equine-genetic-disease/lfs.html.
In the afternoon, Bruce went to the Asgardian consulate, asking to see Loki. Loki permitted it. They met in a cozy sitting room (not Loki’s own anymore, but somehow it had been waiting for him). Loki, still dressed as he had been that morning, was seated in the middle of a broad bench.

“I came to see how you are doing,” Bruce said.

“Still angry,” said Loki, standing. “Am I a misconceiving bitch, with her pups taken away and drowned, to be duped with a replacement? I do not like to be manipulated.”

“If we’d known you would”—a swallow—“kill that horse, we would never…”

“It was dying, in great pain! I gave it a merciful death!”

“You could have saved it?”

“To what end?” Loki paced. “Yes, I could have saved it. But suppose I had. A miracle foal—that color always dies, Doctor—so a survivor would be cherished, bred, cloned—leading to many more horses doomed to die, in unwitting pain, on the off chance that one would survive. More would suffer, and for what? I chose not to perpetuate such evil.”

“So,” said Bruce carefully, “you made a rational response. A compassionate one. Thank you for explaining.”

“Oh, I have done even more,” Loki growled it out, still pacing. “I continued your test, without more bloodshed. I walked the park, still in this ridiculous girdle, and encountered baby ducks, several dogs, even human children. It doesn’t work. Be grateful I have harmed no-one.” Loki unpeeled the Velcro back, shrugged off the still-squirming harness. “Take this blasted thing.”

“I’ll go, then,” Bruce said, very tired of all this; walked to the door.

“Doctor,” Loki said.

Bruce turned.

“I am a frost giant. Please appreciate that I did not eat the damned foal.”

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Bruce returned to the lab, to Tony and coffee and his own green tea.

“So. Rational,” Tony said, numbly.

“Scary rational. Also, scary. Did I mention scary? Because he was.” Bruce hoped that what he said was sinking in.
“We need the numbers,” Tony said.

“What?”

“Sanity test. We need the numbers,” Tony repeated, not even looking at Bruce.

Bruce leaned forwards, knuckles on the table. “No. We. Don’t.”

Tony looked up, finally meeting his eyes. “No?”

“No. If killing things makes him rational, I don’t want to know it. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else knowing it, either.”

“Oh. Point taken.” Tony was dejected. “Hey, Bruce. Ever have an experiment that didn’t work?”

Bruce looked slightly green—which was an answer in itself. He gave a heavy sigh. “Tony, you’re an engineer. Your job is to get things to work. A scientist tries to find out why things work, not just how. To do that, we have to have experiments with the possibility of failure.”

“So…”

“No, listen. What do we try next? Electric shocks? Lobotomy? We’ve tried everything we could think of that wasn’t too morally objectionable.”

“So we just call this a lose and move on,” Tony said, heavily.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t either,” said Bruce; then: “I wonder how Loki feels.”

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Once Dr. Banner had left, Loki wrapped his long arms around himself, hugging his ribs; sat back on the bench and howled. He rocked back and forth, making rough wordless sounds, crying without tears.
The next day, Loki arrived at the usual time, dressed as usual, and ready to go. “What’s the next test?”

Bruce hated to admit it, but… “Well, uh… we ran out of tests.”

“What?”

“Yeah. And, um, we destroyed the results from the last few days. All the evidence from those tests, in fact.”

“Why? You’d ruin Freya’s study?”

“It wasn’t hers,” said Tony, determined to take all blame away from volatile, depressed Bruce and ditto, ditto Loki. “I planned these tests and talked Bruce into running them. If they worked, we would have given them to Freya, but as it is…”

Loki said, “Well. There’s one horror ended, then. What next?”

“We have to wait for Freya to get back. Maybe she has ideas.”

“Very well,” said Loki. Mollified? Ambivalent? He was suddenly very hard to read.

“Yeah, well… don’t leave town,” Tony said; and Loki was through the door, and out.

Tony got up. “Pepper says I have to paper-train the puppy. DUM-E’s on cleanup duty.”

-L-x-x-x-

Loki didn’t even leave the building.

-L-x-x-x-

CEO Pepper Potts was expecting Stark Industries board member William H. Short to arrive within the hour for a lunch meeting. His appointment was actually within fifteen minutes, but Mr. Short was rarely that punctual. It was a surprise, therefore, when Ms. Arbogast, her personal assistant, announced that Mr. Short had just arrived.

Pepper, at the office door, said, “Will, come in. Thank you, Bambi.”

Will closed the door behind him, and with a sigh, transformed into tall, green-clad, and miserable Loki.

"Ms. Potts? I throw myself upon your mercy.”

“Loki? What’s wrong?”
He turned his head away; she darted to her desk. “Bambi? Cancel the rest of my appointments.” And tried again. “Loki?”

“How all of you so cruel? I sent away your fiercest Avengers, but I expected better treatment from the rest.”

“What happened?”

“I did not want to kill, but they left me no choice…”

“Loki?” In general, when Pepper was confronted with a monologing villain, things did not go well. “Loki, what’s wrong? Is it Cordelia?”

And at his daughter’s name, Loki finally calmed down. “No! No, she is fine…”

“Loki.” Dammit, Pepper couldn’t deal with this with low blood sugar. She grabbed both his wrists. “Loki, I need lunch. Take me somewhere.”

He nodded, and they disappeared from the room.

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Notes:

Ms. Arbogast: In the Marvel Universe, (Mrs.) Bambi Arbogast is a long-time Iron Man character, and has frequently served as his personal assistant. She might as well be here as Pepper’s PA, with an updated honorific. See http://marvel.wikia.com/Bambina_Arbogast_%28Earth-616%29. (She has a small part in Iron Man 2: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1228705/fullcredits?ref_=tt_cl_sm#cast.)

Will Short: does not appear to be a person in the Marvel Universe. Hence any resemblance to persons real or imaginary is coincidental and unintended.
The past is another country.

Chapter Summary

Loki talks. **Warning for triggers of violence and death,** and a big note about past events from Odin’s perspective.

Central Park: the meadow they’d visited in midwinter was now alive with families and lovers and food carts. Pepper vetoed hot dogs, agreed to ice cream. They found an unoccupied bench in the shade.

“So. What happened?” she said, her empty dish set aside, as Loki finished crunching his cone.

“Yesterday…Stark and Banner put me into an uncomfortable position,” Loki said. “There was a colt. He was in pain, and dying. I killed him.”

“Oh!” with a hand to cover her open mouth. “Why?”

“To end his misery. And because, had I let him live, others would continue to die, in great pain. His sacrifice prevented that.”

“But…”

“That I killed him put a stain on my daughters’ births; made the last dozen years seem gray and purposeless. And then you reminded me what I had momentarily forgotten. The colt was not my child. Cordelia still lives, and prospers (or I would have heard of it). So do the rest.”

Loki cocked his head at Pepper. “You do not understand. You need to know more.”

“Yes.”

“Very well. What do you know about my children?” And he settled in to talk.

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“You have met Sleipnir; Sleipnir was my first. I gave him to my father. Some looked askance, but on the whole, all agreed it was an honorable thing.

“You know we live long lives, yes? It was many years later; the court, at peace or at war, was boring; Father was teaching Thor the art of war, and me the art of not yawning through its—and their—stupidity. The moves, so obvious. The results, so necessary. So I took a walk, to Vanaheim; and in the boundary woods I met a woman who was not so obvious.

“She took me in, taught me things; I suppose she seduced me. We were happy together. And eventually, she had three children—all mine: one fierce, one wise, one compassionate.

“Odin himself found us, and hauled me back to court. Perhaps he’d missed me while showing off some piece of diplomacy I was meant to admire. I found myself in disgrace. Worse, he returned to the boundary woods and brought back my wife and my children. He called my children **monsters.** The fierce one he kept, to tease; the wise one he tried to dispose of; to the compassionate one he gave
a realm of her own, to fill with the broken souls he did not want. All tidy, all done with.

“But my wife: he burned her alive, successively, on three pyres. All that was left at the end was her half-burned heart. By then, I thought I had worked out my error: they’d wanted me to be a support, not an actor; a woman, or ergi, but never a man. I was meant to bear, not to breed others. I took her heart—burnt, still warm, still throbbing—and put it to my lips. I prayed to her that I’d lost. Fill me with monsters, I said, and ate it.

“And she did. My body filled, emptied, filled and emptied, over and over again—I do not know what I delivered, or how many—until at last the madness ended. Afterwards, no-one would tell me what I’d made. Frigga consoled me; “It’s all over,” she said. And that was the end of it.”

-x-x-x-

Notes:

So by now you probably think that I need the tag “Odin’s A+ parenting.” Here’s the short version of what happened, from Odin’s point of view.

- Loki disappears. (Remember, time varies from realm to realm. In Asgard time, it is not very long before his absence is noted, and Odin finds him again.)
- When he is found in Vanahem, he is with the evil woman whose children are predicted to bring about Ragnarok.
- Worse, they are Loki’s children as well.
- Odin does damage control: control/remove/buy off the children, to delay Ragnarok; kill their mother, so she cannot further influence them.
- But her execution takes a lot of work—three burnings—and Loki arrives in time, still bewitched, to find and eat her heart.
- Loki has absorbed her poisonous evil. Frigga and Eir and the healers work day and night to purge the poison out of his system, while Loki raves.
- Odin refuses to tell Loki that his inadvertent actions will lead to everyone’s death and the destruction of everything. (What’s a little Jotun heritage compared to that secret?)
- Did they get rid of all the evil? Loki doesn’t know that he may still have it (or even that what he took in was evil), and his non-communicative royal parents just watch and wait. They love him, but they can’t completely relax their guard around him.

Notice that little crisis in communication. Odin and Frigga won’t tell him what he did; and Loki, being imaginative as all get-out, thinks he’s figured out what he must have done wrong. His hypothesis stinks, but it’s consistent with the way he was judged and hushed thereafter. And the reality is worse.

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More notes:


Loki’s family: Surely you recognize from their descriptions Angrboda, Fenrir the fierce, Jormundgandr the wise, and Hel the compassionate?
The Gullveig story: In Norse myth, Gullveig was one of the Vanir, who was burned three times in Odin’s hall, and survived to walk away all three times. She was then considered a great and respected magic worker. Her burning may have caused the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, and some scholars think Gullveig is another name for Freya. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gullveig).

Alternately, the Gullveig story may refer to gold refining, or to a treasure stored in a woods that was later found with tree branches growing to enclose it (her name means gold branch, according to Norman Sheppard: http://thenorsegods.com/gullveig/).

The witch’s heart: This comes from Norse mythology also. See the section about the Hyndluljod (and the accompanying picture) in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loki. The myth version is closer to Loki’s than Odin’s in my story; Loki ate the half-burnt heart of a wicked woman, was impregnated by this act, and from it descended all the ogresses on earth.

Angrboda as Gullveig as the burnt witch: I have seen this in fandom (but can’t find a source now). The notion apparently comes from Swedish writer Viktor Rydberg (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Rydberg), who liked to lump characters together. Although not currently accepted by many students of Norse mythology (see, e.g., http://birdbookandbone.com/2012/03/who-is-gullveig/, http://academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Gullveig), in the context of this story, it works for me.
"Oh, Loki." Pepper's eyes were as wet as his. She could only hold his hands—hard—as Loki came out of his storytelling mode.

"Yes. Well. That was many years ago," Loki said with a bright, false smile. "'And the wench is dead.' But the memories came back, yesterday. I've since recovered."

"Oh." Pepper had a thought. "Your three children?"

"Yes?"

"They are alive, now?"

"More or less."

"And yesterday, you ended the baby horse’s suffering?"

"I should not have been put in that position."

"I agree, but… Loki, you did the right thing."

"That was right?"

"Yes!"

"I was not set up to fail?"

"Maybe they didn’t think things through as far as you did. Tony can be an idiot."

"But you love him, yes?" Was that a hint of a smile on Loki’s face?

"Unfortunately, yes," said Pepper, with a returning smile. She stood up, still holding his hand. "Come on, I’ll treat you to a manicure."

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When Will Short arrived at the desk of Ms. Arbogast, he apologized for his tardiness. She was under the impression that they had already returned from lunch, and he had just come from the restroom; so she opened Pepper’s door, only to find the office empty.

"Where did you leave her? Which café?"

"Café? I haven’t seen her yet!"

Eventually, someone thought to call Tony.
Tony stomped into Bruce’s lab, already in his latest armor, with the visor still lifted. “Suit up.”

“What’s going on?”

“Pepper’s gone. Best guess is Loki took her.”

“Look—I can’t suit up. No Hulk-outs allowed in Manhattan. Try to find Cap, go run searches; I’ll stay here and check the computer records, and coordinate for you.”

“Yeah.” Tony had gone white. “That works. Right. See you in a bit. I’ll find Pepper. And if Loki’s hurt her, he dies.”

Visor down, more stomping footsteps, a whoosh and the sound of breaking glass: Tony left through the closest window.

“Okay, don’t wait for Cap. Right…” Bruce saved his files, and started searching the Tower’s surveillance data.

As Loki relaxed—and it was relaxing—he allowed his tattoos to fade back into view.

His attendant asked, “Dear, would you like your fingernails done?”

“Something to match this, I think.” Pointing to some body art.

Loki turned to Pepper, in the next chair. “I think my ice cream is better than that we had at lunch.”

“I disagree,” Pepper said. “I seem to recall a flavor with sulfur and Tabasco sauce.”

“Oh, yes, the Muspelheim Swirl. De gustibus, I suppose,” he said with a sigh.

Tony was quartering the sky, hunting in larger and larger circles centered on the Tower, looking for chaos or, worse, mayhem, when his phone rang.

“We’ve got a match,” Bruce said. “Pepper’s credit card was just used on the Upper East Side. At a … nail salon?”

“Sir, I have the coordinates,” JARVIS said.

“Got it,” Tony told Bruce, and slanted into a quick course correction in midair.

He landed on the sidewalk. Pepper was visible through the glass door of the salon. “Found ‘em,” he reported to Bruce, then roared through the outside speaker: “Loki! Get your hands up and your ass out here!”

So of course it was Pepper who came running. “Tony?”

Up came the visor.

“You okay? Where’s Loki?”
“I’m fine. Loki decided to have his toenails painted. Is there a problem?”

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Notes:

The wench is dead: The quote, from Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Jew of Malta*, is: “but that was in another country; and besides, the wench is dead.” It has been used many times since, by the likes of T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and Neil Gaiman. See [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/901/901-h/901-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/901/901-h/901-h.htm) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jew_of_Malta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jew_of_Malta).

“*De gustibus non est disputandem,*” does not mean “no accounting for taste”, but “concerning taste, no argument is possible.” There’s more about this phrase at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_gustibus_non_est_disputandum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_gustibus_non_est_disputandum).
Going home

Chapter Summary

People go home, or at least visit there.

Loki entered the conference room, took a side look at Tony, and sat down in his—formerly Tony’s—chair. Silently; as if daring Bruce and Tony to talk.


“How have we any business today?” Loki asked with an arched eyebrow.

“No,” said Bruce. “We’re still waiting for Freya to get back here.”

“And the rest of the Avengers,” Tony added. “War’s over, right? Can we bring our troops home?”

“After Sleipnir’s left the island,” Bruce said.

“Hell, half the time he’s on my roof.” Tony reached for his Starkphone. “Hey, Clint? End the war.”

A pause. “What do you mean, you’ve got war games now? Is there a computer there? NORAD?”

Another pause. “Oh, real war games. Vikings versus the pony club. What’s the spread? Jotuns by what? Oh, Natasha’s the judge. Yeah, put fifty on the Jotuns for me.”

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Of course, the Jotuns won. After weeks at Bora Bora resorts, the Asgardians were not prepared to fight against little girls armed with pool noodles and wiffle balls (Clint had set the rules). Nor to fight against 4-meter-tall frost giants similarly armed, formerly disguised as little girls. It was a fake-movie-blood bloodbath. After a shared and glorious banquet, ending with mead and an unimaginable assortment of ice-cream flavors, both sides participated in rounding up the mares and foals, tallying the latter, and determining Odin’s share. As all the foals save Cordelia were colts, the accounting was simple.

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Odin himself arrived to lead his troops home.

Ivy addressed him: “Allfather. In addition to your new horses, which we shall deliver once all are weaned, you have our gratitude. You will have our diplomatic cooperation as thanks for your participation in this venture.”

“Is it vain, I wonder, to also want my son to return to me?”

It was not a question Ivy could answer.

He jumped atop Sleipnir—curried to perfection by the Jotun girl scouts—and raised his staff into the air; in a flash, all were gone.
“We should go, too,” Natasha said.

Clint sighed. “Maybe we should get one of these of our own.”


“I’ll kidnap one for you.”

“And incur Loki’s wrath? No thank you.”

“He owes me one,” Clint said.

“Where would you put it? Besides, I’ve gotten rusty. It’s time to go.”

Loki’s sanity numbers were down to the high 60s by the time Clint and Natasha returned. Tony had given him Styrofoam blocks and a room previously redecorated by the Hulk, in an attempt to keep him busy until Freya came home. The architectural results were … interesting, although not capable of being reproduced in any denser medium than Styrofoam. A skyscraper balanced on a pencil. Right.

Fearless, Pepper had insisted on sharing bag lunches with Loki every day. Tony watched, still not trusting Loki or his Styrofoam upside-down Eiffel Tower.

“Have you tried …hugs?” Clint ventured carefully.

“Do not mock me,” said Loki.

Clint stepped forward in reluctant invitation, arms out.

Loki took a step back, spun on one foot, and was out of the door before Clint could lower his arms.

“Touchy,” he said to Natasha.

And, finally, Freya was back.

“Well? Are there tropical remedies for barrenness or insanity we have not tried? Have your readings or course materials suggested any new paths to follow? Cycad flour? Stem cells? Someone else’s DNA?” Impatient Loki paced as he walked.

“Nothing, Uncle. But you have nine new foals, all colts; and Cordelia has settled in nicely.”

“Odin has agreed that the smallest colt, which he calls ‘the dirty yellow one,’ is to be remanded to your cousin Prince Teddy of Jotunheim.”

“Well, that’s one of us happy,” Freya said under her breath.

But Loki had excellent hearing. He gave her another sharp look; she shrugged, helpless; he flounced out. And was not to be found for the rest of the day.
Very early the next day, Loki in full armor announced to bleary-eyed Freya and her new cup of coffee, and to red-eyed Bruce and his latest cup of green tea, that he would be returning to Hiva Iotuna. Now. On Sleipnir.

Freya was not used to seeing her usually avuncular uncle in imperious “I rule the world, peasant” mode; Bruce flashed back to the Chitauri war. He stared at the surface of his tea until his green reflection stopped vibrating, then took a deep breath. *No hulk-out. Good.*

“Three conditions,” Bruce said, still staring at his tea.

“You dare?”

“I beat you up once, so yeah. I dare.”

“What are your conditions,” asked Loki shortly.

Bruce cleared his throat. “One. You run your little sanity test before you go.

“Two. You come back here when you’re done with whatever you need to do over there.

“Three. You don’t jeopardize Freya’s deal with Odin.”

“How would I jeopardize…?”

Freya cut in. “I hate to be crude, but: No sex with Sleipnir. Or reproduction. Or hanky-panky. However you want to say it, Uncle, you know what I’m talking about!”

“Shall I wear a chastity belt, then?”

“You’d slip out of it,” Bruce said, then put his head down, ran his fingers through his hair, thought. “We’ve got something else. We tried it early, it made you sick to your stomach, as I recall, and took a while to wear off; but it didn’t change your sanity levels. Cyproterone.”

Although evidently disgusted, Loki said. “Very well, then. I agree. Let’s get started. Shuffle the deck of art cards.”

“Not so fast,” Bruce said levelly. “Give us your word that you will obey my conditions.”

Loki glared at Bruce and grabbed the cards. Lost the staring contest. Said in a quiet voice, “Drs. Banner and Sifsdottir, you have my word.” He shuffled the cards.

“63 per cent.”

“Damn. Give me the injection.”

“Loki, this won’t help. It’s a chemical castration drug, for God’s sake!”

“It will keep Sleipnir’s questionable virtue safe in my presence. That is all the condition Odin requires.”
Loki and Sleipnir left in the early morning; it was dusk when they arrived, halfway around the world. Loki alit, disappeared the horse’s harness, and rubbed him down with handfuls of dried grass. “Yes, we are back. This is your home, too, you know.” He gave his son a hug around the neck and then a slap on the rump. And walked, alone, to the ranch house.

Ivy was there. “Uncle! I was not expecting you.”

Loki waved his hand, no matter. “I can’t eat anything, anyway. Just tea.”

In his study, they talked shop.

“We’re back to normal operations. The next group of children comes next week,” Ivy said.

“Who?” sipping his tea.

“Mostly Badoon, some Somalis; a few Lakota.”

“Good.” Loki winced as the drug disrupted his guts again. “You need to know this. I’ve given Sleipnir permission to come whenever he wants, carrying anyone he chooses.”

“Even Odin?”

“I expect it will usually be Odin. But we still need allies.”

Ivy frowned; Loki grinned. “Odin will want what we have, Ivy of Jotunheim. Drive hard bargains.”

He stood up.

“What about you?” Ivy asked.

“Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?”

-x-x-x-

He sleeps that night in his own bed, under the eaves, where he had first slept while he’d been pregnant with Dua, a long time ago.

-x-x-x-

In the morning, his stomach was settled enough for cold toast with his tea.

The horses had come down from the hills and were waiting for Loki in the back meadow. Dua the matriarch, willing Tritt (with her yellow colt), proud Venn, and all the rest; Cordelia, shedding her foal coat, was with Dua and her new colt. Not like the lavender foal, then: still alive, still safe.

Behind him, a snort: big Sleipnir was well behaved, for once, standing in a dressage halt.

Loki walked up to Dua: his first daughter born here. Quietly said, in her ear, “Is this the life you would have chosen?”

Surrounded by family, given children of many species to love: Dua gave him an of-course-are-you-crazy? look, and he huffed a laugh.

Loki patted and hugged and scritched them all; met Odin’s colts and told each of them You are mine, by blood; then changed into a white horse, male and gelded. Loki tosses his head; the movement
becomes a dog-like full-body shaking as he adjusts to this form. Then he prances over to join Dua and the rest of his family.

Loki walks proudly, expecting acceptance—Dua knows him in any form. Sleipnir, his stallion son, also gives him homage; then Dua’s head is up.

The herd follows her signal. The mares and colts take up her pace, first a walk then a trot then a canter up to the perfect solitude of the hills. Sleipnir and Loki weave in and out of the herd, sometimes running with them, sometimes bluff-challenging each other; sometimes running alone. By the end of the day, Loki is in Asgardian form again, with straw in his hair, contented; then he is gone.

-x-x-x-

Notes:


**Noodle incident**: Every fiction needs a noodle incident. In this case, they are pool noodles. From *TV Tropes* (and now I risk wasting at least 3 hours of your life): “The Noodle Incident is something from the past [not exactly in this case] that is sometimes referred to but never explained, with the implication that it's just too ludicrous for words, and the reality that any explanation would fall short of audience expectations.”

**Cycad flour**: Certain cycad species and their parts are neurotoxic, causing Parkinson’s-like symptoms. See the section in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sago) on cycad sago flour; more technically, see [http://www.neurology.org/content/58/6/956.abstract](http://www.neurology.org/content/58/6/956.abstract) and articles that cite it.

**Cyproterone**: actually, cyproterone acetate. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyproterone_acetate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyproterone_acetate). In fact this is a chemical castration drug for men, so pansexual Loki would also need a chastity belt (at least).
Loki returns to New York by unannounced means; Sleipnir will find his own way to Asgard. During the months his role has been that of a crying pincushion, Frigga and Sif have been performing quiet diplomacy; Thor’s triumphs against the Badoon, and Odin’s oh-so-limited invasion have also raised Asgard’s prestige. The United Nations vote in favor of Asgardian admission does not surprise him; nor that Jotunheim sponsors the motion to admit them. All of the royal family (except, hopefully, his Jotun self) will be present here for the admission ceremony. And Thor is back again, in advance of the All-Father.

-x-x-x-

The brothers meet at the Tower, in Loki’s room, in private. To Hel with Odin: Loki is doing this for Freya, now.

But he wishes he were not so close to panicking. “Thor. Here is the problem. This attempt to make me ‘sane.’ It’s not working; nothing they try works! When the time comes, I can take care of myself, but what if your father blames Freya?”

“Why would he?” asks generous-hearted Thor, puzzled.

“Because he gave her the task of my sanity as well. And you know how he can be! Tell me, can you make me see reason? After all your years of practice?”

“No,” said Thor quietly, “it is not.” And walked out, headed back to the Asgardian Consulate (about to become an Embassy).

Behind him, Loki smiled.

-x-x-x-

The next morning, Freya came in while Loki was playing a complicated game with his deck of art cards: this one down on the table, this one up in the air (sometimes it landed on the ground, sometimes it disappeared into the air), that one into a round trash container from which occasional green flames rose.

“What are you doing?” she asked loudly. “That’s the test set!” As another card erupted into flames.
“You already know the result,” Loki said.

“Don’t give up! We can try….”

“What?! What can we try that has not already failed, singly and in combinations, multiple times? Name one new test we can try!”

Freya sank down on a nearby chair, watched another card burn without comment. Finally she asked, “What do we do now?”

“I believe you and I have different answers to that question. In your case, go back to your studies. Finish your thesis. And if Odin calls you to task, go to Thor or Heimdall. You have allies on Midgard, they can protect you here. Get to them, and continue your life’s work.”

“What about you?”

“If you don’t know,” Loki said with a little smile, “then you can’t tell.” His hands rose suddenly, and the remaining cards flitted away. “And now I have a meeting to attend to.”

-L-x-x-x-

“Light bulb joke,” Tony said suddenly.

“What?” from Bruce.

“How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it has to want to change.”

“You mean Loki doesn’t want to be sane?”


“But we failed. Freya failed.”

“Hey, she’s a scientist. ‘Win some, lose some, learn from both,’ right? And we’ve only got forty years to prepare for the Chitauri, so there are plenty of other things for us to be doing between villain attacks. Come on, it’s meeting time.”

-L-x-x-x-

One last delivery: their Pizza Guy in shades and baseball cap, board shorts and tattoos and flip-flops, and one of his usual green T-shirts. This one said “Sanity is Over-rated.” He delivers several pizzas, silently, and departs before the meeting even starts.

Clint opened his pizza box, blanched, closed it as Bruce watched, sitting next to him. Clint swallowed, nervously. “I’m pretty sure pizza shouldn’t look back at you.”

“Or blink,” said Bruce; who then opened his own. “Mine’s green. It’s just …green.”

“Should pizza be ticking?” from Tony.

“I have caviar on mine,” said Natasha; opening her pizza box all the way to reveal an ice pizza, mounded with gleaming fish roe.

“It’s okay?” from Bruce.
“It’s fine,” she said after a taste (the pizza had come with its own ivory spoon). “Delicious.”

Cap opened his pizza box warily, flushed bright red. The lid made a flatulent sound as he closed it. “So. What do we do about Loki?”

It was Tony’s turn to be billionaire genius playboy philanthropist loudmouth. He stood up. “I say we do nothing.

“Look, he’s been the hero for, what? Twenty years of his time. He’s saved five planets—realms—whatever. The guy’s earned some time to let off steam. Let him go. We’ll find him if he fucks up big-time; we’ll put out a call if we need him. Just let him go for now.”

Tony’s pizza stopped ticking, exploded into pepperoni confetti and splashes of tomato and cheese that rained down on them all. He grabbed a smoking pepperoni, put it into his mouth, chewed. Swallowed. “This didn’t change my mind, by the way.”

-x-x-x-

Notes: The chapter title comes from the same Billy Preston song as Chapter 19.
Epilogues.

Chapter Summary

Aaand, that’s a wrap.

Epilogue 3:
The herders on Hiva Iotuna (still mostly, but not exclusively, Jotun girls) sometimes notice an extra mare during foaling season: white with brilliant green eyes, watching over the others, uncatchable. When Teddy becomes a manager there, he makes the rule that the mare is not to be disturbed, and this order is never rescinded.

-x-x-x-

Epilogue 2:
Loki sends Pele postcards, coming via various diplomatic pouches, their franking illegible. They get weirder over time. SHIELD intercepts them; Natasha, Tony and Bruce are on Pele-Loki decipher duty. In late fall, one of the postcards to Pele is a full-out Louis Wain decorative cat, with round flat eyes.

“28% sane,” says Bruce.

“That’s an upper limit,” says Tony.

-x-x-x-

Epilogue 1:
On that final meeting day, the last relevant surveillance videos of the ground floor of Stark Tower showed their usual pizza delivery boy, still in shorts and flip-flops, T-shirt and tats and baseball cap, skipping a step as he exits the elevator toward the lobby; once out the front door, his clothes change; he straightens like Keyser Söze, is someone else, is gone.

Loki Skywalker, who walks the paths between the worlds; and opens doors, and closes them.

Loki Mares’ Mother, with a herd of white daughters, and a tropical island.

Loki, God of Mischief, kicking away the long-time constraints of responsibility, and ready for new adventures.

-x-x-x-

-x-x-x-

End Notes:
Louis Wain was a British artist who drew anthropomorphic and decorative cats, and who went insane (possibly from Toxoplasmosis-mediated schizophrenia). His least representational images, the so-called “wallpaper cats,” may have been inspired by his parents’ participation in the textile trade. For a while, it was commonly believed that there was a sequence in his art, from representational to decorative, as his madness progressed; but this is now disputed. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Wain). Still, many of his wallpaper cats look insane. The one I had in mind for the postcard is this one (if the link doesn’t work, it’s the one on the right here); if it were either of these, I think Loki would be indicating a still-lower sanity level.

Keyser Söze is the semi-mythical big bad in Bryan Singer’s movie The Usual Suspects. If you’ve seen the movie, you know the scene I’m talking about. “And like that, poof. He’s gone.”

-x-x-x-

Long author’s note:

I was not expecting this work to run so long. I was also not expecting some of the turns it took: blame the characters, who kept interjecting their own ideas. The story was inspired by Hot Toys Loki (see http://collider.com/hot-toys-loki-figure/ and http://www.hottoys.com.hk/news.php?newsID=77) at the Sideshow Collectibles booth at Comic-Con in 2012; a subsequent cruise to the Marquesas (this is one of the better write-ups); and lots of Norse myths, especially in Kevin Crossley-Holland’s version. The Avengers movie showed me that Tom Hiddleston’s version of Loki was acting as a result of torture, and that this was not the first time he had done so. Countless fanfics taught me that Loki’s appeal is both that we identify with him, and we can do anything we want to him.

In my mind, Loki is always an actor (that is, an active character). He is not a passive victim, no matter the circumstances he has to endure.

In the Marvel Universe, two of the rules are that Loki does not get to win; and the author must put the toys back in the box when he or she is done with them. Although I let Loki bend the first rule, now I’m doing the second.

(But there will be other stories, honest!)

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