Saving the World Tonight
by QueenoftheRealmEternal

Summary

Life in the backwater known as Puente Antiguo can get pretty dull. When the boredom gets to Darcy Lewis, she promises to jump on the next exciting thing that comes along and not let go.

Then she hitches an intergalactic ride to Asgard with the God of Mischief, and boredom is the least of her worries...

Post-Avengers. Mature for later chapters.

Notes

Up until The Dark World came out, this was not quite so AU. Ah well!

Anyway, trying to refill the creative well with a little tasertricks.

Title inspired by "Save the World" by Swedish House Mafia.

Disclaimer: I own nothing, nor am I making money off this little jaunt around the Nine Realms. Just happy to be playing on the playground.
“Are you certain of this, my queen?”

Frigga, queen of Asgard, pondered the question. She had never been more assured of anything in her life, and considering how very long lived she was, that was remarkable. She ran her fingers over the matched set of gold bracelets on the table before her, admiring their craftsmanship. Made by dwarves, they were unbreakable in spite of their delicate appearance. They were not solid, but designed like twisting golden vines, encrusted with tiny jewels on the leaves and engraved with runes on the stems. They were lovely, but not made for adornment, for they had another purpose. When she touched them, the spells laid upon them tickled her senses.

“It must be done, Hoenir.” She spoke to the sorcerer standing to her left. He stroked his neatly trimmed blond beard and said nothing, wise enough not to argue.

“I have let the men in my family do as they will, and see the impasse we have come to,” Frigga said. “If I do nothing, my son is lost forever.” She tapped both of the bracelets in turn. “One will keep him from slipping further into the darkness. The other is for the instrument of his redemption.”

“Who will wear the other bracelet?” Hoenir asked.

The sorcerer knew better than to ask, as she never shared what she saw of the future, but the salvation of the disgraced second prince of Asgard was important to him too. A slight smile graced the queen’s delicate lips. “The unlikeliest creature imaginable.”
Darcy and the Prince

Chapter Summary

Let's get right to the meet cute, shall we? Loki realizes he may have a problem and Darcy meets a prince who's not exactly charming.

Who's gonna save the world tonight?
Who's gonna bring you back to life?

Swedish House Mafia

Gods supposedly cannot die.
Perhaps sometimes, though, they might wish to.

On his hands and knees on an icy stone floor, Loki, once a Prince of Asgard, pulled in a breath that sounded like a sob. The floor was slick with his own blood and sweat and tears. The manacles on his wrists bit deep into his flesh, blood running down his hands in endless trickles. He suddenly understood what the Other had been talking about.

If you fail... If the tesseract is kept from us, there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevasse where we cannot find you.

Someone grabbed the back of his head, yanking hard, exposing his throat. "You wish to serve me, little princeling? You wish to make up for your mistakes? I serve Death, and there is no emotion in Death, no room for passion or hatred or your childish need for vengeance."

It was impossible. The only thing that kept Loki going was the flaming ball of rage that had once been his heart. To let it go would be his end.

A blade skimmed his throat, almost a lover's caress, before slicing a long line across his chest. Loki made no sound, choking down a cry as blood flowed. The wound was not enough for him to die of, but he briefly wondered how much he could spill before there was nothing left.

You think you know pain? We'll make you long for something as sweet as pain.

His torturer spoke into his ear and he recognized the voice, though he would not put a name to such a loathsome creature. "I will purge you of everything, of every thought, of every emotion but the will to obey me. Perhaps then, I will give you what you want, a crown and a world of your own. When it means nothing to you.

"You will be mine," the creature murmured in an intimate hiss.
“No,” Loki whispered aloud, and if there was desperation in his tone, no one was there to hear. He opened his eyes to find himself in the same spot he’d been for the last five days: a plain white cell in a SHIELD basement somewhere. He was sprawled on the single piece of furniture in the room, a bunk, and he was definitely alone.

Though if the creature had found a way to reach him in his dreams, then Loki was never really isolated. He threw himself from the bunk and started to pace. He could go days, even weeks without sleep. His enemies would not find him so easy to destroy.

A shame he’d been so busy lately and had already gone weeks with little more than brief naps. He had enjoyed his attempt to conquer Midgard. He’d had what the mortals called a blast along the way, sowing chaos and destruction with joyful abandon. He’d even managed to get his idiot older brother to come down from on high and given Thor a few blows he’d not soon forget (Loki had been especially entertained by dropping Thor from 20,000 feet and sincerely hoped he’d landed on his thick, empty head).

Unfortunately, his attempt to secure Midgard and the tesseract had come to naught. Failure indeed. Why was it his fault that the Other’s army of Chitauri warriors could not hold their own against a motley collection of mortals?

The Avengers.

The door of the cell slid open, and his brother walked in, looking grim in full armor. Behind him lined up the rest: Stark, the soldier, Lady Widow, Barton lurking behind dark glasses, even the beast Banner in his man form.

“It is time,” Thor said. They bound Loki’s magic (or so they thought) with manacles designed by Stark, and even thought to gag him. They still feared the silver tongue, and that gave him some satisfaction. It would give him even more satisfaction to escape, but at the moment, his best option was to go back to Asgard with Thor. The creature should not be able to reach him there, and if he was fortunate or very tricky, he might be able to slip the punishment that awaited him.

In the meantime, there was nothing to be done but take the handle of the glass cylinder that held the tesseract, and allow his brother to take him away.

Except where Loki landed was not what he expected at all.

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It was only when Darcy was bored or flustered that she tended to make impulsive decisions. She was perfectly well aware of the character flaw, so sue her. Her grandmother would remind her of it all the time as a child. "Darcy Elizabeth Lewis, slow down. Use your head." Those words had become a bit of a mantra as she grew up. Now that she had completed her college degree and had a full time job, she had expected that statement to pop into her head a little less.

If anything, she heard Gran's voice more.
She was bored. Completely, out of her skull and off her rocker bored. The small town of Puente Antiguo in New Mexico where she lived and worked tended to have that effect. Nothing ever happened. What teens got caught smoking or making out behind the tiny library was news. When Milt Gordner and Three Finger John had a fender bender at the town's single traffic light, that was big news. Even Darcy's practically nonexistent love life was news. She'd gone out with Toby Tucker two weeks ago, decided he was too much of a farmboy to rate another date, but people kept asking. Was she going to give Toby a second chance? If not him, then who else?

Well, almost nothing ever happened. Once upon a time, say a year or so ago, a guy by the name of Thor had fallen into the lap of her boss, Jane Foster. Guys were great, of course, but this one had turned out to be the Norse god of thunder from a place called Asgard. Good times. She'd even got to use her taser on him. Yes, Darcy might have roasted because of his pissed off little brother, but didn't that just add spice? Big happenings tended to spoil a girl.

Since then, nothing. Nada. Zip. She'd started going out looking for excitement. She'd tried snowboarding, skydiving and biker dudes, and Jane accused her of being an adrenaline junkie. Maybe Jane was right, but the next exciting thing that came along, Darcy swore she was going to jump on it and not let go.

Then she met Loki of Asgard, the much-discussed, pissed off brother.

What her grandmother might have said of the menacing six-foot-something disreputable god of mischief who happened to be standing by her desk, Darcy hesitated to imagine. He came complete with manacles, muzzle and a foul attitude that radiated off him like heat from the sun. Gran would have been horrified. Well, maybe not. Darcy's grandmother was purported to have liked bad boys in her youth; her grandfather had been a mafia kingpin who'd been found dead in the trunk of his car on the Jersey shore.

This guy, however, was the president of the Intergalactic Club of Badassery.

Maybe the shiver that had run down her spine and exploded over her entire body when she'd first looked into his stunning green eyes happened because she was hungry. After all, what girl in her right mind would be attracted to the guy who'd just tried to trash her planet?

She'd run over to Izzie's Diner to pick up lunch. The boss lady hadn't been back in New Mexico long, for Jane (astrophysicist) had been called to consult at an observatory in Norway, leaving Darcy to watch over the lab. By Darcy's reckoning, Jane could not have been on the Scandinavian tarmac for more than five minutes when reports started coming in about the attack on New York. Jane was not stupid, and she knew SHIELD wanted her out of the way. There weren't enough SHIELD agents on the planet to stop Jane from returning immediately. Thor was back, and this was where he would expect to find her.

Upon Darcy's return from the diner, she had walked into their car dealership turned astrophysics lab to find they had visitors. Jane was all over Thor, and Darcy couldn't say she blamed her. He had vanished from their lives months ago, taking Jane's heart with him. He'd found a way back to Earth just in time to fight his brother and an army of aliens.

Darcy's gaze had been drawn to the aforementioned brother, who didn't appear to have aliens in tow, at least not right now. He wasn't what she expected. She'd presumed he'd be as blond and brawny as the big man himself. Loki was as tall as Thor, but leaner, and she wouldn't have turned down the opportunity to sink her fingers into his long raven hair. Asgard didn't produce sons that were anything but gorgeous.

"Lady Darcy, how good to see you," Thor said while pushing Loki into a chair. "Brother,
do not move. Darcy, would you keep an eye on Loki while I have a moment with Jane? The shackles do not allow him to use magic or stray far from me, so he shouldn't trouble you."

"Uh, sure," she said with a side glance at the bad boy. There was a little too much chain between his hands for her comfort, allowing him quite a bit of freedom, but who was she to argue? If Loki could have killed her with a glare, she'd be dead on the floor right now. He did have the most amazing eyes, a velvet forest green the likes of which she'd never seen before. Harry Potter eyes. He had magic, too, didn't he? Huh. She wondered what he looked like when he had an expression other than total disdain. She started to shrug out of her owl backpack, then thought better of it. "I should go over to Izzie's and get more food."

"We cannot stay," Thor said. "If he moves, shout."

"Riiiight," Darcy muttered and wondered if she should mark it as a life event in Facebook that Thor turned down food. He and Jane stepped outside, though she could still hear the smack of their lips slamming together. That left her with the madman. Well, no one ever accused Darcy Lewis of being a chicken and lived to tell about it. He sat in the chair in front of her desk, perfectly still except for his eyes. His gaze scoured the room, as if looking for something. A way to escape, probably. She sat down behind her desk, across from him, her backpack poking her. Darcy didn't quite dare take her eyes off him to get it off. Her chair squeaked, and he turned toward her.

Gulp. He really was scary up close, and beautiful, with those eyes and perfect cheekbones and elegant, long-fingered hands (even with the manacles). Actually, the manacles were interesting on him, in a Fifty Shades of Grey sort of way. Darcy decided she could carry on a conversation by herself, since he couldn't speak around the muzzle. "So, you're probably wondering who I am."

Not really, said his derisive gaze.

"I'm Darcy Lewis, Jane's assistant," she continued as if he hadn't said anything, which he hadn't, except for those magnificently expressive eyes. "I guess taking over the planet didn't work out so well, huh?"

He glared daggers at her, and she should be dead again. There was a buzz to baiting the leopard, and Darcy was beginning to enjoy herself. Without Loki, all she'd had to look forward to that afternoon was creating charts of Jane's endless atmospheric data. So thrilling. "Maybe New York wasn't the place for you to start. It's against the religion of New Yorkers to bow down to anybody. I know, I grew up in The City. You should have started here in Puente Antiguo, otherwise known as Middle of Nowhere, New Mexico."

One dark eyebrow rose, and he stared at her as if she'd sprouted tentacles.

"So what happens to you now?" Darcy asked. "Back to Asgard, or wherever you come from? Do they execute villains on your world or come up with some other horrific punishment? Do they send you to Azkaban Prison?"

Loki's eyes narrowed, then shifted away. For a moment, there was something vulnerable there, and she realized he didn't know what fate awaited him. Then his gaze returned to her, and it was full of promises that if he ever got free, he'd come back and crush both her and her world.

That moment, though, tantalized her. For half a second, he'd been laid bare. "I'm sorry I can't offer you some coffee," Darcy found herself saying. "You look like you could use it."

Loki glanced down at her desk, and she followed his gaze. Words formed on a scrap of
paper, as if he'd written it in a fine, elegant hand. It was like Tom Riddle's notebook in The Chamber of Secrets, and she had to bite down on a fangirl squeal. No magic? Thor might want to double check on that.

_Do not presume to mock me further, mortal._

"I'm not," she said, meeting his gaze squarely. "I'd like to get you some coffee. Does that thing come off?"

He nodded to Thor. So big bro could take the muzzle off. She could see Jane and Thor outside in the world's longest lip lock, and Darcy made a decision. She really had slowed down and used her head, hadn't she? She couldn't get any slower than sitting at her desk. He was still shackled, and if she didn't get to hear him speak before Thor whisked him away forever, she'd regret it. "Are you sure? Can I try?"

Loki didn't seem to know what to make of her, but he did allow her to reach across the desk and touch the muzzle. It didn't appear to be attached behind his ears or around the back of his head. For all she knew, it was stuck on his face by magic. An experimental tug only produced a snarl from Loki, like she was hurting him. Then she heard the jingle of shackles and his hand closed over hers, directing her to the end of the muzzle, by his ear.

She felt his touch from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Maybe it was just because he was an alien or a demigod or something. His hand was cool, though not so cool as the scuffed armor beneath her arm as she continued to struggle with the muzzle. Darcy glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, wondering if he felt it too. Apparently not, because he was glaring at her like she was the worst accomplice he'd ever been graced with.

Finally, she figured out the trigger, and it released and slipped from her fingers. Loki caught it before it clattered to the desk. They both looked toward Jane and Thor, neither of whom noticed. The kiss had finally come to an end, but they were still nose to nose, whispering sweet nothings.

"Could you be any more clumsy?" Loki grumbled.

"You're welcome!" Darcy shot back. She'd had to sprawl across the desk to get the muzzle off and was probably giving him a nice view down her shirt. She shimmied backwards and regained both her feet and her dignity. He spoke just the way she thought he would, smooth and aristocratic and arrogant as all hell, with an accent that she was coming to label as Asgardian. "So what do you want in your coffee?" she asked. "Sugar? Milk?"

"I have no idea."

"How have you managed to be on this planet and not figured that out yet? Land of Starbucks and all that."

He glared daggers again. Darcy returned her sweetest smile. With his shackles on, all he had was bark, not bite. "I'll just make it the way I like it, and we'll go from there."

Loki gave her a look that spoke of humoring an idiot, but said no more. She walked over to the lab's kitchenette, swearing he was watching her ass as she did so. Yet when she turned, he was fiddling with his shackles. When she caught his eye, his expression was not quite innocent. Yeah, he'd been watching. Why had she chosen today of all days to wear a form-fitting skirt with its matching jacket and leggings rather than her usual jeans and oversized sweaters?
To hell with that. Darcy was glad. It was good for a girl’s ego to be checked out, even if he was a lunatic. At least he was a fine looking one. She sent Loki a smoldering glance and went on about her business, her heart zipping along. She poured out two cups of coffee, with plenty of milk and just a smattering of sugar. Then she returned to her desk and handed him one.

He accepted it, but said, "Is it poisoned, Miss Lewis?"

Oh, he was just too much. Loki was incapable of opening his mouth without uttering something provocative. That was why they'd put the muzzle on him. Didn't the Norse myths call him silver tongue? She smiled down at him. "Some guys just can't hold their arsenic."

"Hey Darcy!"

Darcy turned toward the open double doors that faced the main street of their little town. There stood a young man about her age with a big smile on his face. His blond hair was carelessly wind blown, and he wore jeans and a gray hoodie. She'd had a couple of poli-sci classes in college with Chase, and he'd been coming around lately. Jane thought she should go out with him. Maybe she would, since he was the ultimate in Hot Nice Guy and polar opposite of Hot Bad Guy, but what wretched timing. She didn't think SHIELD would appreciate the Asgardians being seen, and she hurried to head him off. "Oh, hi Chase. Jane's got guests so I can't really talk right now."

He didn't even try to peer around her, she was so, so grateful for that. He gave her a hopeful smile. "That's okay, I can't stay long anyway. I was just wondering if you wanted to go see that band I was telling you about, The Brainy Starfish? They're playing in Albuquerque on Saturday night."

Anything to get him back out the door. Darcy nodded desperately and grabbed his arm, but before she could guide him out or agree to the outing, another voice intruded.

"Miss Lewis?"

No, no, no. That silky voice of Loki's wrapped around her senses, and she looked back to see him holding out his coffee cup. "Clearly, there's not enough arsenic in here, because I'm still alive and have to listen to your mortal drivel."

"Don't make me sorry I took the muzzle off!" Darcy hissed while dragging Chase to the door. Where the hell were Thor and Jane?

Too late, Chase had seen Loki sitting at her desk. He frowned. "Hey, wait. Isn't that the guy from on the news? The one who tried to take over New York? What's he doing here?"

"You should let him court you," Loki told Darcy. "His grasp of the obvious is exceptional for a human."

"Arsenic is too good for you," Darcy threw back. She pushed Chase toward the door. "Don't mind him. He's just-"

Before she could come anywhere near a plausible explanation for the presence of an alien war criminal at her desk, one of the windows facing the desert exploded inward. Darcy hit the floor, dragging Chase down with her. Broken glass showered over them.

That, at last, brought Thor bounding into the room. He wove through the debris, keeping low until he hunkered down behind Darcy’s desk with his brother. Loki had overturned it at the first sign of trouble. Thor glared at his sibling. "How did you get the gag off?" Sheets of blue energy blasted over their heads, making them both duck. "Never mind," Thor said. "Friends of
As far as Darcy could see, there were three Chitauri skiffs, with nine soldiers to deal with. They were even uglier in person than they were on Fox News. She scrambled for cover behind Jane’s van, suddenly glad they could park the monstrosity right in the lab. Chase followed her.

"They’re after the tesseract and my head, not necessarily in that order," Loki said.

"Stay here," Thor commanded. "I'll deal with this." When Loki held up his shackled hands, Thor shook his head. "No, I won't free you to fight. Get the mortals out of harm’s way. It's a good way to start atoning for your misdeeds."

From his growl, Darcy thought Loki was going to charge Thor and damn the consequences and the Chitauri. Thor didn’t give him the chance. Raising his hammer Mjolnir, he jumped through the broken window and into the midst of the attacking aliens.

Darcy watched as Loki’s gaze swept the lab. He made no move in her direction, not that she really expected him to help. Chase, hunkered down next to her, shouted, "We need to get out of here!"

She took stock of the situation, and could see Jane waving frantically from the dubious safety of Izzie’s Diner across the street. She could also see Loki focus on something just out of her vision. Leaning around the edge of the van, she spotted a cylinder with a blue glowing cube in it. Whatever it was, it must have rolled off a desk and out onto the floor during the explosion. It didn't take a genius to guess that was how the two Asgardians had traveled here, and if it was anything like the Einstein whosawhatsis bridge that Jane was working on, Loki could escape with it.

She should leave this to Thor, but he seemed busy. Hadn't he given her the job of watching over his brother? She'd feel guilty forever if she let him escape. She gave Chase a push toward the street outside and the diner, but when he tried to grab her hand to tow her along to safety, she slipped away.

Thor was knee deep in aliens, and the blue blasts of their energy rifles were focused on him. Darcy slid to the edge of the van. Between her and the cube stretched several feet of empty floor space, with no cover. Then again, His Supreme Naughtiness was further away. His gaze was glued hungrily to the cube, and she didn't dare move.

"Darcy, we’ve got to go!" Chase said.

Loki turned to check his brother's progress, and Darcy threw herself across the open floor. Behind her, Loki swore in what she took to be Norse, and she knew he couldn't be more than three steps behind her. Heart stuttering, she skidded to her knees, scooping up the cylinder and clutching it to her chest. Darcy tried to get her feet under her to run, but Loki seized her, his arms capturing both her and the cylinder. The chain of his manacles and his strength made escape difficult. She fought anyway, kicking and clawing and squirming.

"You impress me, Miss Lewis," Loki said in her ear. "You have spirit, but you cannot stop me."

Darcy had barely a second to wonder if she was being extraordinarily stupid before two blasts of blue energy took chunks out of the concrete in front of her knees. She screamed and found herself scrambling backwards, but that only got her deeper into Loki’s arms. Chase had made his way to the edge of the van, and he was holding out his hand to her. There were more Chitauri
coming in toward the back side of the lab, and Hot Nice Guy was looking like the way to go.

Loki used her distraction to yank one of the cylinder's handles away, and it was all she could do to hang on to the other one. She refused to let go, and found herself being dragged across the floor on her posterior as he headed for the side door. He looked back at her in disbelief, and they stared at each other over the cylinder like they were playing some bizarre game of tug of war. "Last chance to run, Darcy Lewis," he snarled. "Last chance to run back to your tiny mortal life."

Well, when he put it that way, what was the girl addicted to excitement supposed to say? Oh, yes sir, crawling back into my corner now? Not.

If Loki had to drag her along, there was a chance she could alert Thor to his whereabouts. Besides, the god of mischief, the ultimate bad boy, had just as much as called her a chicken.

Hadn't she sworn an oath to jump on the next exciting thing that came along?

Darcy released the tesseract. Loki placed both hands on the cylinder, the cube's blue light giving him a truly villainous look. It didn't stop her. She hopped to her feet and jumped, landing on his back with her arms around his neck, piggy-back style. "You keep underestimating us mortals," Darcy said.

The world around her exploded in light.
**Chapter Summary**

**Welcome to Asgard, Miss Lewis!**

**Chapter Notes**

As you all have probably guessed, I'm not going to follow the events of the Dark World. I loved the movie, but they kill off one certain character, and in my humble opinion, they underused her in both movies. The MCU needs more Frigga. Well, Loki does, anyway.

Still not making any money, no copyright infringement intended, just happy to play on the playground.

_I don’t know where you’re going_  

_But do you got room for one more troubled soul?_  

_I don’t know where I’m going, but I don’t think I’m coming home_  

*Fall Out Boy, Alone Together*

When the light faded, Darcy found herself sprawled on top of Loki, gasping for breath. She couldn't begin to catalogue the experience of traveling by tesseract; she’d been on roller coasters less gut-wrenching. Maybe it was closer to being shot out of a dynamite-loaded cannon like Wile E. Coyote, and the apparent lack of oxygen on the trip kinda sucked. As she watched, tiny blue flames licked her skin, though they did not burn. Soon, they disappeared.

The experience of being on top of Loki, well, that wasn’t bad at all. She rather liked the feel of his strength and what girl didn't like leather and magic? He studied her, green eyes narrowed. It was like being with Harry Potter, if Harry was all grown up and sexy and she could totally have a crush on him -

"Get off me, wench."

Too bad he had that whole supervillain thing going on. Darcy buried her elbow in his ribs and scrambled off, eliciting no more than an irritated grunt. "Asshat," she muttered and slid backwards
across the highly polished black floor, out of reach of his manacled hands. Then her eyes widened as she took in her surroundings.

Definitely not in New Mexico anymore.

High above her on two sets of steps stood a winged golden throne, overlooking the most enormous room she had ever seen. Actually, enormous didn’t seem like the right word. Immense? Gargantuan? Ginormous? She wasn’t even sure that last one was a real word. Pillars that were bigger around than three of her held up ceilings of gold, and everything was covered with carvings and runes that would have been right at home in the Viking age. Further out in the hall, the ceiling opened up to two observation balconies and the bluest sky she had ever seen. Thousands of people could gather here, though it happened to be empty at that moment.

All of this made Darcy feel very small, and very mortal.

This must be Asgard. It really existed, and she had beaten Jane to it. Mental fist pump.

Loki didn’t seem to be impressed. Then again, he’d grown up here and was no doubt used to all this grandeur. A raven sat on one of the wings of the throne and it squawked. Loki glared, and it flew away. He rose to retrieve the cylinder with the tesseract in it. "Give my regards to whoever finds you, Miss Lewis. Tell them they’ll have to find another way to bring my brother home."

"Hey, wait," Darcy said, fearing her voice sounded too close to the squawk the bird had made. Loki was her only connection to home. What Gran or the rest of her family might say about her latest misadventure didn’t bear thinking about, if SHIELD ever told them what had happened to her. "You can’t just leave me here!"

"Can't I?"

“Aren’t you a prince? Aren’t princes supposed to have nice manners?”

Loki changed direction and wrenched her to her feet like she weighed nothing at all. “Aren’t humans supposed to have some sense of self-preservation? Considering how short, delicate and pointless your lives are, not one of you know when to keep your tongues behind your teeth!”

She swallowed, hard, heart stuck in her throat. Damn, but he was tall and menacing and he still had his hand on her arm. Maybe supervillain was all there was to him.

“Loki.”

The voice was that of a woman, the tone a mixture of surprise and relief. Loki turned, and though his cold expression did not change, Darcy thought from the pressing of his lips together that it was all he could do to hang on to his poker face. She followed his gaze to the lady who glided from behind the throne. Never had Darcy thought of another woman as strikingly beautiful, but that was how she would have described this Asgardian. She appeared to be in her prime, yet her warm blue eyes reflected a strength born of centuries. Her blond hair was coiled on top of her head and she wore a gown of gold with precious stones at the collar.

“Mother,” Loki said, and there seemed to be a wealth of suppressed emotion in that one word. So even supervillains had moms, and this must be Frigga, queen of Asgard. Loki released Darcy and she stepped back, aware that she was intruding on a private moment between gods of myth. It wasn’t like she could excuse herself, though, since she wasn’t sure where the nearest ladies room might be.

The queen’s face softened. “My son,” she whispered. Gathering her skirts, she rushed to Loki
and threw her arms around him. “I thought you were dead.”

He stood stiffly in his mother’s embrace, though he didn’t try to escape. Darcy gave him points for not blowing off his own mom and looked away. Far beyond the cavernous room, she could see the skyline of a golden city. She hadn’t really expected longhouses and huts, but the city wasn’t all that different from New York, albeit with futuristic skyscrapers. She was suddenly hit with a wave of homesickness. How weird. She’d lived in New Mexico for more than four years and never once felt a desire to go back, since the only family she wanted to see was Gran and she’d moved to Florida. Maybe it was because Asgard was so much farther away than New Mexico.

The queen turned to her and spoke. “You must be Darcy Lewis. How nice to meet you at last.”

Darcy blinked. “Um, me?” Oh, that was intelligent. She would have facepalmed but for the look Loki gave her, as if he had expected moronic babble from her. She settled for giving him the stink eye.

“Mother,” Loki said, bristling with suspicion, “how do you know this mortal?”

Frigga ignored Loki and bestowed a gracious smile on Darcy. “I do hope you didn’t find the trip too taxing, my dear. Travel between worlds can be so fatiguing.”

“I’m fine, thank you.” See, she could put a few words together, even to the queen of the universe who seemed to know her name. It just showed how weird her life had gotten that she didn’t freak out. She probably should be screaming and running in circles.

“Then we shall talk more anon, but a mother’s work is never done.” Frigga’s voice took on a queenly tone as she focused on her wayward son. “Your timing could not have been more perfect. Your father is in the Odinsleep, your brother is nowhere to be found, and there is a representative of the Chitauri demanding an audience. I am in desperate need of someone to represent Asgard.”

Loki’s mouth fell open. Darcy rather liked him off guard, his eyes wide and his expression boyish. She decided this was another Facebook life event: the silver tongue struck speechless. She pulled her Starkphone from her pocket and snapped a picture.

Loki scowled and snatched at the phone, manacles jingling. “Give me that!”

Darcy gave him her sweetest smile and dodged. “For the next time I get a wifi signal.” She turned to the queen. “You do know what he’s been up to on Earth, right? Really ugly aliens on flying surfboards looking to lay waste to the five boroughs?”

“Indeed,” Frigga said, sounding most displeased. “Why do I suspect you have brought the Chitauri to our doorstep, Loki? Now you may do the right thing and send them away again.”

Loki showed no signs of behaving like a chastised little boy, for he crossed his arms at his chest and glowered, not just at Darcy and his mother, but at the throne, the ravens (there were now two) and the magnificent view. Finally, he said, “You would trust me?”

"I trust that you will do whatever you need to do to protect your home." Frigga drew closer to him, taking his face in her hands. "For this is your home, no matter what."

His impassive poker face didn’t budge, but those expressive eyes gave him away. He wanted to believe his mother. This was the second time Darcy had glimpsed vulnerability, and maybe there really was more to him than Thor’s outrageous brother. Damn, but she wanted to find out.

It was beyond skydiving and biker dudes, wasn’t it? Gran would have a fit.
A noise that sounded like great doors grinding open rolled across the massive floor, and both Loki and the queen looked up. From far off, a voice carried to them. “I demand to see the Allfather!”

A group of Asgardians walked toward them, so well dressed that Darcy took them to be nobility. They were trying to delay several Chitauri.

Frigga touched the manacles on Loki’s wrists, and they fell to the floor. Immediately, she replaced it with something else on his right wrist. To Darcy’s eyes it appeared decorative, a beautifully wrought gold bracelet styled like a climbing vine. By Loki’s revolted expression, he saw it differently. “What is this?” he demanded.

“We shall speak of it later,” Frigga said. She glanced at the knot of nobles and Chitauri growing ever closer. “It does not inhibit your magic, for you may need it. Now, make yourself presentable. The Chitauri do not seem to want to wait any longer.” She motioned to a servant to come forward bearing a golden staff. This servant spared a nervous glance at Loki, but bowing, he handed the staff to the queen. She gave it to Loki with a pleased nod. “Yes, you’ll do.”

Then she faced Darcy with a smile. “So will you, my dear. You are now Lady Darcy of Midgard. Seeing Asgard and Midgard firmly allied might give the Chitauri pause.”

Abruptly Darcy was the one speechless. She was no diplomat or duly designated representative of Earth, just a girl who’d decided to hitch a ride with the wrong guy. She hoped the queen didn’t actually think she had any experience to back up her political science degree. “But I’m not—”

Neither of the Asgardians were listening. Loki studied the staff in his hand as if he wasn’t sure he wholly approved of this development. “They know the Bifrost was destroyed and we can’t move armies between worlds. Why should they care if we remain staunch allies?”

“They were soundly thrashed by Midgard a few days ago,” Frigga said, pushing them both forward, not mentioning (kindly, Darcy thought) that it was also her son’s defeat. “They sent a representative and not an army. Why should they care if we remain staunch allies?”

Darcy tried to speak, and ended up with a strangled groan. Somehow, she’d gone from being Jane Foster’s lab rat and poptart supplier to Loki’s personal illegal alien and representing her entire planet to extraterrestrials who’d tried to stomp it flat only a few days ago. Oh, and they’d had the help of the guy standing next to her. “Oh my God,” she muttered. “What just happened?”

There was a rich chuckle. Loki was laughing at her, and she couldn’t bring herself to look at him, or think too hard about how sexy his laugh was when he wasn’t doing his villain thing.

“Welcome to Asgard, Miss Lewis,” he said.

***

The mortal’s dumbfounded face was worth all the gold in the Nine Realms.

Even though Loki had not caused it through his own mischief, he could still enjoy it. He could have warned Miss Lewis about his mother’s implacable will, but she was well on her way to
He’d promised himself he would never call her that again, for Frigga was no blood kin of his, but the stark relief on her face had smashed his resolve to bits. If her expression had been anything to go by, she had genuinely mourned him. Even after all he’d done, she had embraced him and called him my son. Then she’d gone on to hand him Gungnir, Odin’s staff. That meant the Allfather had not disowned him, or had not thought to. Loki scorned the idea, as the old man missed little and forgot less. Somehow Loki of nowhere and nothing was still Loki of Asgard. Loki Odinson.

Impossible.

He ought to fling the staff away. It was beyond ridiculous, yet here he was as if nothing had changed, as if his ill-fated attempts to wrest the throne from his dearest brother and to rule Midgard had never happened. Asgard was as it had always been, nothing he did mattered. He should be furious. He should take Gungnir and raze the palace of Hlidskjalf to a pile of burning rubble before turning it on the rest of Asgard, then on Midgard and anybody else who caught his eye.

Except that he felt… nothing.

The anger he’d nursed for so long was gone, and what was he without the fury that had sustained him? He shook the bracelet his mother had put on him. It was less a piece of jewelry and more a magical construct, loaded with spells. In some way, she had bound him, though not his magic. What could his mother be up to?

For he had no doubt this was a trap of some kind, though he admitted he couldn’t see how dropping control of Asgard into his lap could be a snare. Right now, though, the Chitauri were here, and he had to deal with his former allies. The Allfather’s counselors had managed to talk them to a standstill in the middle of the throne room, and Loki let them have at it. He shifted his clothing to his formal dress armor, complete with golden helm.

“Um,” said Miss Darcy Lewis, standing next to him, staring straight ahead.

At least he could take comfort in the fact that she’d fallen into Frigga’s trap right alongside him. She was no diplomat, but an impudent girl and lowly assistant to Thor’s wench.

Why in Hel had she refused to let go of the tesseract and of him?

Perhaps she was an agent of SHIELD, and if so, she had to be the worst agent he’d ever met. She appeared to have no self-defense skills, no weapons and she talked far too much for her own good. At least she was far easier on the eyes than Stark or the beast or his hawk. Even Lady Widow’s beauty had an edge to it sharp as a sword. Miss Lewis, on the other hand, was all supple curves, with a tiny waist and softly flaring hips and breasts that would more than fill a man’s hand. She had a body that would tempt any self-respecting Aesir.

Loki jerked his eyes forward, focusing on the progress of the Chitauri instead. The Allfather’s counselors continued to argue, voices raised and hands flapping. If Miss Lewis was not an agent of SHIELD, she was somehow mixed up in his mother’s plans, and that was reason enough to keep his distance.

“So,” she said, “you’re going to do all the talking, right?” Mahogany curls tumbled around her shoulders, and she bit her lower lip as she watched the Chitauri. Her hands twisted nervously, as if
she didn’t know what to do with them if she wasn’t clutching her Starkphone. She had those things mortals called glasses sitting on the bridge of her nose, and he wondered how she functioned if she couldn’t see well.

“I doubt there will be much talking,” Loki said. “They will demand my head, I won’t give it, and there will be war.”

“Wow,” Miss Lewis returned. “You guys are serious about war, aren’t you? I think your mother wanted us to try diplomacy first. Speaking of your mom, why isn’t she out here doing this? She seems capable enough.”

There was no one more capable than Frigga, and he was oddly pleased that this little mortal had noticed. “She is. You will find, however, that Asgard is very much a man’s world. As queen, she may do much in the background, but to represent Asgard in such a matter as this? ‘Tis not done.”

“But I’m—“

A woman? He’d noticed. “You are the only Midgardian in the realm. You are also a – how do you say on your puny planet? – a tattletale.”

“As if I told the queen anything she didn’t already know about your explosive grand tour of greater Manhattan. Your mama probably knows the color of my underwear.”

Loki watched in fascination as color rose in her cheeks and she added, “Forget I said anything about underwear –” She skidded to a halt as she finally turned to him. Her blue eyes widened as she took in his armor.

“You do not approve?” he asked. Not that he cared, but he was curious about what she would say. He couldn’t begin to guess what would come out of her mouth next.

Miss Lewis swallowed visibly. Her eyes followed the curved horns of his helm. “It’s, um, it’s really primal, I guess.” She continued to stare, and finally added, “That helmet of yours should be goofy, but it’s not. Actually, it’s kind of –“ She trailed off again and faced forward, cheeks flaming. “Forget I said anything.”

Whatever she’d meant to say, he’d get it out of her later. “You do not fear me,” he said, amused. “You know you should.”

“Not with your mother standing six feet away.”

“Shall I guess the color of your underthings?”

“What part of forget it did you not understand, Loki?”

No other woman in the Nine Realms would dare speak to him so, and he found it refreshing. He rather liked the sound of his name on her clever tongue.

Four Chitauri elite guardsmen finally pushed the nobles aside. In the center of them was a familiar figure, hooded, in blue armor edged with gold. Loki’s stomach did a somersault and he found himself gripping Gungnir until his knuckles were white. He could almost smell the stench of his own blood from his nightmare, feel the manacles on his wrists. He shook off the feeling. It had been naught but a dream, and the Other was no more than a mouthpiece of the creature.

The Other caught sight of him and pulled up short. "You! Where is Odin Allfather?"
Loki inclined his head as Miss Lewis inched closer, though she didn’t try to hide behind him. “The Allfather has more pressing matters to attend to. I see your master has not come himself but sent a lackey.”

"I see the Allfather has sent his traitorous second son. Interesting."

Loki scowled. “What do you want?” As if he didn’t already know. He glanced up to see the nobles who had hindered the Other standing off to his right, every single one of them giving him a stare of death. Apparently his reputation had not improved in his absence.

The Other drew himself up and directed the Chitauri guardsmen around him to stay in place, though they looked primed for a fight. "My Lord demands what is rightfully his. He insists you hand over the tesseract."

"Our deal was Midgard for the tesseract." Loki made a great show of studying Odin's staff. He should be cackling with joy to have it in his hand again. Why was he so blasted empty? "I don't appear to be ruling Midgard, do I? You and your vaunted army, routed by a group of unruly humans."

“They were not the cowering wretches we were promised, Liesmith. Promised by you!”

Loki made a point of learning from his mistakes, and he had learned the hard way that the mortals were no longer helpless primitives. Speaking of mortals, Miss Lewis had her mouth open to object, and he seized her hand and squeezed hard. "I was so impressed by the earthlings," Loki said smoothly, "that I returned to the bosom of my family and insisted that we cement our alliance with Midgard. May I present Lady Darcy, their representative?" He brought her hand to his lips, hoping she would play along and not actually be a cowering wretch.

Miss Lewis gave him a filthy look, and then turned it on the Other. “I hope you’ll understand if I don’t curtsey.”

The alien seemed to stare at them both, though it was impossible to tell since his eyes were covered. “I would not trust him if I were you, milady. Midgard would be better served negotiating with us. At least we keep our bargains.”

“Oh, I don’t trust Loki,” Miss Lewis assured him airily. “Considering it was your army that did most of the damage to New York and that you were fools enough to entrust him with an army in the first place, I trust you even less. I would like to think,” she added with a twinkle directed at Loki, “that he’s seen the error of his ways.”

Wench indeed, and he’d repay her at some point. She had the sharpest tongue he’d come across in a while, and he was going to get some much needed amusement out of this chit before he sent her back to Midgard.

"One way or another, My Lord will get what he desires," the Other said. “I have come to offer a new bargain. In exchange for the tesseract, we will leave Asgard and Midgard in peace. Perhaps we will even leave you your head.”

“How kind.” It was too good to be true, and Loki was suspicious. “For how long?”

“For as long as both of your realms stay out of our way.”

Loki thought about accepting. After all, what did he care if the creature wanted the rest of the Nine for himself? Yggdrasil could save itself or let itself burn as it saw fit. His mother had been right, the Other coming to negotiate was telling; if he had to guess, he would suspect they didn’t
want to take on Asgard right now.

Yet it wouldn’t last. Once the creature had command of the armies of conquered worlds, he would turn them on the Realm Eternal, bargain or no bargain. It could be centuries from now or three weeks from now. Either way, Thanos, the creature, the Mad Titan, was coming.

There, he’d thought the creature’s name and survived, though it made him nauseous. Really, there was only one choice if he wanted to live and if he had any hope of ever ruling Asgard on a permanent basis.

He had to save it first.

Meanwhile, Miss Lewis had forgotten her insistence that he do all the talking. “Earth doesn’t bargain with terrorists,” she said to the Other.

“What does Asgard say?”

Loki shrugged and knew his first order of business was to misdirect and play for time. "I don't have the tesseract.” It wasn’t a complete lie, since he didn’t have it in his hands at that very moment. It was somewhere behind him—

His heart dropped to his boots, and he cursed the women in his life for being such distractions. Then he cursed Stark, Banner and Selvig, whoever had designed the tesseract’s pretty glass cylinder that rolled so damned easily. Finally he cursed himself, for he was certain the cylinder was just where he’d left it, sideways against the throne after a hard landing. It was only sheer dumb luck that the Other had not seen it.

"You used it to get here! We sensed it."

"The humans used it to send us here,” Loki said. It would serve both Nick Fury and Thor right if they had more Chitauri all over them. As for the tesseract, casting an illusion over the cube might react with its energy and attract the Other. All he could do was leave it to the Norns, and those ladies had not treated him well lately.

Somehow, Miss Lewis’s hand was still in his, and it was her turn to squeeze to get his attention. Then she walked around him, putting herself between the Other and the tesseract, though her boots hid it poorly. She studied the alien, and shivered, though she stood her ground. Loki didn't blame her, and it gave him an idea. "Chilly, milady?” He gave her no chance to reply, just conjured up a green cloak and slipped it around her shoulders. As the voluminous fabric settled around her, the tesseract disappeared from view. She cast him a slight smile.

The Other sneered. "Such gallantry. Enjoy it until he turns on you, milady, for he certainly will. If neither of you have the tesseract or are willing to give it up, then we have no more to negotiate. We will find the cube ourselves. You think you are both safe here in Asgard, but once My Lord has the tesseract, there will be no stopping him.” He paused, then he leaned forward to speak directly to Loki. “You already know there is no place to hide. What belongs to My Lord Thanos will always belong to him. There is no escape.”

The nightmare manacles were back, holding his wrists high above his head as he struggled. The creature approached, hands full of shining cutting instruments, wanting to rip into Loki’s chest, and he couldn’t, wouldn’t allow it…

He shook off the vision as the Other stalked away, his Chitauri at his heels, though Loki found himself checking his wrists. They were unmarked, and he made a fist. Back when he’d accepted
the scepter and made his deal with Thanos, this was not how he’d expected it all to turn out. Well, was he not the master of making something out of nothing?

Darcy Lewis stuck out her tongue at the Other’s retreating back, and gave him a brilliant grin. "He’s not as smart as he thinks he is, is he?"

Loki forced himself to return her smile. “Not nearly as smart as I am, at any rate.”
Fury's Fury

Chapter Summary

Thor's got some 'splaining to do and Loki's got some hiding to do, leaving Jane, Darcy and Frigga to pick up the pieces.

Chapter Notes

Hey all, sorry it's been so long between updates! The holidays came and wrestled me to the ground. My family gifted me with a Loki bobblehead, and he's ever so cute and says yes to everything.

I have great hopes for quicker updates now. Enjoy!

Just a quick warning, a wee bit of torture in the middle of the chapter. I'm really not a fan of Loki whump, but the story seems to need it. You have to admit, he needs a spanking. ;) (Here's me, volunteering!!)

As usual, I love you Marvel, please don't sue me.

Maybe you'll get what you wanted

Maybe you'll stumble upon it

Everything you ever wanted

In a permanent state

Coldplay, White Shadows

Jane Foster was a woman of science, and she liked her data and her life in order. Order, unfortunately, hadn’t happened to her in so long she might not recognize it if it showed up and bitchslapped her.

Stone-faced agents of SHIELD arrived within an hour of Loki’s escape and swarmed the lab. They brought along a pair of scientists that couldn’t have been more than Darcy’s age. As they unpacked their equipment, Jane surveyed the wreckage of her lab while leaning against the one surviving desk. Thor sat next to her, looking as grim as she felt, Mjolnir on the floor near his boots. This was not how she had envisioned their reunion. She’d always had something more romantic in mind, that he’d return and whisk her away to a palace on a cloud. The least he could have done was show up with flowers instead of his deranged brother.
Now the deranged brother had made off with her assistant, or had it been the other way around? Either way, she hoped the younger woman’s epic adrenaline rush from this adventure didn’t get her killed. “Darcy, what have you done?” Jane asked aloud.

Thor grunted at her words as the scientists sent three small flying drones to scan the floor. “I never meant—” he started, then stopped. “Why would Darcy do such a thing? Was she trying to stop him?”

Jane shrugged. How to explain Darcy’s behavior lately? “She’s always been impulsive. She tasered you, after all.”

“So she did,” Thor agreed, and Jane swore she saw a hint of a smile.

“Will she be alright?”

“Not that long ago, I would have said she was perfectly safe with my brother. Now I do not know.” Thor paused and took her hand in his. “Worry not, Jane. My mother will see to Darcy’s safety.”

His tone was meant to reassure, but Jane wasn’t fooled. He was worried. Jane and Darcy had started off as boss and intern, but there were certain things people couldn’t go through together without becoming friends, like gods falling from the sky and fire breathing robots. She should have done more to get Darcy out of the lab and away from Loki. Knowing her assistant as she did, she should have never left them alone in the first place.

Kneeling on the floor, the woman scientist studied her tablet and poked her colleague. “Look at this, Fitz,” she said in a crisp British accent. “The readings are consistent with what Dr. Selvig reported in New York. He must have used the tesseract right here to create an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Can you imagine? Interstellar travel in the blink of an eye – “

Jane tuned them out. Yes, a wormhole had happened right in her lab and she should be over the moon excited, except that her assistant was gone. Science, she decided, should not be more important than the life of Darcy Lewis.

Two hours in, a jet landed, helicopter-style, in the desert behind the lab. Thor went to meet it, and Jane followed. There was no way she was going to let him face this alone. Three people disembarked, the first being a tall man in black with an eye patch. “Thor,” he began without preamble, “what the hell happened? I thought you were going straight to Asgard!”

Jane put her hand on Thor’s arm and squeezed. His expression was both miserable and forbidding. “My brother used a Chitauri attack to cover his escape,” he said. “My friends, I have no excuse —”

Jane jumped in. “This is my fault. I may have, um, distracted him at the wrong moment.”

“Dr. Foster, I presume?” The second man to step off the jet held out his hand and shook hers firmly. “Tony Stark. Nice to meet you. I read up on the work you’ve been doing on the way over.” He gave Thor a friendly punch in the arm. “I can see why you were distracted!”

Tony Stark was apparently everything she’d read about him, but before Jane could form a tart reply, the eyepatch guy spoke. “Just tell me what happened.”

Eyepatch turned out to be SHIELD Director Nick Fury. Jane wished Darcy was there, because they’d have had a good laugh about the director’s name being Fury, since his one eye looked ready to pop out in, well, fury. He wasn’t pleased as Thor told his story, though what could he say? Thor
was foreign royalty and an Avenger (not to mention a mythological god). Meanwhile, the third person off the jet was an attractive redhead in a black uniform, and she moved off to investigate the debris.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jane saw the male scientist elbow his counterpart. “It’s Agent Romanoff,” Fitz said in a thick Scottish accent. The two scientists stared at the woman in awe before she gave them a pointed look and they scrambled back to work.

"So where did Reindeer Games go when he used the Tesseract?" Stark asked.

"Asgard," Thor said with confidence. "He didn’t have the opportunity to manipulate the cube, although he shouldn't have been able to use it at all without magic."

Stark squawked when Fury’s eye fell on him. "Hey, don't blame this on me. As far as I could tell, the magic-suppressing manacles worked. I warned you he could be playing possum."

“They will be ready to intercept him in Asgard," Thor said.

From behind them, the redheaded agent spoke, the one Fitz had referred to as Romanoff. She knelt by Darcy's overturned desk and had Loki’s muzzle in her hand. "I thought he couldn't get this off."

Jane spoke as they all gathered around. "Darcy probably did it."

Thor frowned thunderously, as only he could do. "Why would she do this? Loki could not have talked her into it. He couldn't talk at all!"

A scrap of paper caught Jane’s eye and she picked it up. "This isn't her handwriting." It was too perfect, too beautifully rounded cursive to be Darcy's chicken scratch.

_Do not think to mock me further, mortal._

The words only made sense if Loki had written them, and it certainly wasn't any way to convince Darcy to help him. She handed it to Thor.

His frown deepened, and he dropped the Post-It as if he had been burned. "This is not truly his writing either. It is a spell. He did have some magic."

Tony Stark, meanwhile, was poking at a Chitauri body with his toe. "I thought we got rid of all these when I took out the mothership."

"That was only one hive. There are others," Thor said, and drew Jane aside. "Jane, I cannot believe that Darcy would attempt to free my brother."

"I don't either, but she's been acting a little strange since the Destroyer came. I wouldn't put it past her to try and bait your brother. He would have to be able to talk for that, right?"

"How about coffee?" Agent Romanoff said from the floor.

Jane and Thor looked down. She held up two coffee mugs for their inspection. Jane facepalmed and groaned. "Oh, Darcy..."

Tony Stark joined them, mug in hand, having poured himself coffee while no one was paying attention. "So she's given Loki a caffeine buzz, and in the throes of said buzz, he decides to take her with him. Why?"
"According to Chase, she jumped on Loki," Jane said with a look back at the college student. He was being interrogated by two agents, poor guy. He'd probably just come by to ask Darcy out. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and leave it to Darcy to pick Mr. Wrong.
"Well, I want my assistant back. What do we have to do?"

"Without the tesseract or the Bifrost, I am stranded here," Thor said mournfully.

Perhaps there was something she could still do for Darcy. "Then," Jane announced, "we have to build our own Bifrost."

There were stunned faces all around.

"Is that even possible?" Romanoff asked.

"I knew I was supporting your research for a reason," Fury said.

“If it is possible,” Stark said, “I want in on it.” Then he took another sip. “We need her back. She makes a really good cup of joe.”

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“You think you are safe here, little princeling,” the Other whispered, the reptilian slither of his voice shooting dread down Loki’s spine. “Are you really? Do you think any of your fellow Aesir will bestir themselves to help you? What do you think they would do if they found out what you really are?”

Loki struggled, but he was shackled to one of the enormous pillars in the throne room. His arms were stretched painfully around its girth, his cheek and chest pressed hard against the unyielding stone. The Other had taken great pleasure in stripping him of armor, weapons, surcoat and tunic. No one objected, or said anything at all, not Odin or Thor or Mother. He hadn’t expected anything of Sif and the Warriors Three, they had always been Thor’s friends first. He was disappointed Miss Lewis didn’t speak, since she seemed like the most soft-hearted and by far the most talkative of the assembly. They all simply stood there together, watching, their faces set in the same condemning expression.

The Other spoke again. “You think I can’t reach you in Asgard? You think your master cannot reach you?”

“I have no master.”

Wrong answer, apparently. A lash cut across his back, and Loki bit down on a cry of pain. Be damned if he would give the Other that satisfaction.

“My Lord Thanos is your master,” the Other said, each word punctuated by the whip. It sounded like leather, but it felt ten times worse, the exquisite agony of a thousand daggers dancing across his skin.

“Why suffer so?” the Other asked. “End this. Tell me where the tesseract is.”

Loki looked at his mother. Hadn’t she just embraced him, called him my son? The lash snaked across his back again, and he clawed the stone until his fingers bled, refusing to scream. No,
Frigga would not stand for this.

“Loki?”

He opened his eyes to find her kneeling in front of him. The tesseract cylinder lay at his feet, the throne room empty of all but himself, Frigga and Miss Lewis. He remembered sitting down on the steps of the throne and putting his head in his hands. Had he fallen asleep?

His enemies could reach him in his dreams, even in Asgard.

Frigga studied him with an intensity he didn’t like, as if she could see what was going on in his head. “Are you alright?” she asked. “You look exhausted.”

“I am fine,” Loki lied to the best of his considerable ability. He stood and picked up the tesseract. “I must secure this in the vault.”

When he tried to brush past her, Frigga stopped him with a hand on his sleeve. “You are not fine.”

She might not be his birth mother, but she had raised him and knew him only too well. Loki glanced in the direction the Other and his Chitauri had taken and squeezed her hand. “I do not have the luxury of being anything but fine.”

Loki took the tesseract down into the depths of the palace, to Odin's treasure vault. Here the most sacred relics of Asgard were kept in a stone strong room and guarded carefully. Some belonged to the Aesir, others had been taken from their enemies during wars long past. There were four guards posted at the doors, Odin's elite Einherjar. They jumped to attention, and though he could feel their tension, they did not attempt to stop him or even dare to look sideways at him. Interesting. The doors still opened at his command. Another circumstance the Allfather had forgotten to remedy?

Loki didn't like it. His hands tightened on the tesseract cylinder. Somehow it was all left to him to save or destroy as he saw fit.

So tempting, to let Odin Allfather wake to a pile of smoking rubble.

Inside the vault, he strode down the stairs. There were footsteps behind him, and he didn’t look back. He should have left Miss Lewis with his mother.

The Einherjar commander approached and brought his fist to his chest. "My Lord, we have done as you commanded."

At the far end of the vault, four servants lugged a stone pedestal into place next to the Casket of Ancient Winters. "Very good,” Loki said. "Has the Allfather fashioned a new Destroyer?"

The commander's face worked, as if choosing his words carefully. Well and good for him, and Loki wondered how much of what proceeded his abrupt departure from Asgard was known. Although it had been Thor who destroyed the monstrous metal protector of the vault, he had done so because Loki had sent it to kill him. The commander settled for a simple, "Yes, My Lord."

"I want the guard inside and outside the armory doubled. No one comes in here without my express permission."

The commander saluted again, though his eyes shifted to the mortal woman who trailed after his prince. "I'll see to her,” Loki said.
The commander hurried off. The servants finished putting the pedestal into place, and they were shown out of the strong room by the guards. Loki set the cylinder on top of the plinth. Then he opened it and used magic to pull out the tesseract without touching it. Leaving the cube floating in mid-air above his right shoulder, he created an illusion and placed it in the cylinder, adding extra charms as he did so. If perchance the Other or his master managed to break into the vault, they would get a nasty surprise or two or six.

Miss Lewis stood nearby, watching. "What now?"

"I find a better hiding place for the tesseract.” His mind was full of possibilities, but how was he to stop the creature from plucking it right out of his brain like a ripe apple? Thanos already seemed to have too much access to his thoughts.

“You owe me big, Harry Potter,” Miss Lewis said. She cocked her head as she studied the golden glove that occupied an alcove to her left. “If not for me, that creepy Other might have realized the glowy cube was right under his nose.”

"I cannot send you home using the tesseract, if that is what you wish. To use it will alert them to its whereabouts. For now, I’d like them to think it’s on Midgard.”

"Thor and his superbuds will like that, I’m sure.” Gathering the green cloak around herself, she wandered off to browse among the other relics. "I'm not ready to go home yet anyway.”

Loki followed, the tesseract bobbing along. Perhaps he should ask his mother to hide it. He dismissed that thought a moment later; he would not endanger Frigga so.

Miss Lewis stopped to gape at the Warlock’s Eye, and Loki said, “You do not have enough to report back to Nick Fury yet, I should imagine.”

She glanced back at him, her blue eyes guileless. "Who's Nick Fury?"

"Master of spies.”

"You think I work for SHIELD? Lousy IPod thieves," Miss Lewis said, making a face. "I do, but I’m just Jane's assistant. I fetch coffee, make Poptarts, find lost papers, plug data into endless spreadsheets. SHIELD won’t let me do more, but they don’t dare let me loose on the world either. I know too much.” She cocked her head, still studying the Eye. Pulling out her Starkphone, she took a picture of it. “This thing is freaky. It’s like the Eye of Sauron, except it's not big or on fire.” She took two steps to the right, then to the left. "I swear it's watching me.”

"Of course it is," he returned absently, wondering if it was even possible to have a conversation with her that he completely understood or if he should stop her from taking pictures. Was there anyone he trusted to hide the tesseract for him? One name surfaced, and Loki dismissed it too. Thor would have brain lock if Loki started behaving like they were brothers again, and the golden prince might just give it to his SHIELD friends. For Thanos, it would be like that mortal saying: taking candy from a baby.

Miss Lewis gave the eye one last wary peek, and once again, Loki found himself draggling along in her wake. "Who is Harry Potter?"

"Wait, you spent how long on my planet and you don't know who Harry Potter is?” She whirled and snapped her fingers. "That's it! That's my purpose here. I am going to teach you to appreciate all the wonders of my people."
As if mortals had wonders. "You must work for Fury, because you're as mad as Stark and the rest of them. There is nothing on your backward world that is worth my time." He gave her a leer. "Unless you'd care to kneel."

"Yeah, I heard that was your thing. I watch the news." She had reached the stairs and climbed up two steps to face him. Now they were eye to eye. "Here's the thing, Magic Man. If I do kneel, it'll be totally because I want to, and then you're going to have to admit there are things we post-feminist Earth girls do very well."

Loki reminded himself she was a mortal and a distraction, but this acid-tongued wench intrigued him. No Aesir lady would acknowledge his sexual innuendo, much less claim to do it well. "Are you offering a demonstration of your expertise?"

Miss Lewis flushed, but her chin rose and she said, "You've got to earn my expertise."

Loki knew he could force her, easily enough, but that had never been to his taste. He preferred a willing woman, and by the time he was done, she'd be more than willing. "I like a challenge."

Her eyes widened, and unless he was much mistaken, she was no dewy innocent with a big mouth. Then she scowled. "Hold it, Silver Tongue. You're trying to distract me. Let's get back to the original discussion, shall we? I think you're afraid there are things you might actually like about my world."

"Prove it to me." Inspiration struck, and he knew the perfect place to hide the tesseract. Loki captured her upper arm in a tight grip and pulled her closer. "Show me what wonders your world has to offer."

***

Darcy knew she should have run. She should have run from him way back at the lab. She was no chicken, though, and Loki was faster, stronger and magical anyway. A sparkling warmth flooded her and she gasped as the world spun away.

She stood in a forest. It was no strange, otherworldly place, but full of oaks and pines and the familiar smell of damp vegetation. She could be in any state forest on the East Coast, except for the castle looming in the distance. Darcy discovered a wand in her hand. "The hell?"

It got weirder from there. Loki stood to her left, and though he was still Loki, he was all wrong. He wore jeans, sneakers and a flannel shirt, distinctive round glasses and sported enough bruises and scratches to have just gone back through the battle of New York. He had a magic wand, too, and held it up for inspection. "Ah," Loki said. "Harry Potter, boy wizard. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Darcy just stared at him. He'd claimed three minutes ago not to know who Harry was. "Is this the Forbidden Forest? Why are we here?"

"Looking for a place to hide the tesseract."

"This place doesn't exist." Darcy couldn't help but speak in a hushed voice. There was a silence that hung over the forest, like the quiet before a snowfall, or perhaps before the Battle of Hogwarts. She'd heard from Thor that Loki was adept at illusion, but this was far beyond what
she’d imagined. “In other circumstances, I might enjoy this.”

Loki cast her a smirk as he started walking toward the castle. “Why not now?”

She’d never seen him in anything but Asgardian armor, and she rather liked him in jeans. Still, she didn’t like the implications of what he was doing. “Because I think you’re taking an uninvited walk through my brain case.”

“All in the name of saving the world,” he assured her cheerfully. “Not willing to make a small sacrifice for your precious Earth?”

Yes, he was damn nice to look at. He was also an asshole of epic proportions. “How about you explain what’s going on here?”

He stopped at the edge of the forest and turned to her. “’Tis the perfect hiding place, an illusion that exists outside normal reality, but it exists enough to hide the tesseract in. Though my magic created it, it is your fantasy, your vision. Only together can we gain access to this place. Even if the Other and his master discover where the tesseract is from me, they can do nothing without you.”

Darcy stepped back. This sounded like an extraordinarily bad idea, for her anyway. “But—“

“When we are done here, I will send you back to Midgard through one of my secret ways. Then I suggest you vanish among the seven billion of your closest friends.” He leaned closer. “Because if they find you, they will tear you apart to get the answers they seek.”

Darcy shuddered. His eyes were cold, and she could see he was deadly serious. “Why me?”

“You are here.”

Great. She’d underestimated his supervillain again, and yet, he was trying to do something good, wasn’t he? In a dumb ass sort of way. “Will it keep the tesseract safe?”

“It must.” Loki closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, she thought she saw desperation. He was between a rock and a hard place and he knew it. If he failed, she suspected he was toast, and for some reason it bothered her. Didn’t he deserve everything coming his way on the great big lazy susan of karma?

“Then let’s do this,” Darcy said. “You could’ve asked first though.”

“Apologies,” Loki said, not even attempting to sound sincere, though he was looking at her differently. Maybe a hint of respect? Probably just her imagination. He thought mortals were no more than cattle, made to be ruled. She’d show him if it was the last thing she did.

Loki looked at the castle with a critical eye. “There are hiding places within Hogwarts, especially the Chamber of Secrets or the Room of Requirement, but let’s see what else you have.”

The world around her switched again, and Darcy found herself in a thick jungle, the air hot and soupy enough that she broke a sweat immediately. In front of them an ancient stone temple sprawled, covered with vines. She scowled. “Oh, come on. Really?”

Loki stood next to her in leather jacket and brown fedora, bullwhip at his hip. He was grinning wickedly. “Dr. Indiana Jones, intrepid archeologist. What’s not to like about this? We’ll replace the golden idol within the temple and let the deadly traps protect the tesseract.”
Her dad had introduced her to Indiana Jones, and it was one of her few precious memories of him. She didn’t want to share this with Loki, so she tried to think of something else.

The world changed again. This time it was blue skies, blue water and a great wooden ship with black sails. It was Loki’s turn to grimace and look down at himself. “What is this?”

He made one fine pirate, but then, his normal mode of dress wasn’t too far off anyway. Loki wore a black coat and breeches, frothy white shirt and eight tons of weapons, including a sword and a brace of pistols. He took the tricorne hat off his head, scowled at it and chucked it over his shoulder. It bounced harmlessly off the tesseract and landed in the sand. Apparently it was not on par with his usual headgear. “Did I do this?” Darcy asked, admiring her own rich burgundy gown.

“You did.”

Her heart leapt. She’d spent her entire childhood wanting to be Hermione Granger. “Does this mean I have magic?”

“No,” Loki growled back. “You are simply strong willed.”

So much for childhood dreams. “I hate you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. So. Captain Jack Sparrow, pirate. You propose to bury the tesseract on a deserted island?”

“What, not good enough?”

“Try again, Miss Lewis.”

So she did. This time they stood on a ledge on the side of a steep mountain. Behind them opened a stone tunnel, and in front was a flat plain with no other mountains in sight. “The Lonely Mountain,” he said.

“Once the dwarf kingdom of Erebor.” Darcy looked down at herself and smiled. No clunky dwarf clothes, but a shimmering white gown like Galadriel, while Loki was rocking the Elrond look. “Oh, I have such good taste.”

He rolled his eyes, but said, “I hate dwarves.”

If there was any truth to myth, she could understand that. She headed into the tunnel, and he followed. “So you’re getting this from my mind, right?”

“If you’re asking if I’ve made a tour of mortal entertainment, the answer is no. This is all you, Miss Lewis.” He touched the stone of the tunnel. “This one is not as clear a fantasy as the others.”

“The others are movies. This one is a book, so this is what I imagine Erebor looks like. It’s getting made into a movie.” Would she ever get to see it? Loki had threatened to send her home, after saying he couldn’t send her home, and she didn’t know if she could trust anything he said. Somewhere in his long life, he’d earned the title of god of mischief and lies. Darcy put her finger to her lips. “We have to be quiet.”

“Why?”

“Because of what lies below.”

She didn’t explain further, only led the way down through endless tunnels. It was a warren of
dark passageways, yet it was her fantasy, and Darcy didn’t question her sense of direction. At first, they passed living quarters, libraries, vast dining halls. As they went deeper, it became kitchens and laundries and then forges and quarries and mysterious dark shafts. Finally, the tunnels ended in a stone hall so vast she couldn’t see the other end. Decorated pillars held up vaulted ceilings and the room was filled to unimaginable heights with gold and jewels, too much to count. Even Loki seemed impressed. “By the beard of Odin,” he muttered.

Darcy pointed to one of the highest piles. “Can you put the tesseract up there?”

The cube abandoned its spot over Loki’s shoulder and floated gently up to settle on an enormous pile of gold, and its blue light illuminated the jewels around it. “Great Smaug,” Darcy said, “This treasure is yours. Keep it safe. Let’s go,” she said to Loki.

She headed upward. Behind her, she could hear a great shifting of treasure, the coins sliding in great waves, tinkling against one another by the thousands. Something snorted, and a hot wind filled the tunnel.

Loki had not followed, but flattened himself against the wall of the tunnel and gaped into the hall. Then he hurried after her. “A dragon? I am impressed.”

Darcy blinked, and they were standing in Odin’s treasure vault again. Loki’s hand was on her hip, holding her against him, and her hands were splayed on his chest. She found herself trembling under his intense gaze. If there was ever a moment to run, this was it, yet she was unable to move. She wondered if he was weaving a spell around her, and she forced herself to remember who and what he was. Liar. Killer. Supervillain.

“‘Tis a shame I have to send you back to Midgard,” he said.

“Let me go,” Darcy insisted.

“Is that what you really want?”

She didn’t answer, and by the smile playing on his lips, he thought he knew what she would say. Bastard. Darcy pushed against his chest and he released her.

The guard commander came to the top of the stairs and cleared his throat. “The queen requests your presence.”
Chapter Summary

In which Darcy proves her worthiness, Loki starts a brawl and Frigga levels the playing field.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Sorry not sorry about bringing a taser into this. Couldn't help myself.
As always, no copyright infringement intended.

So you wanna play with magic

Boy, you should know what you’re falling for

Baby, do you dare to do this?

Cause I’m coming at you like a dark horse

Katy Perry, Dark Horse

Darcy thought that when making important decisions, Asgardians would be dignified and behave themselves and follow something like Robert’s Rules of Order.

How wrong she was.

She followed Loki to a large chamber, but then, every room here seemed bigger than her entire apartment. There must be a broom closet somewhere with the same miniscule square footage. An argument was in progress, and a sudden and deafening silence fell when Loki walked in. Queen Frigga stood at the head of an enormous table, and several nobles gathered around it. Darcy recognized Lady Sif and the Warriors Three. The warrior woman ignored her in favor of glaring at Loki, though both Volstagg and Fandral gave her smiles (and Fandral, that hopeless flirt, winked). Hogun maintained his usual inscrutable face. One woman stood further down the table, along with two men, one clearly a warrior, the other a nobleman in black. With his shoulder length blond hair and beard, Darcy was reminded of Theoden of Rohan.

It really was like being in the middle of the Lord of the Rings. So, so cool. She was tempted to whip out her phone and take some selfies with these amazing beings.

Loki stopped, and Darcy almost walked into his back. He studied all the Asgardians at the table with grim satisfaction. “This is more of what I expected. What’s it to be, then? Venom and
entrails or sewing my lips shut? Perhaps off with my head?”

He said it with an easy casualness, as if he wasn’t really talking about his own life. Maybe he didn’t believe they’d kill him, or maybe he didn’t care. His expression was somewhere between poker face and fake politeness, though his eyes were hard and angry. If he could have set fire to the room with that look, it’d be like Chicago Fire.

“You deserve all of that and more,” Sif retorted. “You betrayed Thor. You betrayed all of us. Where is Thor?”

“Lady Sif,” Loki purred in greeting, strolling up to the table. “My brother is much too occupied with his lady on Midgard to come back with me.”

A dagger with a golden hilt buried itself in the tabletop in front of him. Loki snatched it up and sent it back where it came from with a flick of his wrist. It landed in the wall behind Sif. “Was it something I said?” he asked sweetly.

“Cursed spawn of a dwarf—!” Sif launched herself across the table at him, hands curled into claws, reaching for his throat. Fandral and Volstagg dragged her back while Loki watched in amusement.

Frigga’s voice cut through the fuss. “Lady Sif, calm yourself. I have not called you all here to discuss Loki’s punishment. This is a council of war.”

“A war of his making,” Sif hissed, then she seemed to recall who she was speaking to. She bowed her head. “Forgive me, my queen.”

As Frigga inclined her head, Darcy decided it was safe enough to come out from behind Loki. There were plenty of deadly weapons in the room, but no one actually had one in hand. When Darcy took a closer look at the table, she realized it was a map of Asgard. She leaned in, seeing vast mountain ranges, lakes and seas, large cities and tiny villages. It reminded her of the map she once had of Middle Earth in her dorm, and she wished she could read the place names.

Was it wrong of her, not to be longing for home? Maybe she just hadn’t been here long enough. Darcy brushed her fingers over the runes on the map.

“The name of the town is Skógar,” Loki whispered in her ear. “Literally, it means forests, and it is surrounded by the darkest wood you’ll ever encounter. Not very original, I’m afraid.”

She glanced over her shoulder at him, to be met by the most guileless green eyes she’d ever seen. There should have been a halo over his head. If she was not mistaken, he was trying to flirt with her, right under the nose of his mother and the power players of Asgard. He obviously wanted to pick up right where they’d left off in the armory. “You’re not getting anything else out of me,” Darcy hissed back in an undertone. “You’ve already used me to hide your precious tesseract. What more do you want?”

“You underestimate your charms, Miss Lewis.”

“Charms, ha.” At least he had the good sense to have this conversation with her and not her boobs, like most guys. Perhaps she was giving him too much credit and not enough opportunity, since she was whispering to him over her shoulder. “I thought you were sending me home.”

He turned his back to the rest of the table and leaned against it, a move that stunned her with its supreme indifference to the proceedings. He was also giving Sif a mighty easy target. With a smirk, he retorted, “I thought you weren’t ready to go home.”
“Who are you, girl?” Down the table, a woman with long, almost white blond hair and a gown of silver spotted her. This Asgardian looked hardly more than a girl herself, and Darcy was reminded of a Vestal Virgin. Wrong pantheon, though. Her eyes were a piercing ice blue, and they seemed to delve straight into Darcy’s soul. She resisted the urge to go back into hiding behind Loki.

The woman turned her remarkable eyes on the prince. “You have compounded your foolishness by bringing a mortal here?”

“Lady Idunn,” he said, his gaze still on Darcy, “you know I have always done exactly as I please.”

Darcy was sure that comment was meant for her, but Idunn sniffed. If Darcy recalled Norse mythology correctly, she was the keeper of the magic apples of immortality. If Asgardians were immortal, what did they need magic apples for? She was tempted to raise her hand and ask. Then, at least, she could avoid Loki’s intense regard.

“I saw that, you wretched boy!”

“Loki,” Frigga reproved. “Do not antagonize everyone at the table.” Like all mothers, she must have sensed trouble in the air, for she pulled Darcy to her side. “Let me present Lady Darcy, a representative of Midgard. She is here as my guest.”

“Hi,” Darcy said while inwardly cringing. So Frigga was going to continue to pass her off as some kind of ambassador. She wasn’t about to repay the queen for her kindness by behaving like a drooling idiot (she suspected ordinary mortals who dared to visit Asgard got sent home by express train, or express bifrost), but before she could come up with something intelligent to say, Idunn spoke again.

“A representative of Midgard? Is that what we’re calling it? We were more plain spoken in the old days, we would have just called her Loki’s—“

“Hey!” Darcy wasn’t about to be called a tramp, not even by a goddess, and she hoped Loki would remember he couldn’t get the tesseract back without her if Idunn took offense. The Asgardian woman might look seventeen, but she talked like an old crone. Gran had far better manners. “Do we call you a ho when you come to our planet?”

“Hoe?” Volstagg repeated, confused. “A garden tool?”

Fandral, who must have caught on to the context of her words, whispered urgently in the big guy’s ear. Volstagg had the grace to blush before he went fishing in his voluminous red beard and plucked out a grape. He ate it. Darcy wondered what else he had in there.

Loki was enjoying the controversy, practically bouncing in glee. Idunn glared in his direction and Sif looked like she very much wanted to launch herself across the table again. Just as things were about devolve into anarchy, Frigga once again intervened. “Lady Darcy and Loki are here to share what information they can about the recent Chitauri attack on Midgard.”

The big warrior dude who stood near the queen had a battle axe in his hand and he ran his finger along its deadly length. He was covered in armor and scars and bristling with other weapons. “Asgard needs no help fighting its battles, not from mortals or traitors. Especially
traitors. Execution is in order, my queen."

"Think of that all by yourself, Tyr?" Loki shot back.

The bearded man who reminded Darcy of Theoden of Rohan spoke up. "I, for one, would like to hear Loki's side of the story, and what the lady of Midgard has to say."

"Who is to say he'll tell you the truth?" Sif returned. "Somehow he is back and Thor is not."

"It doesn't matter what I say, does it?" demanded Loki. "It has always been the way of this court to take even a fire giant's word over mine."

Silence fell, though it was a hostile one, and Darcy felt she should say something. "Look, I get that you all are mad at Loki. After what happened on Earth, so am I." She shot Loki a significant look, and he returned it with one elegantly raised eyebrow, daring her to tell him off. She refused to let him fluster her and continued. "But I've seen what the Chitauri can do, and I was standing there when he talked to the Other. That guy means business. He's not going to let anything stop him from taking the tesseract and laying waste to the universe, not even the might of Asgard."

"Lady Darcy is right. Our most pressing concern is the threat to our home," Frigga said. "I remind you all that Loki's punishment is up to the Allfather and must be put off until he wakes. Have no doubt there will be punishment." She also cast Loki a pointed glance. Hers seemed steeped in sadness, and he looked away.

"My queen," Sif said with both hands gripping the table’s edge. "With all due respect, I have no faith in Loki or his words. Why should we trust him now?"

"Perhaps some kind of guarantee of good behavior on Loki's part would go a long way toward easing tension," Fandral suggested.

Frigga did not answer at first, but took time to study everyone at the table. Finally, she held out a gold bracelet, identical to the one she'd put on Loki earlier. "Perhaps this will satisfy all of you. Hoenir?"

It was the nobleman in black who answered. "I have spelled two bracelets together so Loki cannot stray."

So Hoenir had more in common with Albus Dumbledore or Gandalf the Grey than the king of Rohan. The sorcerer caught Darcy staring, and inclined his head to her. Blushing, she returned his smile.

"What?" Loki tugged on the gold bracelet already locked around his wrist, but it didn’t come free, despite its delicate appearance. "I need no keeper."

"Do you not?" Idunn asked. "We all know you can slip between worlds. Who knows where you may go or what creatures you may make deals with while our backs are turned?"

"It does not hinder your magic in any way," Hoenir added. "I feel I should warn you, though, that the further you go from the original bracelet, the more pain it will inflict. It can kill you. Also, if the bearer of the original dies, you will die. You cannot harm whoever holds the other bracelet."

He didn’t look happy, which Darcy found interesting. Just about everyone else in the room would enjoy inflicting a little pain on Loki. Speaking of the prince, his poker face was back in place, but his expressive eyes were ablaze and Darcy had no doubt he was at his most dangerous
when trapped. "How far can I go?" Loki spat.

"The length of the palace, no further."

The dark prince of Asgard scowled, crossing his arms at his chest. "I will break the spell."

A slight smile crinkled the corners of Hoenir’s mouth. "You may certainly try. I expect nothing less from my best student."

So Hoenir taught magic. Darcy wondered if he took mortal students and wanted to put her hand up again, but Loki spoke.

"Who is to be my keeper?"

"The bracelet will decide who is worthy," Frigga said. She threw it on the table.

It skidded across the surface like a solid gold hockey puck and slid from person to person, though it never fell off the table. No one recoiled when it came near, though both Sif and Idunn looked like they wanted to. Boucing merrily from person to person, it didn’t stop.

Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy saw Loki drop his arms to his sides and make an odd movement with his hand. As if he was a Jedi—

He was no Jedi, but he was a hell of a sorcerer and she realized he wanted the other bracelet. If he possessed both he’d probably be able to break the spells or at least wander as he pleased. She wouldn’t put it past him to leave Asgard altogether; hadn’t that been his plan in the first place? She opened her mouth to warn, but Sif must have seen it too. The warrior woman finally got her chance to hurl herself across the table, knocking Loki down. The Warriors Three were right behind her and they dogpiled the prince.

"Should we stop them?" Darcy asked no one in particular when she realized they weren't just trying to stop Loki. Fists were flying. They were going to have a serious brawl.

Frigga looked unruffled. Guardsmen stationed at the doors ran forward, but she waved them back. "Let them have it out. They’ll all feel much better for it, even Loki."

Well, if the queen wasn't bothered by it, why should she? This woman had raised both Thor and Loki and must have nerves of vibranium, like Captain America’s shield. Darcy decided to follow her example.

There was a whole lot of yelling and punching and reeling around. Loki must have been giving as good as he got, for Volstagg rolled to a stop at Darcy’s feet with a groan, rubbing his chin. "Blasted sorcerer,” he muttered. Then he got up and dove back into the chaos. Loki had managed to get to his knees, fist pulled back to deliver a punishing blow to either Fandral or Hogun, but Volstagg landed on top of him, squashing him back to the gleaming wood floor.

The bracelet continued to bounce around, and once the table cleared, it jumped to the floor of its own volition. It spun and twirled around and through the combatants.

A young noblewoman slipped into the room. Her eyes widened, but she came to whisper in the queen’s ear, and Darcy took her to be a handmaiden. Meanwhile, the big warrior Tyr walked over to the fight, swinging his axe in a way that was a shade too casual for Darcy’s taste. He watched, then raised the weapon.

He wasn’t trying to scare them into stopping. He was going for somebody’s head while Frigga
wasn’t looking, and Darcy knew whose he wanted. Without thought, she unlimbered her backpack and pushed her taser. “Stop!”

Tyr gave her a malignant smile that was just as good as saying she was a stupid mortal nothing. Asshole. She pulled the trigger. She wasn’t entirely sure it would work, but this was her SHIELD issue taser, supposedly able to take down the Hulk. She wondered if they’d actually tested it, and how anyone managed to survive such a thing.

After that, it all happened in unfortunate slow motion. Loki had managed to cast a spell that had Sif and the Warriors Three squirming on the floor, unable to get up. He rose with a victorious grin, only to freeze as he realized he was in Darcy’s line of fire. A sneer started to form, no doubt to cast aspersions on her puny mortal weapon, until the nodes of her taser struck him in the chest, just below the collar. For a second, nothing happened. Then his eyes rolled back and he dropped like the proverbial sack of potatoes.

Tyr’s axe swung, parting the air where Loki’s head had been.

“Tyr!” Frigga exclaimed in queenly fury. “Get out, and do not come back until you can offer me a reasonable explanation for trying to kill my son.”

The warrior retreated, but didn’t look a bit sorry.

Darcy dropped to her knees next to Loki. “You idiot, what were you thinking?” she demanded, unsure whether she was talking to herself or him. Either way, he didn’t respond. He had a steady pulse, but he was out cold. Her taser worked on Asgardians. Maybe SHIELD did know what it was talking about.

Around her, there was a moment of disbelieving silence, then everyone started talking at once. The spell holding Sif, Volstagg, Fandral and Hogun down must have broken, for they gathered around the unconscious prince. Sif stared at Darcy with dawning respect. Hoenir knelt across from Darcy and ran his hand above Loki’s face. "He's alive. How long will the paralysis last?"

"A couple of hours. Maybe. You guys are really strong." Darcy turned to the queen. "He'll be okay, really. Thor woke up with all his marbles. At least I think so. I didn't know him all that well before I tasered him." She realized she was babbling, and a little dizzy. What in hell had she just done?

She’d saved his life. Somehow she doubted he was going to see it that way.

Darcy sat back, and realized the gold bracelet had finally come to a stop, right at the toes of her boots. She stared at it. Out of everyone in the room, she was worthy to be Loki’s keeper? The silence was even more deafening than when they’d first walked in. Darcy cautiously reached out to pick up the bracelet. It fit her wrist perfectly, as if made for her.

Frigga smiled, though it was quickly hidden. She straightened to her most regal stance. “I believe the meeting is adjourned.”

"Frigga, you have run mad," Idunn said. “She’s mortal, she’ll be at Loki’s mercy.”

“The bracelet chose and that is that,” the queen returned. Idunn stomped out.

Hoenir still knelt by Darcy, and he had an enormous grin on his face. He seized her hand and brought it to his lips. “Thank you, milady, for a most entertaining evening.”
Frigga took Darcy in hand. "Come along, my dear, we'll find you quarters so you may rest after all this excitement."

Darcy followed blankly. Before she left the room, she watched as the Warriors Three attempted to get Loki up off the floor. Hogun and Fandral helped Volstagg throw the unconscious prince over his shoulder and off they went.

Gran’s voice echoed in her head. "Darcy girl, you didn’t think that through."

Um, nope. They'd had that conversation many times, in the aftermath of bad dates, bad relationships and even the one time she'd gotten herself thrown out of Walmart. Today, she'd topped it all. She'd tasered the god of mischief, and even though she had meant it for Tyr, Loki was going to be pissed when he woke up. Retribution was coming her way, and she touched the gold bracelet on her wrist. He couldn't kill her, but with an imagination like his, she shuddered to think what he might do.

Idunn was right, she’d be at Loki’s mercy. After seeing the news reports from New York, she wasn’t sure he had any.

The queen led Darcy away from the war room, down endless corridors covered in gold. Enormous paintings hung on the walls, some portraits, but most of scenes of battle. In certain places there were statues. Massive windows held glimpses of the golden city, and she realized it was night. "Thank you," Frigga said quietly.

"For what?"

"For saving the life of my son. In so doing, you proved yourself worthy of the bracelet."

Darcy felt like a complete bonehead. She wasn't entirely sure what she'd proved beyond being trigger happy. "You wanted me to have the bracelet?"

The queen smiled. "I think Loki would benefit from a mortal woman's viewpoint."

"He’s not going to let me forget my mortality."

"Nor should you let him. We of Asgard live long, but we are very resistant to change. Mortals, on the other hand, accomplish much in no time at all, and are unafraid to change. I admire your people for that. If Loki cannot change his thinking, I fear for him." She paused, then asked, "Thor is with his Jane?"

Jane was surely overjoyed and had already forgotten Darcy’s existence. She'd comfort Thor while SHIELD gave him a piece of its mind over Loki's escape. "He is."

"I am pleased." Frigga's voice dropped. "I feel I should apologize for Loki. I know he has caused a great deal of pain and suffering on your world."

Frigga certainly loved him, far more than he deserved. If Darcy decided to go off and try to rule the world, what would her own mother do? Pretend Darcy wasn’t her flesh and blood, for starters. "No, you shouldn't. He's got his big boy pants on and can take responsibility for his actions."
"Perhaps, but how can he take responsibility for what others have done to bring us all to this point?" She did not explain further. "It is good that you are here. You seem to have an interesting effect on Loki."

She had an effect on Loki, all right, and it certainly wasn’t anything you talked about with a guy’s mom. Darcy didn't know what to say.

"Do not question how you came to be here. You are in Asgard now, and I'm certain there’s a purpose to it." Before Darcy could respond, Queen Frigga stopped before a gilded wooden door. "These are your quarters. I have assigned two maids to you. They will see to your every need."

“What if I need protection?”

“From Loki? Yes, he’ll be furious, but he got precisely what he deserved.” Frigga’s lips twitched into a smile. “Worry not, my dear. The bracelet will keep you safe.”

Darcy looked down at the delicate thing on her wrist with its leaves and vines and tiny, exquisite jewels and wished she could believe that.
Jewelry and Sorcery

Chapter Summary

Darcy's not done with the taser yet, and Loki discovers that the line for his head is getting longer.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Thanks to all of you who are reading and following and leaving comments. It means so much to me!

As usual, no copyright infringement intended, just playing in the greatest sandbox ever.

Funny you're the broken one

But I'm the only one who needed saving

'Cause when you never see the light

It's hard to know which one of us is caving

Rihanna (feat. Mikky Ekko), Stay

Loki crawled close to consciousness, but couldn't get his eyes to open or anything else to function. He could have sworn, though, that he was being carried somewhere. In fact, he suspected he was slung over someone's shoulder like game taken in a hunt. Conversation happening nearby confirmed his hunch.

"He's no lightweight," someone grunted. Volstagg, and he should talk. If Loki was not mistaken, the big fellow had gotten bigger in the time he'd been gone. Of everyone in Asgard, he had to be hauled around by Thor's cronies?

"If we just toss him off the end of the Rainbow Bridge, no one would complain."

That would be Fandral. There were ladies aplenty throughout the Nine who had been loved and left by the dashing warrior. They wouldn't mind seeing him off the end of the bridge, and Loki knew who they all were. It paid to know those details.
"'Tis too easy." A woman's voice this time, harsh with anger. The Lady Sif. Loki hadn’t endeared himself to her today, or in centuries, come to think of it. "He's done it before and survived. The Allfather will have a much better punishment for him. In the meantime, Lady Darcy will keep him in line." Her voice dropped to a tone of awe. "She must be a great Midgardian warrior to have brought Loki low so quickly."

He would have burst out laughing if he could. The little mortal was nothing, an assistant to Thor's strumpet. He couldn’t send her back to Earth now, but perhaps that was for the best. She should be here, under his watchful eye, lest she stumble into the clutches of Thanos through her own foolishness.

First though, Miss Darcy Lewis had to be relieved of her taser.

Volstagg dumped Loki onto something soft, presumably a bed. No one said anything, but he didn’t hear them leave. The back of his neck pricked as if they were staring down at him.

Finally, Volstagg spoke. "I do not want to be anywhere near him when he wakes."

"Indeed," said Fandral, and the sound of his voice moved towards the door. "If the Lady Darcy survives the night, then I'll have to agree that she is a mighty warrior."

"If she does not?" Hogun wondered.

"Then the Queen will have to find someone else to mind her precious traitor prince. I suggest," Fandral added, "that we be nowhere in sight come the morrow."

The door slammed shut behind them.

Darcy Lewis had the bracelet? He must have misheard, for giving it to a mortal would be no punishment at all. He simply wasn’t that fortunate.

***

In her teenage years, Darcy had once been on a time travel romance kick. She’d spent most of one summer hiding out in Central Park from her mom and sister and she’d devoured the books. Life in medieval England or Scotland or wherever had to be better, no matter how primitive the plumbing. After a while, there were certain clichés she’d come to expect. The modern lady would be embarrassed at having maids cater to her every whim and would end up doing for herself, no matter how ridiculous the gown or the situation.

Oh to the hell no, that wouldn’t be Darcy, especially if the god of mischief was going to come and strangle her later, or at least make her life miserable. She was going to enjoy a little pampering first.

As promised, there were two maids. Jofrid was a very friendly strawberry blond that looked to be Darcy’s age, though the Asgardian woman must have had centuries on her. Brunhilde was older, a bit motherly, with blond hair in a neat bun and bright blue eyes. They both curtseyed, and Brunhilde spoke. “Welcome, milady. What may we do for you?”

Darcy mournfully remembered the caesar salad and broccoli cheese soup from Izzie’s Diner
that she’d never gotten to eat. It seemed like a lifetime ago. It seemed even longer since she’d
taken her morning shower in Jane’s tiny camper. SHIELD funding they might have, but the secret
government agency could be tightfisted when it came to salary. “I’m starving, but I’d really like a
shower first.”

The maids exchanged puzzled glances.

“Bath?” Darcy asked.

“Of course.” With a glance from Brunhilde, the younger maid disappeared into another room.
“Jofrid will draw you a bath. I shall have the guards locate your trunks.”

“Yeah, no luggage,” Darcy said sheepishly. “I kind of came in a hurry.”

Brunhilde’s expression softened, like she thought Darcy was some sort of intergalactic refugee.
“No need to worry, milady. I’ll speak to Her Majesty about a new wardrobe for you.”

It was another of those time travel clichés, and she hadn’t given this one much thought. Frigga
had been very kind, and this seemed like pushing her kindness too far. “Oh, no—“

“You arrived with Prince Loki, did you not?” Jofrid asked, coming back into the room with
something white and silky draped over her arm. “Men do not always think about what’s important
to a lady.”

How about that? Politically correct existed here too. “Loki doesn’t think about anything but
Loki,” Darcy agreed with a smile. “I think we’re all going to get along just fine.”

Once properly bathed and fed and dressed in the most magnificent white nightgown and robe in
existence, Darcy dismissed the maids and explored her opulent new digs. It wasn’t one room but
several. The main room contained built-in chairs and couches around a blazing firepit. She’d
already checked out the tub in the bathing room, and it was big enough to hold a decent orgy. A
mirrored dressing area stood off to the side, with closet space enough for even a serious
shopaholic. The best room by far, though, was the bedroom. It held a bed as round and luxurious as
a cloud, piled high with pillows and cozy furs, and she promised herself she was going to get more
use out of it than sleeping. How hard could it be to find some nice and good looking Asgardian guy
before she left? It had been way too long since she’d been laid, her last date with farm boy Toby
Tucker and his fumblings notwithstanding.

Immediately, Loki popped into her head.

Her next thought was of Gran, who mentally shook her head.

“No,” Darcy said to herself. What about Fandral or even Hogun? Loki fell into the category of
good looking Asgardian guy, but definitely not into the nice category. Then again, since when had
she aspired to nice? Nice guys tended to be unimaginative in the sack, and as far as she could tell,
Loki had centuries of experience and plenty of imagination. Sextimes with him would in no way,
shape or form be classified as a fumble.

Oh, who was she kidding? He would have his vengeance for the taser before the night was
over, and she doubted it would involve him putting her through the mattress.

“See, Gran?” she said outloud. “I stopped and gave this horrible idea all the thought it
deserved. Now I am going to find the Asgardian version of bleach and wash out my brain.”
It was well into the night when Loki became physically functional again. With a groan, he stumbled up off the bed and had to sit back down. The room spun around him, and when it stopped, he simply stared. He had been carted to his old rooms, with its familiar green and gold.

All was the same, as if he’d never left.

He sat on his enormous bed with its golden dragon headboard and piles of furs, a firepit to his left. When he was able to stand, he wandered through the dressing room, the sitting room and into his personal library. The shelves sagged under the weight of hundreds of books, and there were even stacks on the floor he’d meant to get to. Scribbled notes covered his desk and Loki picked up a page. It was his thoughts on constructing a spell for Asgard’s soldiers to communicate over long distances, something so mundane he almost laughed aloud. He’d written this before Thor’s banishment. *Before Jotenheim.*

Had he ever really been the earnest prince who had once sat at this desk, wanting so desperately to prove himself to his father?

Foolish, stupid boy. It had been a hopeless quest from the start, and he hadn’t even been smart enough to realize. Loki swept up all the papers and threw them into the firepit. They blazed brightly before being consumed.

It was all the same, no matter what he did. Try to conquer a world? Never mind, dear, your room is still here waiting for you. Your place is still waiting, too, the one in the shadow of your golden brother. Nothing he ever did changed anything. Nothing he did mattered in Asgard.

Perhaps it would matter if he left them all to die under the heel of Thanos.

He wouldn’t do it, for Frigga’s sake if nothing else, but the idea continued to be tempting. He suspected his mother of trying to force him into the role of hero (that was Thor’s job, not his), but letting Asgard fall did nothing for his own ambitions. The throne still called to him, and Thanos could have it over his dead body.

At the moment, he could do nothing about the creature, but he could do something about Darcy Lewis. Then he would find out who had really ended up with the other bracelet.

Guards stood outside his door, and whether they were there to keep him in or to keep out someone who might want to slit his throat, he didn’t care. They were Odin’s vaunted Einherjar warriors, and they weren't even aware when he used magic to create a copy of himself sprawled on the bed and slipped away.

The suite of rooms devoted to one Darcy Lewis was just down the hall. Interesting she wasn’t closer to his mother, for that was where ladies without chaperones usually ended up. No guards were posted, but the door was locked, not that it was a difficulty. A quick charm and he was inside.

Loki wasted no time in casting another spell. This one stopped movement in the entire suite, and it included lurking mortals. Miss Lewis wouldn’t know anything was awry until she missed that charming little blowgun of hers in the morning.

A lamp burned on the bedside table, though the flame didn’t flicker, nor did the fire in the pit. There was a lump under the furs on the bed he took to be Miss Lewis, though all he could see was a
few dark locks of hair. So where would she keep her diabolical toy? Slipping around the room, he found her bag. Emptying the contents, he discovered a lot of useless mortal junk. Her Starkphone fell into his hand and he tossed it aside. No 4G in Asgard (he wasn’t a complete dolt when it came to Midgard. One could not conquer a place one knew nothing about, after all). There was a similar piece of technology, but it had wires sticking out, and he pocketed it for further investigation. No taser though. Then he came across a cylindrical tube. Fiddling with it, he determined that it was the color mortal women applied to their lips. This, he had a use for.

Going over to the blank wall next to her bed, he drew a picture of his horned helmet with the lipstick. Then he stood back to study his handiwork with a smirk. Now there was no doubt who had made off with her taser.

A flick of his wrist, and he sent tendrils of magic throughout the room. A soft glow gathered right above the girl's head. Of course, she had the weapon under her pillow. If he had more time, he could think of more rewarding ways to coax her into handing it over, but studying the bracelet was a priority. Kneeling down, he slid his hand into the bedclothes.

Promptly, Loki found himself nose to nose with Darcy’s taser.

Her blue eyes peered at him over the edge of the furs, her finger wiggling suggestively on the trigger. “Well, if it isn’t the Dark Lord of the Sith,” she said with a great deal of satisfaction. “I knew you’d be stopping by for a visit.”

Somehow, Miss Lewis was awake and impervious to his spell. Mortal, awake, impervious. Those three words should not be strung together in one sentence. He found himself sputtering. “What… how?”

She shook the gold bracelet. “Did you know this thing tingles when you get close?”

So he had not misheard Fandral, and she had the other accursed bracelet. Loki stared, and then he started to laugh.

“It can’t be that funny,” she said testily.

“Oh, but it is,” Loki returned with a grin as he straightened, looming over her. He couldn’t have come up with a better solution if he tried. His keeper was female and mortal, and he didn’t doubt his ability to use her exactly as he willed. “Usually my good mother is more subtle. You, Miss Lewis, are to be a lesson in why I should not crush mortals. Give me the weapon.”

“Yeah, how about no? Everybody around here is armed, and I’m not giving up my taser.” Climbing to her knees, she gave him a victory grin and tapped him under the chin with it. “Better luck next time, though. Hey, did you stop time?”

What a maddening creature she was, in so many ways. She wore a nightgown that covered her from neck to toes and did nothing to hide her lush curves. Really, with all the trouble he was in, he was contemplating the fastest way to get to those curves? He did not need this distraction. “No, only movement, and you should be as immobile as everything else in this room.” Loki grabbed her left wrist and held it up so he could better study the bracelet. He could see the layers of charms, all interwoven in such a way that it would take him hours to sort out exactly what his former teacher had done. “Ah, Hoenir, you old whoreson. May your hammer be limp the next time you use it.”

Miss Lewis wrinkled her nose. “There’s a mental picture I didn’t need. Does this mean your magic doesn’t work on me?” When he didn’t reply, she added with a blinding smile, “I’ll take that for a yes. I guess if you want something from me, you’ll just have to ask nice and use your natural
charm. If you have any.”

“I should watch my tongue, if I were you,” he said conversationally, tracing her lips with his eyes. She had a full, kissable mouth, when she wasn’t employing it to spout stinging commentary or nonsense. With his grip on her wrist, he could feel her pulse pounding under his fingertips. He turned her hand over and kissed her wrist, right over her skittering pulse. “If you think I am out of tricks, Miss Lewis, you are sadly mistaken.”

Her eyes widened, and she pulled her hand away, but she lowered the taser. “I’m not dumb enough to think you’re ever out of tricks. It wasn’t meant for you,” she added. “The taser, I mean.”

“Who then? Volstagg the Mighty? If yon taser is to be used on a man’s most vulnerable spot, you’d have had to aim for his stomach. On Fandral, you’d have to aim even lower.”

“Don’t be a pig,” Darcy said. “Tyr tried to take your head off with his giant Axe of Overcompensation.”

He had to work his way through her Midgardisms to get her point. “Now who’s piggish? I wonder why, I haven’t done anything to him. Not lately, anyway.” Tyr had the sense of humor of a bilgesnipe and a long memory, though. In centuries past, he had not been immune to Loki’s pranks. “Does he still have his own head?”

“Yeah, but if I understood your mom correctly, he no longer has a job.”

Tyr commanded Asgard’s armies, a point of pride with him. Taking that away was a start, but Loki would consider his vengeance carefully. “I suppose you think I am in your debt again. How shall I repay, Miss Lewis?”

Her cheeks flushed and he had his answer. She was his for the taking, whenever he wanted. Perhaps he should bed her and get her out of his head.

She hurried into speech, avoiding his eyes. “Call me Darcy. Miss Lewis is my crazy aunt who lives with sixteen cats and an enormous collection of garden gnomes.”

Loki could not imagine why or how someone would collect garden gnomes, troublemakers that they were. When he’d been naughty as a child, Frigga had made him clear parts of Hlidskjalf’s enormous gardens of the devils. As for calling her Darcy, he would not. The only familiarity he was going to encourage would be under the furs.

“Um, Loki?” she asked. “Is that part of your motion spell?”

He whirled as an icy chill shot down his spine. Frost crawled across the floor from the balcony, cracking and crunching, and it could only mean one thing. One of his own people was nearby. A Frost Giant in Asgard.

It seemed the line for his head was getting longer.
Basic Hexes for the Busy and the Vexed

Chapter Summary

Loki learns not to cross the streams and Darcy uses Harry Potter to bridge gaps.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Thanks for your patience! My latest update has been slow in coming, but it’s my longest chapter yet and I hope you enjoy it.

Saw Captain America: The Winter Soldier over the weekend (twice!!). So awesome, but for the moment, all the changes that happened in the movie won’t affect this story. Maybe later though? Only time will tell.

As always, no copyright infringement intended. Curse you, it’s your fault, Marvel, because these characters inhabit my head just a little too much.

And I just got broken

Broken into two

Still I call it magic

When I’m next to you

Magic, Coldplay

A Frost Giant climbed over the railing of the balcony into Darcy’s room. As two more followed, the first slammed his fist against the stones. A wave of ice rose and rushed at Loki.

They’d sent three giants to kill him and he’d only been in Asgard a few hours. Cheers to their spies, then, he was honored by all the attention.

No, not really.

Loki spun, scooped up Darcy —Miss Lewis— and tossed her toward the door. “Run!” He didn’t wait to see if she obeyed, but faced the oncoming wave. He cast a magical shield in front of himself, expecting a flurry of deadly ice daggers, but the wave stayed low and washed over his boots. Then it froze, climbing upward. He threw a warming charm at it. It was not one of his better spells, since producing heat went against his nature, but he had used it on occasion (adventuring
with Thor, who was perfectly capable of starting his own damn camp fire). The ice stopped below his knees, but the charm did nothing to melt what was already there.

Damnation, he was frozen to the floor. There was only one explanation for this stupidity: they wanted him alive.

The ice around his boots crackled as it began to form a pattern. It grew around his ankles like a crystalline vine, sprouting frost-bound leaves covered in runes. He used another charm to shatter the ice, and nothing happened. It was as if the air had been sucked out of the room or out of his lungs and he realized what they’d done.

They’d blocked his magic. They really wanted him alive.

The three giants approached carefully. The bedroom was large, but they seemed to fill the space, stooping as their heads bumped the ceiling. One hurled ice into the firebowl in the corner, putting out the flames, and the temperature in the room plummeted.

“Why aren’t you running, princeling?” the lead giant asked with a laugh.

“Did you run after you killed Laufey?” another demanded. “He was my kinsman.”

That made this giant a kinsman of Loki as well, not that he would mention it. “Why should I have run?” Loki demanded haughtily. If they were looking for a sniveling coward, they weren’t getting it from him. “His death was well deserved and I hope he’s enjoying his time in Hel.”

Laufey’s kinsman launched himself forward, but before he got his hands around Loki’s throat, there was a taser hovering over Loki’s left shoulder. Miss Lewis fired, and the nodes attached themselves to the charging giant. He halted in his tracks, shuddered, and his eyes rolled back. He dropped like Volstagg on the fourth day of a three day feast.

“Is that what I looked like?” Loki drew a dagger for each hand and tried to shift his feet, but he was stuck. The giants shifted, spreading out, but they stayed beyond his reach. “So undignified. Did I not tell you to run?”

“I didn’t see you running,” she said matter-of-factly, standing on the bed behind him. “Besides, they froze the door shut.”

“Since you’re still here, you could see about the ice around my boots.” One of the giants swiped at him, and Loki parried with both daggers. The giant retreated with bared teeth.

“With what?”

He handed her one of his daggers. Now he was down to one, since that was as many as he’d been able to lift from passing soldiers. For someone who had as many people after him as Loki did, he was woefully lacking in weaponry. He had hidden Gungnir in a space between realms, but without magic, he couldn’t get to the staff. “Give me the taser.”

“It needs to be reloaded, so it’s useless,” Miss Lewis said. “You can handle them, right?”

One dagger and no magic against two giants and he was unable to move. “Do I have a choice?”

“Nope!” She dove to the floor behind him and started chipping at the ice with the hilt of the dagger.

“Destroy the vines,” Loki told her.
“What? Oh.” Darcy – Miss Lewis! – adjusted her glasses, and hit the ice with all her might. Not even a crack. She hit it again. Nothing.

This might take more time than he had.

The two Frost Giants tested the limits of his reach by swinging ice daggers at him, then stepping back. One got too close and he slashed at the creature’s chest. He drew bright blue blood that froze as soon as it hit the floor and the giant howled, but he didn’t seem to be crippled. The two giants exchanged a look, and charged together. Loki buried his dagger into the chest of one, but the other grabbed him by the back of the neck. He scrambled for some vestige of magic as his own Frost Giant nature began to manifest. Cold roared through him, and he realized there was one magic he could access. “Close your eyes!” he shouted to Darcy.

“Wait, I think I’ve got it—”

It all happened at once. Loki gathered what Frost Giant power he possessed and threw it back at the giant who held him. Darcy brought the hilt of the dagger down on the ice vines and smashed the spell. His Asgard magic came back in a rush and combined with sorcery of Jotenheim to explode in a white-hot flash of light.

Loki blinked and found himself sprawled on the floor, up against the bed. He sat up and held his hands before his face. No blue. Darcy lay next to him, and she slowly raised her head. “Are you alright?” he asked.

She seemed to take stock, and then nodded. “What the hell just happened?”

“An excellent question.” He crawled over to the giant who’d had a hold of him. The creature was dead, as were the other two, even the one Darcy had tasered. If they were dead from the nasty backlash of combining magic, why wasn’t Darcy? The only answer he could come up with was the bracelet. Both types of magic had been his, and the bracelet was designed to protect her from him.

He should be dead too, but he just wasn’t that lucky.

So his mortal was impervious to his magic, and he should be furious. At the moment, though, he was too drained to care. He rose and brushed himself off, then reached down to help her up.

“So, who are these guys?” she asked.

“Frost Giants, from Jotenheim. They aren’t fond of me.”

“I guessed that.” She wrinkled her nose. “Is there anyone who isn’t after you?”

“Do you want a list of my enemies?”

“Betcha it’s a long one,” she said brightly.

Loki snorted. By the Nine, she had pluck. Hundreds of melting ice crystals glittered in her hair, and if he decided to taste of her pouty lips, he wondered what she would do. Would she run, as she should, or would she return his kiss?

He was beginning to suspect she didn’t run from anything, not even him.

The door broke in from the outside, and a half dozen Einherjar poured into the room. They came to a halt and stared at the wreckage. Darcy frowned at them. “I hope you guys are the cleanup crew, because you’re way too late to save us.”
The second council of war only involved three people, and in Loki’s considered opinion, it went rather better than the first. At least there was no brawling or tasering.

Loki stood at the head of the map table, a place reserved for the Allfather or his queen. Frigga stood to his right. She had quietly ceded the spot to him and he couldn’t quite make up his mind about it or anything else she had done over the past few hours. Was she such a trusting fool? She had as much as dropped the kingdom into his lap.

If there was one thing he was certain of, though, his mother was no fool.

“It’s a shame there are no giants left alive to question,” Fandral, the third member of the council, said. Frigga had chosen the swordsman to replace Tyr and head up Asgard’s army. Fandral would not have been Loki’s choice, but it could have been worse; at least he knew the warrior well enough to predict his actions.

“I expected the Jotun Miss Lewis tasered to survive,” Loki said.

“By Odin’s beard, she used that weapon on a Jotun? She can certainly defend herself. You’d best mind your silver tongue around her.”

Now there was admiration in the swordsman’s tone, and Loki thought Fandral would look good as a toad. A toad with a blond goatee. Surely no one would notice his absence.

“Dead or not, we need to discover how they got into Asgard,” Frigga put in. “We can’t have Jotenheim attacking at the same time as the Chitauri.”

“You must know,” Fandral said to Loki with a distinct accusation in his voice. “You let them in to Thor’s coronation.”

“Fandral—” Frigga began.

Loki waved her off. As the mortals liked to say, he wasn’t about to confirm or deny anything. “Any secret pathways between here and Jotenheim that I may have known about have been closed magically, so either they have found a new way in or they’ve gotten around my spells. I will find out.”

The warrior frowned and rubbed his chin, clearly trying to decide whether he believed Loki or not. “Can we destroy the pathways?” he asked.

“Asgard is already too isolated without the Bifrost.” Loki turned to his mother. “I see a new observatory at the end of the bridge.”

“Construction is almost complete,” the queen said without batting an eyelash, as if it hadn’t been her two sons who’d destroyed the thing in the first place. “But Hoenir is still testing the mechanism at the Collegium of Magic. He says it’s not ready yet.”

The sorcerer had always been overcareful, and perhaps that was to Loki’s benefit. He didn’t need Thor stomping about. He twisted the bracelet on his wrist, and rubbed underneath it. It had begun to itch.
Frigga put her hands on the table and leaned toward him. “Loki, will this Other and his Chitauri truly attack us?”

If only he could say it wasn’t true. If only he could say the name of the Mad Titan without dread roiling his stomach. “Yes. The Other is pledged to one called Thanos. He desires the tesseract and all of Yggdrasil at his command and he knows that Asgard stands in his way. With the tesseract here in the vault, he will come for us. Perhaps to our advantage. Perhaps before he is truly ready to fight.”

“I have heard the Allfather speak of this creature,” Fandral said. “He was concerned.”

Loki leaned over the map, fingers tapping. “We must start to gather troops from the provinces and prepare for a siege, but I would do so quietly. Let them think we aren’t taking the threat seriously.”

Frigga gave Fandral a commanding look. “See that it is done.”

He didn’t move. “My queen—“

“The Allfather himself has not seen fit to remove Loki from the line of succession,” Frigga returned, her tone full of authority. “When have you ever questioned Odin before? Loki is to be obeyed, just as I am, or as Thor is.”

Fandral bowed to the queen and took his leave. He did not bow to Loki.

That left Loki alone with his mother. She studied him with a gaze that was disconcerting at best, and he found himself toying with the bracelet again. His skin burned beneath it, though there were no marks. Apparently, he was too far away from his mortal minder. Leaning against the map table, he said, “Mother, what are you doing?”

“I am doing what I always do, taking care of Asgard.”

“Are you? You trust me with the kingdom after all I’ve done?” He wasn’t sure what sort of response he was digging for. Anger from her, perhaps, or disappointment, not this unshakable faith that terrified him.

“I do not approve of what you’ve done,” Frigga returned firmly. “One day soon, you will have to face the consequences of your actions. For now, though, yes, I do trust you. How would the destruction of Asgard serve you? Would it satisfy you? Do you truly think it would quench your rage?” She glided closer to him, close enough to caress his cheek. “You already know in your heart you would regret it for the rest of your days.”

He knew no such thing, and even if he did, he wasn’t about to admit it. “Haven’t you heard? I have no heart.”

“What utter rubbish,” Frigga said. “I don’t believe that.”

There was no hint of deceit in her eyes. He might have preferred that. She really did believe in him, and Loki gave in to the urge to flee the room. “I must see to the secret pathways.”

“See to it tomorrow. You need to rest,” she called after him.

She had no idea what she was asking. He had dark suspicions about what awaited him if he dared to close his eyes. Loki inclined his head and made no promises.
Darcy hadn’t meant to stare.

She’d known Loki was coming long before he came into view down the hall. The bracelet had alerted her with a slight tingle that grew as he moved closer.

Putting down her Starkphone, Darcy waited, knowing full well she should disappear back into her quarters for the night. She probably shouldn’t be sitting out here by herself at all after the whole Frost Giant thing. Then again, they hadn’t been after her, they’d been after Captain Mischief Pants. She dared to wonder what he’d done to them.

The open sitting area near her suite was quiet, with an enormous firepit set into the floor that gave it a cozy ski lodge feel, if the lodge happened to be in the middle of a golden city where the lights never went out, even deep in the night. What kind of nightlife existed out there? Probably not a loud club scene like back home, but maybe a tavern atmosphere where Thor could break mugs and yell “Another!” in joyous abandon.

Then again, her nightlife was exciting enough as it was without looking for more.

Loki walked toward her with a stride that was both cocky bastard and predator stalking prey. If she were honest, she’d have to admit she never knew whether to be scared or horny around him. So far, horny was winning, and if she thought about it too much, there was probably a dumb joke about his helmet lurking in there somewhere. He wasn’t wearing it at the moment, but he had on plenty of dark leather and gold armor with splashes of green.

She warbled a little Justin Timberlake under her breath. “I’m bringing sexy back, them other boys don’t know how to act…”

Supervillain, she reminded herself. Gran wouldn’t approve. Nobody would approve.

Loki spotted her and stopped, one eyebrow raised. He might have decided to pass on by, but she couldn’t make herself look away, even when her treacherous cheeks grew hot. He strode over, and she gave serious thought to planting a kiss on his sassy mouth, just to see what he would do.

“Miss Lewis,” he said, “what keeps you up? I thought you would be long abed.”

He stopped at the back of the chaise she sat upon, and he crossed his arms at his chest. There was a hint of a smirk on his lips. Darcy suspected him of posing for her, and if he thought she was waiting for him, he had another thing coming. “They’re still cleaning my rooms. The maids wouldn’t let me help, so I got out of the way. I figured I’d read, since I probably won’t sleep anyway.”

Ooops, she hadn’t meant that last part to come out. Every time she closed her eyes, all she could see were Frost Giants climbing onto her balcony. She wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to sleep in that room again. Hurrying into speech, Darcy said, “You must have an awesome library here.”

“You read?” he asked, disbelievingly.

“I am capable of it,” she returned with some asperity. She held up her Starkphone. “I keep my favorites on here, so I always have them with me.”
Loki cocked his head as if reassessing her. Then he held out his hand. “Come, I will show you
the library.”

For some reason, Darcy hesitated. On the face of it, the invitation was nothing, and yet she
couldn’t help feeling she was on the edge of a cliff. If she took his hand, what then? Would her
world ever be the same again? Did she want her world to ever be the same again?

She put her hand in his.

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Darcy was totally channeling Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.

Not that she had ever liked the Disney princesses (except for Jasmine), but here she was, being
shown the most magnificent library in existence by the beastly prince. If Loki actually looked
beastly, it would make her life easier. At least he had the beastly reputation, but that hadn’t stopped
her from spending far too much time thinking about him.

Loki had opened the enormous wooden doors with great flourish, letting her gasp in
amazement. The main foyer must have been three stories tall, and in the center stood an enormous
tree that glittered in the moonlight. Nestled in the branches above her head seemed to be galaxies.
“Is this what the universe really looks like?” she asked in a hushed voice.

Loki nodded, his voice equally muted. “We call it Yggdrasil, the World’s Tree.”

She touched one of the lower branches, and her fingers prickled as they passed through it. The
leaves disappeared, only to return a moment later.

“’Tis illusion,” he said. “A permanent spell, though, so it reforms itself.”

She was about to tell Loki how cool it was, but stopped when she looked up at him. His poker
face had returned, but those expressive green eyes told a different story. Staring up at the tree, he
looked like someone had just told him the family dog had died. He brushed past her, disappearing
through one of several doors.

So weird. He made about as much sense as Miley Cyrus at a Quaker meeting.

She walked under the tree, admiring it, then took the door Loki had gone through. Beyond was
a warren of smaller rooms, each with neatly shelved books from floor to ceiling. There might very
well be miles of books, certainly more than she could read in her lifetime. She approached the
closest shelf and studied the spines.

All titles were in runes. Why show her a library where she couldn’t read anything? “Loki!”

No answer. She traipsed through several rooms of varying sizes, with no sign of Loki or anyone
else. She wondered if each room was a particular subject, and if the size of the room could be
magically changed as the collection grew. The lighting was dim for a library, but it was the middle
of the night. As she kept moving, the bracelet warmed. Making a left down a dark hallway with
many doors, it went cold. “Huh,” Darcy muttered and turned around. It heated again.

Was it trying to get her back to the other bracelet? She made a conscious effort to follow it, and
sure enough, by playing hot and cold, it led her to Loki. He was in one of the largest spaces she’d seen so far, up on a ladder pulling down books. Darcy paused in the doorway and glowered at him.

He finally deigned to notice her. “What?”

“I can’t read the runic alphabet.”

Loki huffed and jumped down off the ladder, half a dozen books tucked under one arm. She realized he wasn’t wearing what he’d had on when they came in. Gone was the more formal leather and armor. He wore tight black leather pants, boots and simple green shirt. His hair was loose, not his usual slicked-back style, and somehow she had to talk him into leaving it loose, because damn. If this was the Asgardian version of dressing down, she approved. “Are there any books in English?” she asked.

“Shakespeare. Jane Austen. Leo Tolstoy. Nora Roberts.” He made a face at the last one as he set his books on a side table.

“Nora’s not your thing?”

“Mother enjoys her books. Which hand?” he asked.

“Which hand what?”

“Which hand do you write with?”

“Oh. I’m right handed.”

Loki took her right hand in his, brought it to his lips and blew on her fingertips. Standing so close, she could hear the words of the spell spoken under his breath, but she could make no sense of them. Her hand tingled.

“Now try,” he said. “Run your fingers over the runes, and the spell will translate. If you keep reading, it will teach your brain to read the runes, and the spell will fade when you no longer need it.”

“Um, thanks.” Thanks seemed like such a small word compared to this unexpected gift, and Darcy found herself blushing again under his gaze. She brushed her fingers over the runes on the book at the top of his pile. *The Application of Advanced Binding Spells,* she read aloud. “Ugh, sounds like an engineering textbook. Somehow it should have a more interesting title, like Basic Hexes for the Busy and the Vexed.”

“You have odd ideas about magic.” With his patrician nose in the air, he took up his books and headed out of the room.

“You don’t want to be bound to me?” she called after him archly. His shirt was short enough that it afforded her a nice view of his tight, perfect ass as he marched off.

“I do not wish to be bound to anyone,” he snarled. “Especially a mortal.”

Oh, that was the princely version of sticking his tongue out at her. Feeling trapped, was he? Darcy followed him, but at a much more sedate pace. She found rooms devoted to history and political theory and spent some time browsing. Picking up a history of the light elves, she then went looking for fiction, with no luck. There had been other doors leading off of the foyer with the tree in it; maybe she needed to go back and try a different one.
Then she found Loki again. He had settled himself in a reading nook under an arched, mullioned window where moonlight poured in. Like most things in Asgard, the window seat was big enough for a small orgy and piled with fluffy pillows. He sat cross-legged, his books lying open and forgotten in front of him as he stared out the window. Maybe it was a trick of the moonlight, but he looked, well, *lost*.

She should take her book and go quietly back to her rooms. At the very least, she should leave him to his deserved misery. She shouldn’t want to get to know him.

That, however, wasn’t Darcy Lewis style, was it?

Quietly putting her book aside, she approached him. Loki didn’t move or look away from the window. Outside, the city glowed under Asgard’s dramatic night sky, and the view of the rainbow bridge was spectacular. There seemed to be construction going on far down the bridge. Darcy sat down across from him, tucking her robe around her, and waited.

When he looked at her, his face had smoothed over, but his eyes remained stormy. She suddenly wanted to offer comfort. Those words, however, didn’t come as easily as clever comebacks did. “It’s a nice view,” she tried.

Loki returned his gaze to the window again and didn’t speak. Darcy refused to be daunted and waited some more. Finally, he said, “I never expected to see this place again.”

“Why not?” At his incredulous look, she added, “Yeah, okay, that came out stupid. You’ve got amends to make, especially on my planet. But you guys are really long-lived, right? Isn’t there any room for second chances? For forgiveness?”

“Why should I forgive?”

If Darcy had built-in sound effects, this would have required a screech of tires and a car crash. Or an explosion. Clearly, they weren’t having the same conversation. Considering how many bad things he’d done lately (that she knew about), what was it that he didn’t want to forgive of someone else?

What was it that had driven him out to do all those bad things?

He seemed to realize he’d said more than he wanted, and untangled his limbs to bolt for the door. Darcy’s hand reached out to stop him and landed on his leather-clad thigh. She tried not to think about that too hard as she said, “Don’t go. Look, I think we both came here because we wanted to forget about our shit for a while. So let’s do that.” She crawled past him and made a pile of pillows against the wall. “I’ll read to you.”

Loki stared at the door as if he desperately wanted to be on the other side of it, but he didn’t move. He didn’t look at her as he said dully, “Read what?”

She put her Starkphone under his nose. The screen held a picture of a boy riding a broomstick. "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," Loki read aloud.

"You and the boy wizard are made for each other." Darcy scooted back to the pillows and patted the spot next to her. "Come sit.”

He didn’t move, but at least he didn’t flee. This was probably the craziest thing she’d ever done, trying to use Harry Potter to reach the supervillain. Why the hell was she doing this? People had died in New York, people who hadn’t deserved it.
Maybe the problem was with her. She caught glimpses of the bad guy, but not enough to convince her that was who Loki was. Yes, he was a rude, condescending, spoiled asshat, but he was also smart, occasionally charming and might actually be trying to do the right thing. Darcy tried to imagine what Gran might say. What popped into her head was the tail end of a conversation they’d had after Darcy had dumped Rooster the biker dude. Gran had given her a mysterious smile and said, “You need to find a man worth your time.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly say no to villains. She peered at Loki over the edge of her Starkphone. Was he worth her time? There was only one way to find out, and she started to read. “Chapter one, The Boy Who Lived. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were normal, thank you very much.”

“What passes for normal on your mud ball planet, anyway?”

At least she’d gotten some sort of response out of him. She poked him with her foot and kept going. “They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.”

Finally, he edged over to her and sat. “These people are boring, Miss Lewis. Why should I listen?”

Petulant prince, much? Hiding a smile, Darcy said, "I’ve read two sentences. Give it a chance. Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills …”

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The book was childish and its notions of magic ridiculous, Loki decided, but Darcy Lewis reading aloud made it worth his time. When she read, she slowed down, and her voice dropped to a silken smoothness that he could listen to all night. He was comfortable and drowsy and thinking of the simplest way to conjure a chocolate frog.

When was the last time he’d used magic to make someone smile?

Then someone grabbed his chin, forcing him to look up into a wide, purplish face above him and unnaturally bright blue eyes. Loki shuddered. Thanos. "If you think to disobey me, little frostling, you will regret it. You and everyone around you."

It's only a dream, it's only a dream, Loki chanted to himself.

The Other stood in the background, and he carried a bowl with something in it that squirmed. It was the shape of a star in glowing shades of orange and yellow; if Loki had to guess, he’d say it had come from Muspelheim, and that the thing was somehow alive. He tried to recoil, but Thanos seized it and held it over Loki’s heart. He fought to get away and found himself bound in place.

"One way or another, I will always know what you’re up to," Thanos said with his hideous, death's head grin. The star began to glow, and he placed it on Loki’s chest.

Then the world went up in flames.
Loki sat up, gulping for air, one hand to his chest. “Thanos,” he gasped out.

It was just a nightmare. The creature couldn’t reach him in Asgard.

He closed his eyes again, listening to the only sound in the night, the harsh rattle of his own breathing. Then someone touched him.

By rights, whoever had dared to disturb him should have regretted it by finding a dagger in their belly. Yet that wasn’t what happened at all. This caress was feminine and gentle, stroking his hair, and he found himself leaning into her. "It's alright, it was just a dream, you're safe in the library,” she whispered, slipping an arm around his shoulders. "You're okay."

The Midgard word jolted him. He knew what it meant, and no, he was not okay. Even worse, Darcy Lewis had seen him like this. Without looking at her, he shook her off and escaped out the door.
What Happens in the Library...

Chapter Summary

Thor puts a hole in Jane's roof, Darcy contemplates second chances and Asgardian beauty products, Loki indulges in mischief and Frigga meddles with all the subtlety of a steam roller.

Chapter Notes

I continue to be humbled and amazed by your kind comments and kudos. Thanks!

This chapter feels a bit like a milestone for me, since the Every Flavor Bean scene was one of the first I'd written back when this was only a germ of an idea. Happy to be finally sharing it.

As usual, no copyright infringement intended. Just spreading the tasertricks joy.

Oh, no, what’s this?
A spider web and I’m caught in the middle
So I turned to run
The thought of all the stupid things I’ve done
Trouble, Coldplay

Jane loved any time from midnight until dawn. The world was quiet and dark and on cloudless nights, the glory of the cosmos was laid out above her head. She often fell asleep on the roof of her lab in one of the old lounge chairs she kept up there, thinking about the stars and about Thor.

Okay, so she’d spent more time thinking about Thor than anything else. She’d often wonder if he was alright, what Asgard was like and if he’d managed to patch things up with his brother (obviously, that one was a big fat no). Sometimes Darcy would shoo her off to bed. Sometimes she would just deliver a cup of coffee to the rooftop the next morning, right before it was time to start the day.

How odd to lay there and stare at the stars and wonder if Darcy was okay.

“Coffee, Jane?”

She looked up and smiled as Thor held out a mug. “Thanks.” The mythical Norse god of
thunder had made her coffee. She took a sip and sighed. How, exactly, was a girl supposed to resist? He’d remembered just how she liked it, plenty of sugar and plenty of milk.

He sat down in the other lounger with a mug of his own, wearing the tight jeans she kept on hand for him with a t-shirt and hoodie. As regal and gorgeous as he looked in cape and armor, she loved him best like this, the guy who wasn’t quite so far out of her league. Funny, she would have thought they’d be making use of the bed in her camper by now, but they both had heavy hearts. Of all the things Jane wanted to say, she ended up with, “Where’s Tony?”

“He was my little brother, my comrade-at-arms, my best friend. Not once, in centuries, did I question the fact that Loki had my back.” Thor sighed. “His betrayal has left me questioning everything.”

Jane reached out and took his hand. “I’m sorry, Thor.”

He stood, and Jane followed suit. His hands were at his sides, though his fingers clenched, as if wanting to summon his hammer. Mjolnir was downstairs in the lab, and she hoped he wouldn’t put a hole in the roof. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I command the Chitauri. You may call me the Other.”

“I thought Loki commanded the Chitauri,” Thor said.

“Only at my behest, and now he has proven himself untrustworthy.”
Jane exchanged a glance with Thor. Apparently Loki had a habit of running around the galaxy making himself unpopular. “What do you want?” she asked.

The creature gave them a slow smile that dripped of malice. “I offer the same deal I offered in Asgard. I will leave this pretty realm in peace in exchange for the tesseract.”

“The tesseract belongs to the Allfather and is not meant for the likes of you,” Thor returned. “We have defeated you once, what makes you think we are afraid to do so again?”

“A piddling army under the command of a fool. Invading New York was a test for your brother, and he failed. Do you think we cannot send twice that many warriors and decimate this puny world and its heroes? Come now, Thunderer, you and your brother seem to like this planet enough to fight over it. What is it worth to you?” Though she had no way of knowing, Jane thought the Other was staring at her again and she shuddered. The alien spoke again. “Give me the tesseract and you can cavort here with your mortal lady in peace for as long as you wish.”

“What makes you think we have it?”

“You don’t have it, do you?” The Other chuckled, a dry, raspy sound. “I suspected as much. I just wanted to be certain of Loki’s lies.” He inclined his head and started to turn away. “It seems we have nothing further to discuss.”

“No, we do not,” Thor agreed. “The tesseract is safe in Asgard and out of your reach.”

“So sure, are you? My master is an expert at torture, and he knows just how to make your brother scream. Such a lovely sound. He’s done it before, and he’ll get what he wants. Loki has a new master now.” That evil smile seemed to get bigger. “Your brother is lost to you.”

A portal opened behind the aliens, and they walked toward it. Jane had the good sense to get the hell out of the way, and she dove behind the loungers as an ominous rumble built in the clear night sky. Mjolnir burst through the roof as lightning split the heavens. The hammer was barely in Thor’s hand for a second before it flew toward the Other. He and his alien bodyguards stepped into the portal and disappeared. The hammer reached them too late and cleaved empty air.

Thor screamed at the sky. Summoning Mjolnir back to him, he flew off into the desert. More thunder rumbled in the distance, and it began to rain.

Jane crawled to the hole in her roof and looked down. Tony Stark was glaring up at her. “The hell, Foster?”

Yeah, this was going to take some explaining. “Are there any tarps left?” she asked.

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“Milady? Are you awake?”

Darcy groaned and pulled the furs over her head. She was pretty sure she’d just stumbled back from the library and closed her eyes.

Jofrid, the younger of her maids, slipped into the darkened room and flung open the curtains. Sunlight flooded the chamber. “There now, milady, you can’t stay abed all day! It’s beautiful
outside and the Queen has requested that you join her for breakfast.”

Double groan. She liked Frigga enormously, but dollars to donuts she’d be just as radiant in the morning as she was any other time of day. Darcy didn’t do radiant before noon and three cups of coffee. “Don’t suppose I can go in my pajamas?”

Jofrid giggled. “Breakfast is served in the Feasting Hall. Going in your night clothes might raise a few eyebrows.”

“Oh, God, Loki will be there too, won’t he?” Darcy threw back the furs and blinked in the bright light. “Did I say that out loud?”

“I’m certain Prince Loki will be,” the maid assured her with a conspiratorial smile.

Prince Loki. When said like that, it made him sound like some sort of Disney prince who’d whisked her off to his magical castle. Yeah, how about no. Prince he might be, but he was also an extravagant liar, reputed trickster, escaped prisoner, would-be conqueror and powerful sorcerer. People on Earth had died because of him. Aliens from other worlds and many of his own people wanted him dead. In short, he was one hot freaking mess and she was attached to him with magic bracelets that smacked of Fifty Shades of Gray.

She should be running in the other direction, as fast as she could go.

After what she’d seen in the library, though, how could she? For just a moment, she’d held Loki in her arms and seen the panic and the utter hopelessness in his eyes. He was one broken cookie and she wasn’t sure why. She was totally sure, though, that only Frigga and maybe Hoenir were in his corner. Thor, she suspected, was pissed about New York. He had no one else who cared, and she knew what that was like. She’d be damned if she’d abandon him, not when there was the possibility she could reach him. He’d let his guard down with her in the library, at least for a little while, sitting and listening to Harry Potter.

Darcy liked second chances. She’d been given one herself once.

The other maid, Brunhilde, came in with Darcy’s clothes, and they looked freshly cleaned and pressed. Darcy sat up and poked at the skin under her eyes. Major bags. “I hope you two are up to performing a minor miracle, because I think that’s what it’s gonna take to make me presentable.”

“We’ll make sure you catch the prince’s eye,” Jofrid said.

At that, Brunhilde looked grim and shot the younger woman a quelling stare.

Darcy sighed. “I guess that means I stand a snowball’s chance in hell. Loki’s probably got an army of gorgeous, noble fangirls at his heels wherever he goes.”

Brunhilde looked horrified. “Oh, no, milady, my deepest apologies! You misunderstand. We’ll have no trouble making you stand out amongst the pretty birds of the court.” She hesitated, then said, “It’s not my place, but I am concerned for you. Prince Loki is not to be trusted.”

That was hardly a shocker, and Darcy smiled. These two ladies charmed her, that they would care enough to speak out of turn for her wellbeing. Darcy suspected Frigga had chosen these two maids herself, to help make her comfortable. “Thank you,” she said warmly. “I will be careful, I promise. I guess I don’t want to keep the queen waiting. By the way, have you two seen my iPod? It’s a box about this big…”
As far as Darcy could tell, the beauty products of Asgard had no equal. The ladies should be perfect and have no need of such things, but in reality, they seemed to be just as obsessed with refining their looks as mortals. Uneven skin tone? There was a potion for that. Bags under the eyes from not sleeping? There was a concoction for that too. Hair in places you didn’t want it to be? Magic stones took care of it, permanently, though the maids were scandalized by where Darcy wanted to use them. Apparently it was a cultural thing.

If she could somehow figure out how to manufacture them on Earth, she’d be richer than Tony Stark.

Maybe she hadn’t quite reached radiance, but Darcy felt good about how she looked as Jofrid showed her the way to the feasting hall. Her clothes from the day before had indeed been laundered, and she was assured the seamstresses would be by before the end of the day to start work on a new wardrobe. Her hair had been brushed until it shone and those magic beauty products put to good use. She was as ready as she’d ever be to face Loki.

Darcy almost came to a screeching halt in the middle of the corridor. “You all thought Loki was dead?”

“He saved us from the Frost Giants,” Jofrid continued confidentially. “Their king snuck in to kill the Allfather, but Loki got him first. Then he and Thor had to destroy the Bifrost to keep it from the Frost Giants. Loki fell into the abyss during the battle.”

That made zero sense. She’d been in the sights of the Destroyer and she remembered what Thor had said just before he’d left Earth. I would have words with my brother. Like Loki had done something that needed to be stopped.

Jofrid led her through huge doors to a large hall with long tables laden with food. One wall was open to the outdoors, and the morning sunshine made the golden city sparkle. The queen came forward to meet Darcy as the maid curtsied and withdrew. “There you are, my dear,” Frigga said. “I would ask if you slept well, but I heard about the Frost Giants.”

Darcy studied the queen, and a piece of the puzzle fell into place. Whatever the truth of Jofrid’s story, it smacked of a heartbroken mother trying to cover up her son’s misdeeds. Aloud, she said, “It did make for an interesting evening.”

“Of a certainty. I am glad to see you are unscathed. Come, let us break our fast.”

Frigga linked arms with Darcy and drew her to the highest table. While most of the other tables were occupied, this one only had one occupant: Lady Sif. She rose to bow to her queen, but gave Darcy only the briefest of nods before sitting again and diving into a plate piled high with meat. Darcy must have given it a queasy look, for Frigga parked her on a bench across from Sif and said, “Wait here. I think we need to start you off on something light.”

Once she was gone, Sif said, “I see you survived the night.”
“Thanks to Loki, no thanks to the Frost Giants.”

“I thought Loki would kill you for using your weapon on him.” The warrior woman studied her through narrowed eyes, nostrils flaring. “Why did he not?”

“It was an accident and I explained that to him,” Darcy said, trying not to think too much about what Sif was implying. Hadn’t Idunn said much the same thing the day before? Apparently everybody in Asgard had a dirty mind and they’d all decided she was Loki’s playtoy. A servant placed a plate in front of her, piled high with fruit, bread and cheese. She hoped this was not just the first course, as she’d weigh three hundred pounds by the time she left. She gazed down the table, at the assorted breads and fruits and vegetables arranged beautifully in the center and came to a stop. Set on a pedestal was a bowl full of jelly beans, their bright color catching the light. So pretty and attractive were they that they should have had a rainbow over them and a heavenly chorus to accompany staring at them. Darcy blinked, then took off her glasses and cleaned them with the edge of her jacket. Settling them back on her nose, she looked again. They screamed out from the more neutral colors of the rest of the morning’s offerings. Could they possibly be Harry Potter’s infamous Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans?

Frigga came back and sat next to her. Darcy pointed to the candy. “Are they always on the breakfast table?”

Sif frowned and went to poke them with her dagger. When they proved inoffensive, she returned to her seat without tasting. “I know not what they are.”

The queen’s expression was puzzled. “None of the cooks mentioned something new.”

Loki must have conjured them, and Darcy wondered what he thought he was up to. He wasn’t going to fool her with them, as she knew to watch out for the ear wax and vomit and dirt and varnish flavors. Maybe he meant to prank some of his fellow Asgardians. Maybe he had made up his own flavors, and she dreaded what those might be.

Speaking of the devil, Loki strode into the hall, looking pleased with himself. She had been right about the fangirls, too. There were two knots of ladies that seemed to be lying in wait for him, and lo and behold, both groups tried to throw themselves into his path. Loki adroitly dodged them both with the air of one who’d done it a thousand times before. Darcy, however, merited a dark look that dared her to say something about the night before.

What happened in the library, stayed in the library, obviously. At some point, she would say something, though not here. With her eyes, she dared him right back. Loki went to his mother, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Good morning, my son,” Frigga said warmly. “Did you get some sleep?”

So Frigga knew he wasn’t sleeping, but she probably didn’t know why. He shrugged and took the seat at the head of the table. Nobody else had dared to sit there, so Darcy concluded it was reserved for the king or the acting king or whatever he was. As a servant brought Loki a heaping plate (no one went hungry in Asgard), Sif shoved her own half-eaten breakfast away and stood. “My queen,” she said with another bow and marched off with neither a word nor a glance in Loki’s direction.

“Ouch,” Darcy muttered under her breath, but Loki must have heard, for he shot her a black glance.

“I’ll check the secret ways to Jotenheim,” he said to Frigga. “If the Frost Giants have found a
way around my spells, I need to put a stop to it.”

“An excellent suggestion. You should see to it right after breakfast.”

“Mother,” Loki said significantly. He held up his wrist with the gold bracelet. “I can’t go with this on.”

“You’ll have to. The bracelet does not come off until Lady Darcy decides you’re worthy of your freedom,” Frigga returned calmly.

Loki’s jaw dropped.

“Close your mouth, dear,” Frigga said. “Such an unbecoming expression for a prince. You’ll have to take Lady Darcy with you. I’ll go find her a warm cloak, she’ll need it.”

His gaze sought Darcy’s, and the hard, glittering look in his eyes made her want to hide behind Frigga. Oh, shit, was all she could think. Who put mortal Darcy Lewis in charge? “Um, what did you say?”

“Mother,” Loki repeated, more firm this time, “this is Jotenheim.”

“Secret ways, isn’t that what you said? Hopefully you won’t see any giants. Even if you do, I have complete faith in your ability to protect her.” She turned a bright smile on Darcy. “He did a masterful job last night, did he not?” With that, Frigga left them to their breakfast.

They stared at each other, and Darcy gave serious thought to diving under the table. She didn’t see any sign of that lost, vulnerable guy from the night before. Loki tapped a fork imperiously on his plate, but he made no attempt to eat. He looked like he was contemplating her demise or at least turning her into a slug, and she wasn’t sure the threat of punishment from the bracelet was going to stop him. “Wow,” was all Darcy could think of to say. Frigga was the one who was masterful. “I’ve been in hurricanes that packed less of a punch.”

“What is it that I have to do to prove myself worthy, Miss Lewis?”

His green eyes were ablaze, and every word spat out. She was only beginning to realize how much power Frigga had given her, and how much responsibility. How had the woman known? Darcy had only just made the decision to reach out to him that morning, hadn’t she? She swallowed and met his angry gaze head-on. Holding up her bracelet, she said, “Look, this thing didn’t come with an instruction manual. I don’t have a clue.”

Loki’s hand tightened on his fork until his knuckles were white, but he settled for glaring at her. She decided to change the subject until she could give this new development some more thought. “So, where are we going?”

“The home of the Frost Giants.” He poked at his food before turning a sharp gaze on her. “You will do exactly as I say, for I’ve no wish to die today because of some foolish mortal girl.”

Darcy stabbed a fruit that vaguely resembled a strawberry with more force than was necessary. “You must have spent a fair amount of time spelling the Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans into existence for a foolish mortal girl. Woman, I mean. I am all grown up, you know.”

“You aren’t even an eighth of my age,” he scoffed, but his eyes told a very different story. She suspected he was very well aware she was a woman, and the fruit got stuck in her throat. While she was scrambling for water, he said, “You should try the beans. They’re quite good, if I do say so myself.”
Loki spoke with such elegant indifference that she was immediately on guard. At that moment, Volstagg burst into the room, intent on a meal. He paused dramatically when he beheld the Every Flavor Beans. “Ah! I see the cooks have come up with some new confection. Perhaps in honor of Lady Darcy? Is this something to be found on Midgard?”

Before Darcy could stop him, he scooped out an enormous handful of beans and threw them all into his mouth. All she could do was wait to see what would happen. Loki must have had that same thought, for he had a forkful of pheasant half way to his mouth that he appeared to have forgotten.

Volstagg chewed and closed his eyes in an expression of bliss. When Darcy began to breathe again, his eyes popped open wide. He made “mphf” noises as if he’d been gagged, and his lips turned blue. Frost escaped from his nostrils and ears. Then he turned and ran back out the way he came in.

“I knew you were up to something,” Darcy said. “You meant that prank for me.”

His green eyes were alight with mischief. “Like all mortals, Miss Lewis, you always presume to be the center of the universe.”

“How long will it last?”

“It’ll wear off by midday, certainly.”

What better retribution for seeing his weakness than by sealing up her mouth for half a day? Darcy stood and marched over to the beans. She scooped up a handful of her own. “I’m not afraid of you, Loki.” She shoved the entire handful into her mouth. He sat back to watch.

The flavors were more intense than the ones back home, but somehow he’d gotten them right. She tasted apple and pepperoni and cherry tart. Then she made a face.

“Not to your liking?” he asked, his smirk making an appearance.

“Got a paint flavored one,” Darcy said, hands on her hips. “By the way, what was the flavor of the one Volstagg ate?”

The mischief leached out of his eyes, to be replaced by something colder than a glacier. “Frost Giant,” he said.
Propositions and Proposals

Chapter Summary

A day trip to Jotenheim doesn't work out the way anyone planned.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for continuing to send love and comments! It keeps me writing.

This chapter is entirely from Darcy's point of view, but don't worry, Loki's pov is coming in the next chapter. Then again, I think we all know what Loki thinks of Jotenheim. Perhaps Darcy will give him a new perspective.

As always, no copyright infringement intended.

I can see you stalking like a predator

I’ve been here before

Temptation calls like Adam to the apple

But I will not be caught

Cause I can read those velvet eyes

And all I see is lies

Remedy, Little Boots

For someone who was supposed to be checking secret ways to an enemy planet, Loki made no attempt to hide the fact that he was leaving the palace. In fact, Darcy decided he was putting on a show. She hurried after him as he strode through what seemed to be the most populous parts of Hlidskjalf, collecting expressions of joy at his return from several Asgardian nobles (sentiments that were for the most part insincere, and Loki returned his thanks in the same manner). There were a few men he stopped to talk with; for the ladies, he didn’t stop at all, even when they practically sprawled themselves out on the floor in his path. He used his charm and his smile and his silver tongue without ever breaking stride, leaving in his wake a trail of blushing, stammering women.

Unfortunately, those same ladies had no compunctions about glaring holes in Darcy’s back as she followed him. It felt like high school, except she’d never been the one that ended up with the
hot, popular guy. She clutched the white cloak Frigga had given her to her chest and ignored them as best she could.

Not only had Frigga gifted her with the cloak, with its furry collar and beautiful silver embroidery, but she had also cast a spell on Darcy. “Alttongue,” the Queen had said, “in case you should need to speak to someone other than Loki.”

Frost Giants or spiteful noble ladies seemed to be her only choices, and neither sounded like fun. Still, she appreciated Frigga’s concern. Darcy herself was a little concerned about traveling to an alien planet with her less-than-trustworthy companion, so she’d brought along her taser, enfolded in a hidden pocket in the cloak.

Finally, Loki stopped and pulled Darcy to his side, tucking her arm into his. “The least you could do is be useful, Miss Lewis, otherwise we’ll never get out of the palace.”

Two women lurking behind a pillar were giving her Stares of Death. Who would’ve thought? There were beautiful, immortal ladies who would sell their souls (or whatever the Norse version was) to trade places with Darcy Lewis. She cast him a smile, wishing she was close enough to hear those ladies grinding their teeth. “Does the Conqueror of Worlds need rescuing from his fangirls? You seem to have a lot of them.”

“I prefer to expedite matters,” he said and started walking again. “I know too well they’d crawl over me to get to Thor, given half a chance.”

“That sucks,” she said and meant it. He sounded as though he’d had plenty of experience.


They escaped, coming out onto a wide boulevard alongside the palace. There were no horses or vehicles on the ground or in the air, only Asgardians on foot. Darcy had learned from her ever-helpful maids that the correct term was Æsir (masculine singular being Áss, which still cracked her up. Imagine, Loki really was an ass!). Statues lined the street with pillars between them, all as high as a three story building and twice as imposing. Darcy slipped from Loki’s grasp to take a couple of pictures. These were the greatest of the Æsir, and he surely knew their stories, if only she could get him to play tour guide.

“Miss Lewis!”

Not much chance of that. Loki waited for her at the top of a wide stone staircase, looking displeased. At the bottom of the steps was a formal garden, and she stopped again to snap more pics (maybe one or two of Loki). Stone paths beckoned her, meandering through tall trees and flowering bushes in colors she’d never seen before. She could see statues among the greenery, and hear the enticing sound of water in a fountain. “Oh, it’s lovely! I want a tour,” she blurted. “Your home is so beautiful.”

Silence greeted her comment and Darcy closed her mouth with a snap. Maybe one day she would learn not to treat him like he was one of her college drinking buddies. Then again, it had worked out so far, hadn’t it? She dared to look sideways at him.

“It’s not my—” he started to say, and then shut down. He had his back to the garden, and if she squinted, she thought she could see that same lost look she’d seen in the library. I never expected to see this place again. Darcy wondered what he was really about to say. Not my home? Frigga had made a point of reminding him that Asgard would always be his home the day before.
She noticed an Æsir couple staring at them from the garden. “Coming back from the dead is causing quite a stir.”

“It’s not just me. They’re trying to decide whether they should avoid you because you’re in my presence or approach and try to curry favor.”

“Curry favor with me? Why?”

Now there was a spark of mischief in his eyes. “They will all have heard that the queen has singled you out, and you are the first mortal to grace the halls of Asgard.”

“First ever, in like forever? No way!”

“It was not my plan to bring you here, but now I can enjoy the court’s mad scramble to figure out why. Aside from the obvious, of course,” Loki said airily.

Yes, the obvious. After parading through the palace, it wasn’t just Sif and Idunn who thought she was his mistress. “I must be your mortal lover and you can’t bear to live without me.”

The mischief in his eyes got brighter. “No Æsir would dare such a thing.”

Except him, of course. “You don’t like doing what is expected, do you?” she asked. “You like being Asgard’s bad boy.”

“I spent far too long doing what was expected of a prince of Asgard and it got me precisely nowhere,” Loki replied. He crossed his arms at his chest, leaning back against the stone railing. “What of you, Miss Lewis? Always the perfect daughter, I suspect. The good girl.”

Darcy heard the derision in his tone and refused to let it shake her, or let him know how close he’d come to the truth. She tried for a casual shrug that probably didn’t fool him at all. “Maybe, and it got me precisely nowhere too, though I was never the perfect daughter.” She let him chew that one over. “Are we going or what?”

Loki waved his hand and the gazes of the watching Æsir couple slid past them. “As far as they’re concerned, we have just gone for a walk in the garden. Come.”

An illusion formed. Darcy stared as a copy of herself went off with fake Loki. The watching couple didn’t seem to see the difference, and watched the illusion until it disappeared down one of the garden paths. Damn, but he was good at that. She wondered how she could tell the real Loki from the bogus. Like the tree in the library, would he fade when touched? Darcy turned and followed the Loki she was left with. A snap of his fingers and there was a staircase in the plinth of a statue. It went down into darkness. Once they were both below ground level, the cool blackness closed in, and she ran her hand along the wall. It was damp stone, covered with carved runes. A door must have closed behind them, though she heard nothing. “Loki?”

A torch flared on the wall ahead and she blinked as her eyes adjusted. At the bottom, Loki waited. There was only a small space, leading to a vaulted tunnel. Carvings in the stones of the archway looked like a two headed dragon. “This way,” he said.

Darcy poked him in the arm.

“What?”

“Just making sure you were real.”
He paused in the archway to look back at her slyly. “There are better ways to discover if I am real or not. Shall I tell you what they are?” Then he turned and threw something down the tunnel. A ball of light appeared near the ceiling and started bobbing down the passageway. Loki followed it.

What almost came out of her mouth was *does it involve getting naked?* What she actually said wasn’t much better. “That sounds like a proposition from the God of Mischief.” The torch guttered out behind her, and Darcy rushed after him, not wanting to get left in the dark.

“Propositioned by a god? For a mortal, you have a stunningly high opinion of yourself. It must have been your imagination.”

The gold bracelet on her wrist started tingling fiercely, and she scratched at her skin. “I really do need a tutorial on how this bracelet works. It’s tingling.”

“Is it now,” he said without turning.

Darcy grinned at his back. The bracelet told her when he was up to no good, and she was pretty sure he’d just told her a lie. It was a proposition, then. There was a spring to her step as she trailed him down the passageway. She found it interesting that he would flirt with her but steer clear of the noble ladies of the court like he was the Titanic and they were icebergs. *They would crawl over me to get to Thor, given half a chance.*

Yikes. There had been no lie in that, and what a terrible way to live, never being able to trust. She reminded herself not to be a fool, that he didn’t trust her any more than he trusted the Æsir ladies. She was mortal and convenient. Contrary to popular belief, Earth girls were not easy, and she’d have to set him straight.

Drat that spring in her step, it was still there.

*I’m stopping and using my head, Gran,* she thought to herself. *Unfortunately, the rest of me wants a piece of Norse ass (Áss!) and just isn’t listening.*

Darcy really needed to think about something else. She focused on the tunnel around her, which was a boring brown stone. She ended up watching Loki instead. He was wearing his leather and armor get up with the long coat, so it wasn’t as good a view of his ass as it could have been. (Áss! *Stop it, Darcy!*) She had a good sense of direction and contemplated that instead. “Are we going back into the palace?”

“We are. If perchance someone should discover where I was bound, let them think the secret way to Jotenheim is outside, or that I decided to dally with you.”

“A tumble among the roses? How romantic, Your Highness.”

Loki flashed her a grin. “I am told I am irresistible.”

“Humble, too, dude. Just for curiosity’s sake, who told you you’re irresistible? Those ladies —?”

“Those ladies I was trying to avoid,” he finished. There was a hint of self-deprecation in his tone, and Darcy was astounded. If he kept giving her little allusions to the real guy that lurked beneath the persona of Loki, God of Mischief, she might be in some trouble. She might actually have to guard her heart.

The tunnel came to an end, and Loki laid his hand on the ornately carved wooden door. He
motioned her closer. “The door will not open until no one is watching. Once it does, we must be absolutely silent. No one needs to know we were ever here.”

“Are we in the armory?”

“What use is a treasure vault with secret passages? We are close enough, though, that the Frost Giants have used it before to gain access to Asgard and the vault.”

The door did not so much open as dissolve. It faded slowly, and Loki put a finger to his lips. Once the door was gone, a cloud of steam rolled in. Darcy wrinkled her nose. Apparently, laundry was both recognizable and present everywhere in the universe.

Loki slipped out into a dark hallway, and she was right on his heels. Looking back, she saw the door reform and blend into the walls around it. Above the relentless smell of clean, she caught a whiff of something close to chocolate. Were the kitchens nearby? She hadn’t seen any sign of chocolate in Asgard so far, much to her disappointment. She should have kept a bag of Dove in her backpack.

The steam was thick, and though Darcy heard voices nearby, she didn’t see anybody. The stone passages made her think they were far beneath the palace, and she wondered if there was such a thing as house elves who did all the work. Loki passed several closed doors, then opened one and ushered her inside.

The room was immense and filled with shelf upon shelf of big, fluffy towels. It was like the basement of a hotel, except the towels were in a rainbow of colors. No plain white for Asgard, no indeed. Loki led the way to the furthest wall, and Darcy noticed that the temperature had dropped. Shaking out the cloak she’d been carrying, she threw it over her shoulders and fastened it.

Loki held out his hand to her. “You must trust me.”

There was a scary thought. Biting her lip, Darcy took his hand and let him pull her against him. Here she was again in the Loki’s personal space, and her lady parts were really beginning to take notice. Though he wasn’t as built as his older brother, she didn’t think he was a slouch in the godly muscles department either. Those broad shoulders weren’t all from the outfit, were they? She was dangerously close to obsessing about peeling him out of all that leather.

Darcy took a deep breath, only to be teased with his scent: mint and virgin snow and there was that hint of chocolate again. She turned her face to the blank wall. “What do we do? Say the magic word or click our heels together three times?”

“Your humor, as usual, escapes me.” He frowned at the wall. “I am not sure this will work. You have been impervious to my magic so far.”

That didn’t inspire her confidence. “What happens if it doesn’t?”

“To you? Nothing. You’ll stay here.” He glowered at the wall, as if trying to see through it. “If I go to Jotenheim without you, supposedly the bracelet will kill me. Shall we find out?”

He didn’t sound as though the prospect bothered him, and once again she wondered if he didn’t believe he could be killed or if he didn’t care. She was beginning to suspect it was the latter. “What do we do?”

“Take a step,” he said, and Darcy suddenly felt like she’d been dropped from a skyscraper. This was way more dizzying than travel by tesseract, and she threw her arms around Loki’s midsection and screamed. Light and color and space moved past them at frightening speed and as her stomach
protested, she shut her eyes. Darcy thought she heard him chuckle or maybe she just felt it, as she
had her face mashed against his chest.

The next thing she knew, the cold hit her like a sledgehammer and her teeth started to chatter. It
was not just a chill that froze her hands and feet, but cold that bit deep into her bones. They were in
a cave, and every surface was blue-gray ice, and though there was no obvious light, it was far from
dark. Maybe the ice reflected light or had its own phosphorescent properties. She presumed this
was Jotenheim, home of the Frost Giants. Had this place ever seen a temperature above freeze your
ass off?

There were voices, and they both threw themselves against the wall, behind an outcropping of
ice. The Frost Giants spoke in deep, guttural growls like the night before, though this time, their
conversation was loud and clear to her. This must be what Frigga meant by Alltongue. Darcy
peered around Loki to see three giants. Two poked at a translucent green wall with ice spears that
were extensions of their enormous hands, while the third was trying to squeeze through a crack in
the middle of the wall. He appeared to be stuck, and the others realized it, for they started poking
at him. He flailed furiously at them.

"This is how they got in?" Darcy whispered.

"Apparently," Loki replied, lip curled in disgust. "Stay out of sight. I'll deal with this."

Darcy crouched down, making herself as small as possible behind the outcrop while Loki
stepped into the view of the giants, and they set up a ruckus.

Æsir!"

"Not just any Æsir, dolt, it’s the Liesmith!"

"The king wants him dead!"

"Yes, yes," Loki said, sounding bored by the whole thing. "In order to kill me, you have to
reach me. Let’s see you try." Magic green balefire grew between his outstretched palms, and the
crack in the shimmering wall began to close. The giant stuck in the wall screamed and pawed the
air in Loki’s direction, but the prince stood out of reach.

Darcy tried to shut her ears to it, with no luck. If Loki was going to pull a Darth Maul with the
giant, she didn’t want to see or hear it. Putting her head against the ice wall to her right, she felt it
vibrate. She placed her palm flat against it. If she listened close, she thought he could hear a steady
scrape, like somebody was digging. She whirled. "Loki—"

The ice wall above her exploded, and a pair of massive blue-grey arms reached through the
hole for her. Darcy ducked underneath and scrambled across the snowy floor even as the giant
made the hole bigger and jumped out. Loki flung magic at the creature, and green fire attached
itself to the giant’s head. He pawed at it and screamed, and he dissolved before her eyes.

Two more giants forced their way out of the hole, and Loki got one with a dagger square
between the eyes. The other took Loki off his feet and slammed him into the icy wall. He went
down in a tangle with the giant. The magic green wall collapsed, and those two giants joined the
fray. The third, the one stuck in the spell, lay dead on the floor.

All three giants ignored her in favor of subduing Loki, and shame on them for thinking she was
no threat. Not that she was, really, but she did have one weapon at her disposal. Darcy didn’t give
herself a moment to think and darted forward with her taser, firing at the nearest giant. He
shuddered with a keening wail and crashed to the floor. Another stumbled back, a dagger in his belly. Loki viciously yanked the dirk out again before turning it on the throat of another adversary. Darcy whirled away, but not before she could see that Frost Giant innards were whitish blue and sort of squirmy. She dropped her taser and covered her mouth and hoped breakfast would stay where it belonged.

“Run!” Loki commanded even as he shook off the grip of a dead giant. He pushed her in the direction they had come from, toward the secret passage between worlds. They hadn’t taken more than three steps when something loomed before them.

It was another giant, and he had a dozen more with him. He towered over the others and wore a beautifully decorated loincloth and collar that screamed Dude In Charge. Loki and Darcy spun and ran in the other direction, jumping over the bodies and past where Loki’s magic wall had been. From there, the cave was relatively straight with small side passages, and she could see a watery blue light at the end. Was that daylight on Jotenheim? If they could escape out into the snow, maybe they stood a chance of getting away. No wonder Frigga had given her a white cloak.

Then Darcy pulled up short. More Frost Giants appeared, running toward them. “Surrounded!” she yelped. “Can’t we talk to these guys? Remember diplomacy that worked so well with the Other?”

“They want me dead too much to listen.”

“The hell! What did you do?”

“This way,” said Loki, never answering her question. He dragged her into a side tunnel. Pushing her ahead of him, he cast another wall spell behind them and ran after her.

“How long will that hold?” Darcy yelled back.

“Not long. No time to set it properly.”

Great. Darcy was in the lead, having no idea where she was going except away from all those giants. At least the floor wasn’t slippery and she was managing good traction in her boots. “Somehow, I don’t think this was what your mom had in mind,” she gasped out.

“Mother and I are going to have words if we survive this!”

Darcy would have laughed if she’d had the breath. She hurtled around a corner and fell headlong over something. She screeched and scrambled back when she realized it was a Chitauri body. There were several of them, all quite dead.

Speaking of dead, the passageway ended abruptly. A dead end, and they were trapped.

“Well,” said Loki in a remarkably calm tone, studying the pile of bodies, “this is a problem.”

Darcy jumped to her feet and put Loki between herself and the Chitauri. “Why the hell are these guys here? Does this mean they’ve found the secret passage between worlds?”

Loki’s expression turned grim. “With such a small contingent, it’s safe to assume they know of its existence and they’re searching for it. There’s nothing else on Jotenheim they could possibly want.”

Then the Frost Giants poured in behind them, Dude In Charge in the lead. Loki turned to confront them, putting Darcy behind him. She peered around him and started counting giants,
quickly getting to double digits. Not good, so not good. Her hands trembled, and she latched onto Loki's arm.

Dude In Charge smiled, and it wasn’t pleasant. “Let me introduce myself, Liesmith. I am Thjasse, kinsman of Laufey, and I will be your executioner this day.”

“Is everyone related to Laufey?” Loki demanded. “Didn’t I dispatch a cousin of yours last night in Asgard? I own, I am disappointed. Even your late king didn’t give me much of a challenge.”

Darcy had no idea who Laufey was, but there was no doubt Loki wanted to fight. She could feel the tension in him and something else, a tingling that suggested he was marshalling all his magical resources. Darcy looked over the giants arrayed against him and decided she didn’t want to die here. “It’s not too late to try diplomacy,” she hissed.

“It was too late before your grandmother’s grandmother was born,” he said, mouth set in a grim line, knuckles white as he held a dagger in each hand.

Wasn’t he Mr. Silver Tongue, though? Why had he decided not to try to talk his way out? If he wasn’t going to give it a shot, she would. Frigga, after all, had given her a fancy title and damned if she wasn’t going to use it. Darcy threw herself between Loki and Thjasse the Dude In Charge, hands in the air. “Wait. Can we talk before we pulverize each other again? I am Lady Darcy of Midgard, and I have a proposal for your king.”
Snow Day

Chapter Summary

Loki has a family reunion and Darcy discovers she has a bit of a silver tongue herself.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Though I didn't think this update would take me quite so long (it was supposed to be a part of the last chapter), writing in Loki's point of view can be like pulling teeth (or giving birth to an eight-legged horse??). Anyway, hope you enjoy.

As usual, no copyright infringement intended. Thank you, Marvel, for the best sandbox ever to play in.

I don’t care

What they’re going to say

Let the storm rage on,

The cold never bothered me anyway

Let It Go, Idina Menzel, Frozen

“It’s beautiful in its own austere way, isn’t it?”

Loki scowled and resisted the urge to shake some sense into Darcy. Leave it to a mortal to find beauty in the armpit of Yggdrasil that was Jotenheim. This was his homeworld, and to say that he despised this foul chunk of ice was an understatement.

Or he would, if he felt anything at all.

He should have pulled Gungnir from its dimensional hiding spot and destroyed every giant in the cave. Fueled by rage, he might have even been able to obliterate them using magic alone. Unfortunately, he no longer possessed the pure, simmering wrath he needed for such an undertaking. He’d thought the sight of the Frost Giants or of the glacial ugliness of Jotenheim would bring back all of his fury with Odin and with Laufey, but he still felt empty. The only thing that roused any feeling in him was the irritating woman walking by his side. Darcy had put herself
between him and the giants and there had been a peculiar lurch in his chest. Loki put it down as a selfish reaction. His life was tied to her sorry excuse of a mortal one, after all.

By Odin’s mangled eye, he wanted his rage back.

The giants, led by Thjasse, escorted them across vast, empty snowfields toward a grim fortress of ice. Darcy’s white cloak flowed around her, hiding her curves, much to Loki’s disappointment. Her blue eyes were bright with curiosity as she studied the bleak landscape. It was a typical day on Jotenheim: heavy gray clouds dumped snow upon icy plains while biting winds scoured the landscape. Once in a while, a distant sun would peek out of the cloud cover, but it was not close enough to touch the deep freeze of the planet.

When he didn’t reply, Darcy kept talking, with an impish peep in his direction. “Well, yeah, this place suffers in comparison to Asgard, but it does have its perks, I bet. The skiing is probably killer. It’s like one eternal snow day.”

“I haven’t a clue what you just said,” Loki snapped. He could enjoy looking at her, but it would be better for his sanity if she kept her Midgard nonsense to herself.

“You just used the word clue. I don’t think you’re as clueless about Earth Speak as you’d like me to believe.” Darcy leaned over as she walked and scooped up a handful of snow. The giants around her stiffened and brought their weapons up, but she ignored them. She squashed the snow together in her hands and sighed when it feathered out between her fingers. “It’s too dry for building a snowman.”

He’d been the one to lead the charge as a child when it snowed in Asgard, dragging Thor and Sif out into it to build creatures to vanquish or recreate great battles. Only now, centuries later, did he wonder if his parents had ever held their breaths on winter days, waiting to see if he would manifest his true nature. “You like the snow?” came marching out of his mouth, and he could have bitten off his own tongue. Now he was asking for her babble?

Darcy smiled, and Jotenheim seemed a bit brighter. It must have been the clouds. “It doesn’t snow often in New York,” she said. “When I was a kid, I would sneak out early to get to it first, when it was fresh and new and white, before the snowplows and the bums got to it.”

“Bums?” he found himself echoing, before belatedly reminding himself he didn’t care. It did interest him that this was the first time Darcy had spoken of herself and her past freely. Anything else she’d shared, he’d forced out of her. She was a great mystery to him, one he was determined to solve.

“Homeless people. Peasants to you, I guess.” She looked around at their escort of Frost Giants and her voice dropped to a whisper. “So what now?”

“I thought you had a plan, Miss Lewis. How foolish of me.”

“Don’t scoff, I’ve gotten us this far,” Darcy said, but he could see it in her eyes. For all her bravado, and she put on a very good façade, she was scared. She ought to be, alone on Jotenheim with him. He wasn’t exactly well-liked here.

The fortress loomed before them. Great gates of ice groaned open, and they were ushered inside. They marched through an outer and inner bailey to a keep several stories tall in the middle. The ground floor of the tower was an open room with no furniture or decoration to speak of except for carved floors and ceilings. Despite the fact that it was made of ice, it had probably been there for centuries, as nothing on Jotenheim ever melted. Loki glanced at the floor as he walked over it.
It told the story of a long-ago battle with Asgard.

“Wait here,” grunted Thjasse. Then their escort withdrew to surround the space.

This was as alone as they were likely to get, and Loki decided to take advantage of it. Darcy paced around the edges of the room, as if checking each entrance for Frost Giants. All were guarded, so escape was impossible. Loki caught up with her and drew her to the center, clasping her hands in his. Her fingers were like ice, and he cast a warming spell. “Better?”

Any other woman would have used the moment. The noble ladies of the court would have found subtle ways to assure him of his welcome in their beds. Darcy, however, was far more prosaic. “Aren’t you cold?”

Loki kept rubbing her hands and a blush rose in her cheeks. It was so easy to make her blush. What would it take to make her scream his name? “I do not feel the cold,” he said. She didn’t need to know why.

Darcy stared at their intertwined hands and frowned. “I don’t like it when you play nice. It freaks me out. It makes me think you’re up to something.”

“I can play nice.” Loki left no doubt as to his meaning. She looked like cornered prey and then tried to yank her hands from his, but he tightened his grip. “In this case, however, I am up to something. Let them think we are lovers,” he said, leaning closer to whisper in her ear. “Such displays make others uncomfortable, and the giants will be more inclined to look away and not try so hard to listen to our conversation.”

“Is that all you want, Loki?” Darcy returned, her blue eyes snapping. “Just to pretend?”

Ah, but she had fire and he wanted it. “I didn’t say that,” Loki murmured, “but now is hardly the time, hmm? You can tell me of this alliance of yours.”

“An alliance between Asgard and the Frost Giants makes sense, right? More sense than blowing each other up.” She bit her plush lower lip, flooding it with color. “If the Chitauri are on Asgard’s front step, it would be bad to have the Frost Giants attacking from the rear.”

She was right, and once it would have been Loki in her place, trying to talk Thor into peaceful negotiation and out of turning somebody’s home into a flaming ruin that could be seen from space. The irony did not escape him. “You are up against millennia of hatred between our worlds.”

“Wouldn’t it have made more sense for the Chitauri to make friends with the giants?” she asked softly. “The enemy of my enemy and all that, yadda, yadda, yadda.” At Loki’s disbelieving look, Darcy said, “What? Political science major. I’ve also read The Art of War.”

“‘Tis your infernal Midgard claptrap that offends, wench, not your logic.”

“Come on, yadda yadda yadda is an easy one. If I were to explain the meaning in Æsir, I would say ‘tis like so on and so forth, when the actual words are too tedious and lengthy to recite in full.”

She dared to mock him, even going so far as to try to sound like an Æsir noble with her nose in the air, and yet he sensed no malice behind her words. If he didn’t know better, he might think she was teasing him or trying to make him laugh. “I take your meaning, Miss Lewis. The Chitauri, however, have no need of allies. All they want is access to the vault. What is it that you hope to offer the Frost Giants in exchange for their cooperation?”

“Umm…”
It was as he had suspected. “You have thought of nothing to offer them?”

“Hey, I’m new here. I was hoping you’d come up with that part.” Darcy glanced at the giants standing guard, trepidation in her gaze. “I should let you do the talking.”

“They won’t listen to me.” Loki was surprised he wasn’t dead already.

“What did you do? Jofrid said you killed their king to save the Allfather and destroyed the Bifrost to keep it from falling into the hands of the Frost Giants, but I don’t think it’s the truth.”

“If that’s what they say in Asgard?” Someone had been spreading falsehoods, and since those dishonesties reflected well on him, he could guess who: Frigga. This close, Darcy’s hair smelled of Asgardian night-blooming skyflower, and he wanted to sink his hand into her silky locks and pull her closer yet. The only thing stopping him was the suspicion of his mother’s hand there as well. “Laufey was their king,” he finally said. “I killed him as he knelt over the Allfather with a knife, but he was there because I lured him. Thor destroyed the Bifrost to keep me from using it to destroy Jotenheim.” The rest, well, she didn’t need to know.

“Loki!”

Her eyes were wide, and he itched to trace the delicate curve of her cheek. Even her hands were petal-soft and fragile and nothing like that of an Æsir woman. “Did you forget who I was for a moment?” Loki asked. “Have you forgotten what happened in New York? Did you think I confined my thirst for destruction to Midgard?”

She studied him intently and her eyes narrowed. “You’ve got a thirst for something, but I don’t think its destruction. You work awfully hard at being Asgard’s bad boy. Is it who you really are?”

“Kindly do not be a fool. I am not a villain in a fairy tale, ripe for redemption.” What in all the Nine would make her think he was anything but what his reputation suggested, the master of mischief and chaos? In comparison to the almighty perfect Thor, what else could he ever be? His own recent actions had seen to that.

“Whatever,” Darcy said and jerked her hands from his. “So, are you with me on this?”

“An alliance will not work. What have you to offer them?”

“Do you want to die here?”

Loki shrugged. There were better places to die, that was certain.

“There’s nothing they want from Asgard?”

His mouth quirked up. “My head.”

“Don’t tempt me, Magic Man,” Darcy said. “They can’t know—“

Darcy never finished her sentence. Thjasse stepped back into the room. “The kings will see you now.”

***
Thjasse led them up narrow stairs that circled the outside of the tower. Halfway up, Darcy slipped, and Loki reached out to steady her. She shook him off. “I’m fine,” she hissed.

She marched up the stairs ahead of him, all furious and lovely and determined, and he followed behind her with a grin. Whatever happened, he had little doubt Darcy Lewis was going to entertain him while she was about it. She might even succeed with her little plan. Perhaps he might even help.

There were much, much nicer places to die than Jotenheim.

The topmost floor of the keep had a roof held up by twisted pillars of ice, but otherwise it was open to the elements. Two Frost Giants occupied it and they were arguing with one another. The first wore a jeweled loincloth and little else, while the other wore a loincloth and robe in bright white to match. Loki had heard that both of the legitimate sons of Laufey were battling over the throne.

A shudder ripped through him. These were his brothers, or half-brothers at least, and that brought on a spike of fury. He hated that word. Brother.

Darcy had come to a stop, eyes round, biting her lip. The Frost Giant in the robe turned, and his lips peeled back in a feral expression. He stomped over to Loki, and before he could duck, the giant backhanded him across the room. Loki landed hard and skidded across the icy floor, barely stopping at the sheer edge. It was a long way down to the courtyard, even for him. He sat up to wipe a trickle of blood from his mouth and grinned at the two giants. “Now what did I do to deserve that?”

Darcy rushed over to him, concerned, but he waved her off. He’d expected much worse.

The robed giant’s fists clenched to deliver another blow. “You! Father—“

“Now, Helblindi, calm down,” said the other giant, amused. “If the deceitful prince of Asgard had not lured Father to his death, we would still be living in his shadow, not fighting our glorious battle for his throne.”

“Then I have done you a great favor,” Loki said. He knew a thing or two about living in the shadows of others. So the loincloth-clad giant had to be Byleistr, the eldest of Laufey’s children, while robed Helblindi was second. Loki wondered what they would do if he declared himself a son of Laufey too and joined the battle for the throne. As if he wanted to rule this freezing helhole. He just wanted them dead. All of them.

“Bind him,” commanded Byleistr. “Execution is in order. The quicker, the better.”

“That’s more like it,” Loki said. Damn her silly alliance anyway. He had no daggers left, but he was far from defenseless. “My head is right here on my shoulders, come and get it.”

Darcy, though, glowered at Loki and put herself between him and the Frost Giants. He was beginning to wonder if she was touched in the head. “Hold on a sec,” she said. “I thought we agreed to talk, right? Parley?” She swept the two kings of Jotenheim a curtsey. It was unpracticed, but she managed not to fall on her face. “Hi, I’m Lady Darcy of Midgard.”

Helblindi, under cover of bowing, leaned closer to smell her. What he scented must have confused him, for he backed off with a frown. He knew she was not Æsir. “Midgard, isn’t that the primitive realm we fought the Æsir over?”

Byleistr cuffed his brother in the side of the head and bowed to Darcy. “Pay this lout no mind,
milady. Thjasse informs me that you come seeking an alliance. If this is true, why have you
brought the Liesmith with you? We would not listen to him. We would just like him to be dead.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Loki said assured the two giants as he climbed to his feet.

“He’s here because he’s my slave as punishment for crimes on my planet,” Darcy said.

Loki blinked. Suddenly, he was no longer entertained by the mortal wench.

The scheming little minx might have mentioned this part of her plan earlier, though he had to
admire the fact that she’d come up with a reason the giants couldn’t kill him. She glanced back,
daring him to contradict her, and he finished the rest of her sentence from downstairs. *They can’t
know you’re the acting king of Asgard.*

Mayhap she had just saved his life again. He wasn’t feeling grateful.

“What did he do?” Helblindi asked in fascination. “What could he possibly have done to allow
the Æsir to make a slave of their own prince? To a woman, no less.”

Darcy smiled, and she circled Loki slowly, fingers running along leather as if he belonged to
her. There was a sparkle of mischief in her eyes, and he gritted his teeth until they hurt. “Oh, he
was very, very bad,” she said in a smoky voice that riveted every man in the room, Æsir or giant.

He was unexpectedly glad of unforgiving leather and armor.

“He led the Chitauri in an attempt to conquer my world, and you can see how well that went.”
She cast him another challenging glance, and Loki decided to hold his tongue. Later, he would
have revenge. She held up her wrist with the golden bracelet for the giants to see, and then put it
next to his. “My people captured him and he belongs to me now, my very own songbird who can
tell so much about the Chitauri. So can we talk?”

Byleistr and Helblindi exchanged looks, and it was Byleistr who asked, “What is it you’d like
to talk about, milady? I admit, I find this refreshing. Normally, the Æsir prefer to fight and not
speak. If not for your thrall boy, I would think them incapable of speech.”

“Why speak to those we have defeated?” Loki wondered aloud.

Both giants stiffened, but Darcy got there first with an imperious finger across his lips. “You
don’t get to talk.”

“He’s not a very good thrall,” Helblindi observed.

“The worst,” Darcy agreed, turning back to the brothers. “When I met him, he had on a muzzle,
and I should never have taken it off. Anyway, pretend he’s not here. I see the Chitauri have already
arrived. I’m surprised you haven’t allied yourself with them against Asgard.”

“They did not bother to ask!” Helblindi said, pacing the room. “They came with no warning
and attacked several of my outposts. My dear brother,” he commented bitingly, “thinks they will
leave when they have what they have come for. I do not believe it.”

Though Helblindi did not strike Loki as the brightest Laufeyson, he wasn’t wrong. Thanos and
his Chitauri were focused on Asgard, but eventually, the Titan would want to add Jotenheim to his
collection of conquered worlds.

It wasn’t that he cared about this place. He hated Jotenheim, but he hated Thanos more.
“Helblindi is right,” Loki said, moving to stand right behind Darcy. “Once they have what they want, it will only make them more powerful. Then they will return to destroy you.”

Byleistr glowered, ruby eyes cold. “So the pretty songbird does sing! Why should I believe anything you say?”

Darcy started to speak, but Loki put his hand on her arm. “The moves of the Chitauri speak for themselves. You already know what they search for.”

“They do not wander my ice caves for their own pleasure,” Byleistr agreed. “They search for the secret way through Yggdrasil, the one that ends very close to the Allfather’s own treasure room. What is in there that the Chitauri want? The Casket of Ancient Winters?”

“There are things more powerful than the casket,” Loki replied. There was no shame in giving that away; all of the Nine had overblown legends of what was in the vault.

“I think we should all be concerned that they’ve got their eyes on Asgard and Odin’s treasure vault. If Asgard were to fall,” Darcy said, almost tremulous, adding a nice hint of damsel in distress, “how long would the rest of us last?”

“Dear lady,” Helblindi said, proving himself both a bit of a ladies man and a sharper ruler than Loki had supposed, “there is nothing that could possibly convince me to fight on the side of Asgard.”

Darcy refused to be daunted. “We aren’t asking for you to come and fight. We’re just asking that you not attack Asgard at this time.”

Byleistr motioned to his brother, and they turned away to have a whispered conversation.

Loki still had his hand on Darcy’s arm, and she put her hand over his and looked up, her gaze troubled. “You’re doing fine,” he whispered. “Though you might have warned me that you were going to make me your thrall.”

Her whole expression lightened. “Are you telling me I surprised the God of Mischief? It wasn’t on my bucket list, but it should have been.”

Before Loki could discover what a bucket list might be, the two Frost Giant brothers turned around, and Helblindi spoke. “We might even consider keeping the Chitauri out of that secret passage. For a price, of course.”

“May I guess?” Darcy asked with a pert smile. “My pretty songbird’s head?”

“Oh, ha ha,” Loki muttered.

Byleistr cracked a smile, his first. “There are things we want more. The Casket of Ancient Winters.”

That was of little surprise. There was no chance that the Allfather would let it out of the vault (especially after Loki had made such fine use of it), but the giants didn’t need to know that, or that Odin was incommunicado at the moment.

“I have also heard a rumor,” Byleister continued, “that Laufey’s thirdborn still lives.”

It was a good thing Loki was holding on to Darcy, because that might have brought him to his knees. Where in all the Nine Realms would they have heard such a thing? Who would know or
remember after all these centuries that Laufey had another son? Why didn’t they believe him dead?

“Oh, you guys have another brother?” Darcy asked, all innocence.

“Mayhap,” Byleistr said. “If ’tis true, and a Laufeyson resides on Asgard, we want him returned.”

Helblindi, who had been staring out at the snow, whirled suddenly. “Why would we want the witch’s get returned, if he does still live? Simply to appease—“

“Silence, idiot,” Byleister said.

Loki considered this new development. Why would they want him back? He was youngest, but on Jotenheim, any son of Laufey could make a claim for the throne. That would only make their lives more complicated. Who was the witch and who were they trying to appease?

Meanwhile, Darcy was playing her part to the hilt, but in her own Midgardian way. “I’ll see what I can do. You guys rock.”

Byleistr and Helblindi both looked puzzled.

“She means to express her pleasure in a successful negotiation,” Loki put in. “They speak very strangely on Midgard.” Darcy made a fist and hit him in the chest and he smirked at her. They both might live through this after all.

Helblindi bowed and took his leave. Byleistr seemed about to do the same when a gust of wind brought a cloud of snowflakes into the room. Darcy closed her eyes and smiled into it. Tiny ice crystals sparkled in her hair, even on her eyelashes behind her glasses. The Frost Giant stared at her. “You do not think our world ugly?”

Loki already knew what her answer would be, and for the second time that day, Darcy caused that peculiar lurch in his chest. Why should it matter to him that she liked the snow? She was mortal and would be gone from his life in the blink of an eye.

That didn’t make him feel any better.

Darcy shook out her dark curls and gave Byleistr a smile. “I think it’s beautiful. When it snows on my world, we take the day off and go out and play in it. It’s a very special kind of holiday called a snow day.”
A Lady of the Court

Chapter Summary

Darcy gains a wardrobe and an enemy.

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaack!!

Sorry it's been so long, but summer is my busy time of year. I've finally been able to kick all the Lego battle droids (roger, roger) off my desk and get back to work! Looking forward to updating a little more often.

Warning for discussion of suicide in this chapter, but it's so short you might blink and miss it.

Let me be your ruler (ruler)
You can call me Queen Bee
And baby I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule
Let me live that fantasy
Royals, Lorde

As soon as they were back in Hlidskjalf’s steamy laundry, Darcy sat down hard, with her back against endless shelves of towels. Loki joined her, and they sat in silence.

She had never been so scared in all her life.

It was a good thing Frigga had given her the white cloak, as it had hid her knocking knees. Their lives had been in her hands, since Loki had been mostly intent on picking a fight with the giants. Who knew, when she chose political science as a major, that she’d be negotiating for her existence on a subzero alien planet? She should have gone into accounting.

With her luck, she’d have ended up working among the goblins at Gringott’s Bank.

Finally, the heat of the laundry got to her, and Darcy slipped off the cloak and clutched it to her chest like a security blanket.

“You did well,” Loki said quietly.
The intergalactic king of assholes, that’s what he was. How dare he compliment her when all she wanted to do was yell at him. She made a fist and punched Loki in the arm, which didn’t hurt him at all but made her knuckles sting. She’d managed to hit golden armor. “No thanks to you. Dude, what the absolute hell? Do you have a death wish?”

Loki frowned at the wall and didn’t seem to hear her. As she was winding up for another punch (aimed for some place he might actually notice, like his head, but perhaps that was the hardest of all), he blinked and turned to her. Her fist dropped. His expression was carefully blank, but those eyes told a different story, that he had heard her and the answer to her question might be yes.

Darcy swallowed. Even as her hand twitched to reach out to him, Loki climbed to his feet, giving her his back. “Nonsense. Look at all I have to live for,” he spat. “Though if you call me a pretty songbird again, you’ll wish you were dead.”

When he looked back at her, his eyes were cold, empty of every emotion. Perhaps she was imagining things. There was something about Loki that dredged up her own past, and maybe all she was seeing was her own reflection. Why would a being as powerful and long-lived as Loki wish to end it all? Yet her bracelet tingled; he was lying about something, but she had no way of knowing what.

Darcy wished she could draw him out, but those kinds of words were not her strong point. She went for her usual snark instead. Giving him a lopsided smile, just to let him know how much she thought of his threat, she said, “Pretty songbird.”

His eyes widened, and he reached down to pull her to her feet and hard against him. “Which of us,” Loki inquired in a dangerous drawl, “has a death wish?”

She let out a squeak. Here she was again, pressed up against all that leather and armor and yummy Asgardian. Not that it distracted her, or anything. “You do. Why would you go out of your way to antagonize those guys?”

He looked at her as if the answer should be obvious. “They are the mortal enemies of Asgard.”

“Twenty-four hours ago, you were a mortal enemy of Asgard,” she pointed out. She had no idea what to do with her hands and they finally ended up on his chest. The leather was incredibly soft and supple and she made the discovery that he wore some kind of a green chest plate. How did he undress at night? He was a prince, after all, maybe somebody did it for him. Maybe he was looking for volunteers. Maybe she needed to stop and think about something else. “The Frost Giants are sentient beings. They have jobs and families and favorite songs and –”

“They are monsters.”

“They are people, Loki,” Darcy insisted. When his expression didn’t change, she sighed. Was this a Loki attitude or a cultural attitude? “They bought our story though, didn’t they?”

“They would not have taken kindly to discover that I am back in charge of Asgard,” Loki allowed. “If nothing else, we have bought ourselves time.”

“But it’s a good idea, isn’t it?” Even when his expression became forbidding, she pushed on. “You need allies against the Chitauri.”

“What the Frost Giants ask is impossible.”

“Why?”
He released her so suddenly that she wobbled and had to steady herself on the shelving. Her lady parts moaned in disappointment.

Loki headed for the door. “The Casket of Ancient Winters is a powerful relic, and though they could use it to rebuild their world, they most often use it as an offensive weapon against Asgard. As for a prince of Jotenheim living here, that’s ridiculous. You would think someone would notice.”

There was such contempt in his voice that Darcy wondered what she might have missed in the requests of the Frost Giant princes. (Kings? Whatever.) She would have liked to have gotten a glimpse of Loki’s expression, but it was probably his poker face, the face that hid so much.

“Come along, Miss Lewis!”

Darcy looked up at the ceiling, but there was no divine inspiration to be had. It might take her entire lifetime and then some to unravel the mystery that was Loki.

***

Frigga resisted the urge to spy.

She could have sent the ravens to Jotenheim to check on Loki and Darcy, as they had been gone a great while, but she decided to trust her younger son. Loki would see to Darcy’s safety, since his own hung in the balance, and eventually he would see to it because the girl meant something to him.

That, Frigga suspected, would take time. Time was not something they had in abundance.

She’d known Loki would not be the same young man that fell from the Bifrost, yet reality was worse than she’d imagined. He was still deeply angry, and now he had so many more hard edges. His eyes reflected horrors that could never be unseen. There were many things out there in the abyss that did not bear thinking of, and she had no doubt he had run into at least some of those repulsive creatures. What might have been done to him kept Frigga up at night.

Long ago, as his mother, it would have been up to her to soothe his hurts and mend his heart. Now it was past time to give that role to someone else.

“My Queen, are you alright?”

Frigga blinked and realized she had no idea how long she had been staring at the tapestry on the loom before her. When it was finished, it would be of a great battle, but it was no battle she was familiar with. Her fingers traced the odd figures that she had started in the foreground, one bright red and gold, the other red, white and blue. This was the future.

One of her ladies-in-waiting stood next to her, looking concerned. Though she appeared hardly more than a girl, Sigyn had been with Frigga for many years. The other ladies were watching from a circle of chairs. Frigga and her women gathered every day in her sitting room to sew, take tea and exchange gossip. “I am fine,” the queen assured Sigyn, “just distracted. Has anyone seen Loki this afternoon?”

Frigga had already heard much about his traipsing about that morning with Darcy at his heels or on his arm. Speculation about the mortal girl had run rampant through the palace, and everyone
wanted to get a look at her. Most Æsir had never been to Midgard, and dinner, the queen suspected, would be thronged with curious nobles. Before Sigyn could even open her mouth to reply, though, the doors flew open and Loki stomped in, Darcy at his side. They were arguing.

“I shan’t go back for the taser, if that’s what you’re asking,” Loki said testily.

“Of course not,” Darcy returned. “I was out of gas cartridges, so it was done anyway. Since I lost it saving your life, though, I think you need to find me a new weapon. I seem to need to defend myself around here.”

“If you think I’ll hand you a sword or anything with a sharp edge, you’re mistaken.”

“Worried about the family jewels?”

Loki stopped, and a hint of a smirk appeared. “The family jewels. You have such quaint figures of speech on Midgard. You must stop teasing me with your supposed great knowledge of such things, otherwise I’ll feel the need to test it.”

Frigga bit back a smile. She had no idea why they were discussing jewels or why Darcy’s cheeks had flamed up like a bonfire, but she was charmed that neither of them seemed to be aware of the people around them. They had stopped in the middle of the sitting room to confront each other, his arms crossed at his chest, her hands on her hips. All of her ladies had risen to curtsey to their prince, and they were gaping in a most unladylike fashion. Not one of them would have had the courage to berate Loki, certainly not in public. Frigga liked very much what she had seen so far of Darcy Lewis. She would temper Loki’s ambition with practicality and wouldn’t hesitate to speak her mind.

Darcy faced him, her chin up in defiance. “Point me in Sif’s direction. She’ll teach me to use a sword.”

Loki’s gaze swept over the ladies-in-waiting and they hurried to curtsey, but he did not acknowledge any of them. “You are serious,” he said to Darcy.

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“You are mortal.”

“Those without swords may still die upon them.”

“I think it an excellent idea,” Frigga put in, and both of them turned to face her. “Every woman needs to know how to defend herself. I am glad to see you both returned safely, it must have been a successful trip.”

Darcy shifted her feet. “Successful is kind of relative—” she began.

“Define successful,” Loki said.

By their expressions, Frigga thought it was just the sort of escapade she had hoped it would be—full of high adventure in exotic places, with the threat of imminent death forcing them to depend on each other. She’d known full well they’d meet up with Frost Giants, for the giants were no fools. They’d be trying to use that pathway to their advantage. Hopefully, Loki had shown himself in some sort of heroic light along the way. He needed to be reminded of the good he used to do. “You may explain what happened, my son. Lady Darcy, I have the seamstresses awaiting you in your rooms. They’ll provide you with everything you need for your stay.”
Darcy opened her mouth to demure, but Frigga would hear no objections. The seamstresses had their orders, to compliment the mortal’s beauty and give her a style that would set her apart from the rest of the court. Frigga turned to Sigyn. “See that Lady Darcy gets back to her rooms.”

“Of course, my queen,” the lady-in-waiting said. She took a moment to curtsey deeply to Loki, never taking her eyes from his. Something passed between them before he turned away.

Frigga had thought that horse long gone from the stables, and rekindled attraction between Loki and Sigyn could spoil her plans. She would need to be vigilant.

As the two women walked out, Frigga followed Loki to her scrying room. It was much smaller than her sitting room, but it was safe from prying eyes and ears, as she had set those spells herself. It was also her favorite room, open to the beauty of Asgard. Flowering vines climbed the columns and grew in profusion between the balustrades, perfuming the air. In the center of the room was a round, still pool. Sitting down on the edge, Loki stared into its depths. Then he dragged his fingers through the water, destroying his own reflection as if he hated what he saw.

Frigga stood next to him and put her hand on his shoulder. “What do you see, my son?”

“You know I have never been able to see as you do in the scrying pool.”

The gift of peeking at the future was rare. That wasn’t what she’d meant, but she let it be. She sat on the edge of the pool near him. “Tell me all.”

Loki gave her a condensed version of what happened in the Frost Giant’s realm, and with a little prompting, even confessed to why he was not in their dungeons awaiting execution. Frigga laughed aloud. “Darcy told them you were her thrall?”

“Apparently,” he said in disgust, “my humiliation is worth more than my head.”

“Oh, Loki, she’s delightful! What other woman would have dared such a thing?”

“Mother, what is it you think you’re up to? Miss Lewis is mortal.”

“I have no idea of what you speak,” Frigga said in bland innocence. “I just find her charming.”

“You used to be less transparent.”

“You used to be more obedient.”

He rose with a shake of his head, and Frigga was prepared to be satisfied with what she knew, yet he didn’t leave. Loki wandered the edges of the room and stopped in front of an intricate water clock. Given as a gift when Frigga had married Odin, it was a perfect scale model of Hlidskjalf with all sorts of opening doors and dancing figurines to announce the hour. It also kept track of the movements of celestial bodies close to Asgard, including her own homeworld of Vanir. Loki had loved that clock as a child, but he was scowling at it. “Is this correct?”

“It had been correct for millennia,” she answered, wondering what he could be thinking. “Even when you used to put your toy soldiers in the water, it still kept the time and date.”

He turned away from it sharply and still didn’t take his leave.

“Is there more of the Frost Giants?”

Loki did a complete circuit of the room before leaning against a column. “Other than the
casket, the Frost Giants have asked for the return of Laufey’s missing son.”

An old, old fear rose in her heart, and Frigga surged to her feet. She recalled so many times, when Loki was small, of going to his bedside in the middle of the night to make certain he was still there. She’d lived in horror of Laufey discovering what had happened to his infant son and stealing him back. “No. No. How could they possibly ask such a thing? No one knows but you and I and Odin and Thor.”

“Are you certain? Did no one see Fa—,” he hesitated, corrected himself, “the Allfather bring me from Jotenheim? Was there never a time when I revealed myself as an infant?”

“Odin smuggled you home, he didn’t even tell your uncles. Noss knew, but she would never have told. She loved you too much for that.” Noss had been nurse, nanny and bodyguard to Loki, handpicked by Frigga herself. She’d died centuries ago, protecting him from assassins when he’d been naught but a boy.

“Someone knows,” Loki said grimly. “Someone the Frost Giants want to appease.”

“I doubt they will tell us,” she said, and gave consideration to sending out spies to answer that question. “What will you do?”

“What can I do? They’ll use the casket against us and I have no intention of handing myself over to them.”

Frigga knew Loki disliked demonstrations of affection, but she couldn’t help it. She wrapped her arms around his neck from behind, her cheek pressed to his, and surprisingly, he didn’t shake her off. “I would not let you hand yourself over,” she whispered. “They left you to die, and they can’t have you back.”

“After everything?”

He had done terrible things, acts that were hard to forgive. He needed to atone for those deeds, but she understood the world that had shaped him and knew only too well why he had done them. “After everything,” Frigga confirmed.

“Mother,” Loki started, then stopped. Finally, he said, “Mother, I never meant—“

“I know.”

Of course she already knew. All he had done in the name of power and revenge and fury, he’d never meant to hurt her. Somewhere within his broken heart, the man who had been her son still existed. Frigga tightened her hold on Loki and swore to the stars that she would never let him fall into darkness again.

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It only took Darcy sixty seconds to figure out that her noble escort felt such duties were beneath her. Maybe it was the stiff set of Lady Sigyn’s shoulders or the frown that marred her delicate, perfect features (how could anyone have hair that blond or eyes that blue?). Maybe it was her words: “Can you not find your own way, mortal?”
After her adventures with the Frost Giants, this was the last thing she needed, to be pitched head first into *Mean Girls*. “I’m sure I can,” Darcy said. She’d rather wander aimlessly for hours. She hadn’t missed the look the noblewoman had given Loki, the one that said she’d like to be the one undressing him that night. Somehow she’d gotten away with it, too, right under Frigga’s nose. “You just run along back to your sewing,” Darcy couldn’t resist adding as she walked away.

In an instant, Lady Sigyn pulled Darcy to a halt with a deadly grip on her wrist. “I am not your servant,” she hissed. Then she studied Darcy through narrowed eyes. “What in all the Nine Realms does he see in you?”

Darcy winced, feeling as if her bones were being ground together, and she couldn’t yank free. Here was another person who thought she was doing the horizontal tango with Loki. The image that popped into her head brought heat to her cheeks, but at least her quick tongue had not abandoned her. “There must be something we Earth girls do better.”

“Whore!”

“Takes one to know one!”

“Lady Darcy!” Volstagg barreled cheerfully around the corner, and Darcy was never so happy to see anybody in her life. Sigyn released her in a hurry as the burly warrior swooped in and took Darcy’s arm in his. He appeared not to notice anything nasty had been going on. “I had hoped we would have a chance to chat. Would you excuse us, Sigyn?”

The noblewoman barely had a chance to nod before Volstagg whisked Darcy out of sight.

“Thanks, big guy,” Darcy said. “Glad to see you’re okay.” The last time she’d seen him, he’d had frost coming out of his nose and ears from the Every Flavor Beans.

“I should know enough by now to spot one of Loki’s tricks,” Volstagg said gloomily. “Fell right into that one, did I not? I about starved to death.”

Darcy had her doubts that the big guy could ever starve to death, but Volstagg continued. “‘Tis you I am concerned about. Are you alright, milady?”

“That was about to get ugly.”

“Avoid Lady Sigyn if you can,” he advised in a low voice. “Though she is Tyr’s intended, she has enjoyed the pleasures of Loki’s bed in the past. She won’t hesitate to better herself, if you take my meaning.”

“A prince is better than a general. Yeah, I get it. Thanks for the warning.” So not only was the lady an ex-girlfriend, but she still desired Loki for herself. Darcy had just made an enemy. “Could you get me back to my suite? I think I need some peace and quiet.”

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“Has anyone found my iPod yet?”

Darcy’s version of peace and quiet involved her newest playlists at high volume, and by the crestfallen looks on her maid’s faces, there was none to be had.
“I am so sorry, milady,” Brunhilde said. “Nothing has been found.”

“It’s okay,” Darcy said. She hadn’t seen it since the Frost Giants had destroyed her room, and she guessed it had been scooped up with the rest of the debris. It was her destiny, it seemed, not to be able to hold on to an iPod for very long. At least she still had her Starkphone, but she was starting to become concerned about the lack of plugs in Asgard.

“The seamstresses are waiting,” Brunhilde said, directing her toward the dressing room.

The seamstresses turned out to be a fierce lot and determined to give her an extensive wardrobe, certainly more than she’d ever need. They took measurements and argued over her best colors and styles. At least Darcy was able to convince them she was a warrior woman like Sif (they called her a shield maiden, and she hoped they weren’t too serious about the maiden part), and they agreed to supply her with tunics and trousers and really stylin’ boots meant for adventuring. She was also able to produce a few pictures of her favorite ladies from the Lord of the Rings on her Starkphone. The seamstresses were much impressed by Midgardian fashion, and Darcy didn’t have the heart to tell them anything different. Within two hours, she had a white gown with a deep vee collar that gave her fabulous cleavage. It even had long, floaty sleeves and a gold belt at her waist.

She studied herself in the mirror and smiled. She didn’t see plain, mortal Darcy Lewis at all.

In spite of her run-in with Lady Sigyn, Darcy wasn’t inclined to hide in her suite, not if she could wander Hlidskjalf’s halls looking like a princess. So off she went by herself through the corridors of the palace, determined to learn her way around. Jofrid had told her if she kept making right turns, she would end up in one of the courtyard gardens. As she was about to take one of those right turns, the bracelet grew cold on her wrist. She stopped, staring up the great stone stairway in front of her. It led up to the library, and by the way the bracelet warmed, she knew who she’d find there.

Not that she was the least bit interested in seeing Loki. Not at all. She’d seen quite enough of him today, thank you very much.

Darcy took three firm steps toward the garden, then halted. Maybe, just maybe, it was not about her seeing Loki, but about Loki seeing her. Gathering her skirts, she whirled and trotted up the stairs. It was late afternoon, and unlike her first visit, the library was far from empty. There were several men and women conversing beneath the illusion of the World’s Tree, and though they did not halt their discussion, they all gave her curious glances. One of the men gave her boobs more than a cursory glance and she regally ignored him. She’d confronted enough Æsir for one day. Her wrist ached fiercely.

Of the four doors from the tree room, Darcy chose the same one as the night before. The bracelet hinted that she was going in the right direction, but she wandered the stacks, browsing as she went. Loki didn’t need to know she’d come looking for him. Pausing in the history section, she pulled a volume and ran her fingers over the title: *A History of the Light Elves*. She couldn’t wait to meet a real elf (hopefully more like Legolas than Dobby), but she’d read this later. She wanted information on the Frost Giants.

“May I help you, milady?”

Darcy looked up. It was the guy from the tree room who’d looked like he wanted to carry on a conversation with her chest. “I’m fine, thanks,” she said coldly.

He didn’t take the hint. To her eyes, he appeared to be somewhere in his fifties, though she knew he was probably centuries or millennia older. He was handsome in a distinguished sort of
way, with just the right amount of grey in his blond hair and bright brown eyes. She might have
given him the time of day if he’d stop leering. “You must be the Lady of Midgard.” He grabbed
her hand and drew it to his lips. “I once visited your fair realm for research. The hospitality was
unrivalled in all the Nine.”

He didn’t give her hand back. In fact, she was pretty grossed out that he seemed to be
slobbering on her knuckles. She had no doubt what he meant by hospitality and didn’t have any
desire to bring him up to date on feminism. Darcy succeeded in freeing her hand and started to back
away. “Glad you enjoyed yourself. If you’ll excuse me, I’m here to meet someone.”

She turned and headed along the stacks. She didn’t think she was in any real danger, but she
wasn’t going to hang around to find out either. There was an arched doorway ahead, and beyond,
she could see the corner or the great window where she’d read to Loki the night before.

“Are you sure you wish to go that way?” he called.

He had not followed, and Darcy suspected there was an invisible sign above the arch. *Loki’s
Corner. Woe Betide Those Who Disturb Him.* Well, Darcy wasn’t afraid. She cast the Æsir a smile
and a wave. “Yeah, I’m sure. Bye!”

She burst through the archway, and sure enough, Loki was there, curled up in the corner of the
window seat with an open book on his knees. He had a pile of books next to him. He glanced up to
give her a sour look before returning to reading. Then he blinked, and his gaze shot back up.

Darcy bit down on a smile. It was an honest-to-goodness double take from the Prince of
Mischief himself. That was enough to put a spring in a girl’s step. Lucky him, he was going to get
to hear her rant. “You know, you’ve got no right to look down on us mortals. You and your high
culture and your long lives and blah blah blah. At least we have some manners. There are way too
many people here who think Earth girls are easy.”

Loki got serious about his stare, dragging his gaze up her body, lingering daringly at her
breasts. She should slap him, just like she should have slapped Mr. Hospitality, but wasn’t this why
she’d come looking for him in the first place? She was pinned in place by his frank sexual
appreciation. He liked what he saw, and she liked how it made her feel. She wasn’t mortal Darcy
Lewis, but beautiful, confident Lady Darcy, and there was no reason she couldn’t march over to
him and kiss that naughty mouth of his. She wanted to know what he tasted like.

Then Loki brought it all crashing down as he pulled an earbud out of his ear. “What?”

She stood shock still for a moment. If she hadn’t just seen it, she might not have believed it.
Where in Asgard did the Master of Mischief get earbuds?

“Give it back!” Darcy screeched, library or no library. She dove forward, but Loki snatched it
up first and held it out of her reach. She scrambled for it anyway and ended up in his lap.

Loki had on his biggest trouble-making grin. “What was it you said yesterday? Something
about convincing me of the wonders of Midgard.”

“Borrowing without asking is stealing.” He made her so mad and still made her hot. No fair.

“Semantics,” Loki said. “Music does not count as a wonder of Midgard?”

“You love to throw people’s words back in their faces, don’t you?” Darcy tried to escape, but
he pulled her in again, one arm around her waist. Her body wanted to melt into his, and she fought with everything she had. “Let me go.”

“Say my name,” he purred in her ear. “Say it and say please and perhaps I’ll release you.”

“You give my iPod back. Why isn’t the bracelet punishing you for being bad?”

His grin got bigger, if that was possible. “You must not think you’re in any danger. I rather think you’re enjoying yourself.”

She could be somewhere quiet, wandering a peaceful garden, but no, she had come looking for him. Gran would be shaking her head. Or would she? Her mobster grandfather had died long before she was born, and Darcy only had stories of what he was like. She was beginning to wonder if Gran might actually take a shine to Loki. Darcy scowled at him and picked up the dangling earbud. “What are you listening to? Oh, Maroon 5 rocks. Songs About Jane is the best album ever. We should totally make Thor listen to it. Get it? Thor and Jane—"

Ooh, she’d said the T word, and Loki’s face transformed, like he was sucking on a lemon. “Let Thor and his woman find their own music. Maroon 5 is better than the tedious Ariana Grande or the irritating Pussycat Dolls.”

“Come on, Ariana’s not that bad,” she replied, wondering how she could get him and his cool accent to say pussycat again. “Though I get that she may not be your thing. Have you tried Coldplay?” When she reached for the iPod, her sleeve fell back, revealing her wrist. It had turned some pretty ugly and exotic colors.

The atmosphere in the library chilled. Loki grabbed her arm above the bruise, though his touch was delicate. It was obviously a hand print, and even more carefully, he fitted his own hand over it. The mark was too small. “Who did this?” he demanded in a dangerous tone.

She wasn’t sure why he would care. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. You should have gone to Eir to have it healed. I am not much good with healing magic.”

“Destruction’s more your thing, I think.”

Loki grimaced. “Do not try to deflect me, wench. Dare I ask what happened?”

His gaze was knowing, and Darcy thought he had already guessed about Lady Sigyn. “I told her to go back to her sewing. She didn’t take it well.” He snorted and shifted his grip, and cold seeped into her skin, soothing the ache. “Thanks,” she said. "If you’re not careful, Magic Man, I might think you cared.”

“How does Stark put it? Don’t touch my stuff?”

“Yeah, I’m out of here.” Darcy stood, cursing herself for a fool. Why was it she insisted on forgetting what he was? She yanked her hand from his and headed for the door. He was kind enough, at least, to release her and not jar her wrist. “I don’t belong to anybody and I’m so done with you and all your fellow Æsir and your immortal arrogance bullshit. Come find me when you can send me home.”

She didn’t quite make it through the arch. Somehow Loki was there first, leaning casually, blocking the way out. “Come, milady, I jest,” he said. The look in his pretty eyes was intense, as if he didn’t want her go, and maybe there was a hint of contrite in his demeanor. This, Darcy realized,
was why she kept coming back, for those tantalizing clues to the real guy beneath the sneering veneer. Then he held up one of the books he’d been reading.

_Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire_. His copy even had the cool new cover with Hogwarts on the spine. “How-?” she blurted stupidly. “Amazon? Barnes and Noble? Do they deliver to Asgard?”

He shrugged and didn’t answer her question. “Perhaps,” Loki said instead, “it is my turn to read to you.”
Chapter Summary

Magic happens. Nuff said.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Just returned from a writer's conference. Two days locked away in a hotel with 250 other writers, and I feel completely energized and so thankful that I can squeeze in some time to write. Thanks to everybody for their support! Keep the comments coming, they energize me too.

As always, Marvel and JK Rowling and anybody else I've borrowed from, please don't sue. Not making money, just here for the pure joy of it.

The sound of my heart

The beat goes on and on and on and on and

Boom clap

You make me feel good

Come on to me, come on to me now

Boom Clap, Charli XCX

“Complaining about security at the World Cup,” said Percy. “They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher’s put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with ensuite Jacuzzi, but I’ve got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped up on sticks.”

Darcy chortled.

Loki glared at her over the top of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Most women would have been banished immediately, as he had no time for gigglers or interruptions. Then again, most ladies of the court wouldn’t permit themselves more than a calculated titter. Darcy’s laugh was a burst of joy, completely artless.

“I’d like to meet Mundungus Fletcher,” she said. “He’d probably be a hoot at a party.”

Of all the silliness inherent in Harry Potter, there was one thing the author had pegged: the
eccentricity of mages. “I think I know this wizard,” Loki said.

“Really?”

She was staring at him with wide eyes, and he hid a grin. Was he trying to impress the mortal wench? Why yes, he was, because curling up in the library with a pretty girl at his side and a good book was a damn sight better than letting his troubles eat away at him.

Darcy had somehow managed to squirm her way between him and the window and take over half the pillows on the window seat. She’d kicked off her slippers, and the shifting of her skirts gave him enticing peeks of trim ankles and curious purple-painted toenails. Lying only a hair’s breadth away from him, Loki was incredibly aware of what he’d do to keep her there. “Among mages, everyone knows Skeggi Thorvald would cheat his own mother and hasn’t spent money on new robes since the Vikings sacked Lindisfarne. He’s wanted on four of the Nine for selling fake dragon eggs. Hoenir lets him hide out at the Collegium, for he’s got a soft spot for rogues. Skeggi is great fun at feasts, though. Famous for spoon hanging.”

“From his nose?”

Loki waggled his eyebrows and grinned. “That’s one place he hangs them from.”

Darcy laughed. It was not a joke he would use with a delicate flower of the court, but if Darcy Lewis was a blushing maid, it was time to resign his godhood. He no longer had use for blushing maids or artful ladies anyway. They could not be trusted.

Then again, he could not even trust himself, could he? It had taken his mother’s magnificent water clock to make him realize that a portion of his life was missing. Perhaps he’d fallen longer in the abyss than he’d ever imagined, and yet he knew that wasn’t the truth.

That lost time had been spent under the thumb of Thanos, and what might have happened in that time made even his blood run cold.

Loki didn’t want to think about it. He couldn’t think about it.

Darcy’s expression became thoughtful. She ran her finger over the glass of the window, tracing the outline of nearby buildings. Though the bruises on her wrist remained, she was no longer favoring it. He would have words with Sigyn when their paths crossed again.

“What’s place he hangs them from.”

Darcy asked.

“No. It houses a magnificent library, and is a place for mages to gather and share ideas and experiment.”

“A think tank, then. So you don’t have a wizarding school? How did you learn?”

“My mother taught me.” Loki had so many memories of sitting at Frigga’s knee, pouring all his effort into one of those rare things he excelled at but Thor did not. “When she ran out of things to teach me, she passed me on to Hoenir, who is the Master of the Collegium.” He put the book aside. “Most are not so fortunate. Magic is not considered a gift here, at least not for boys. Seiðr is a woman’s art. Sons are expected to become warriors and sorcery is oft buried or ignored.”

“That’s sad,” she said, a certain wistfulness in her tone.

Loki studied her, gauging her sincerity. It wouldn’t be the first time a woman had professed interest in magic in an attempt to snag his notice, but he was expert at spotting a lie. She spoke
honestly. “You desire magic, Darcy Lewis?”

She gave him a sideways glance. “As if you didn’t already know the answer to that, Your Graciousness.”

Truly, he didn’t know why he put up with her, bracelet be damned. “Hold out your hand,” Loki commanded, sitting up.

She faced him, biting her lower lip, but she did as she was told. His fingers brushed her palm, and green fire bloomed. Darcy gasped. “Is this what it feels like to you? It’s like 5 Hour Energy and glitter and fireworks injected right into a vein.”

No one had ever described his sorcery in that way, but she wasn’t wrong, as far as he could guess. “It is both warmer than the heat of a fire and colder than the abyss. It is the power to reshape the world around me and it is always at my command.”

“How?”

“By taking thought and making it real.”

Darcy concentrated fiercely on the flame in her hand. It should have been a most unflattering expression, but he was beguiled by her determination. Nothing happened. “You’re trying too hard,” Loki said. “A light touch works better. Give the flame a form.”

He considered giving it a nudge to help her along, as humans seemed to have little affinity for magic. Then the fire morphed, and there was a tiny green dragon resting on her palm. It reared back, blew a mighty gust of fire from its nostrils and took to the air before dissolving into a shower of sparks.

The expression on her face was rapt. “Did I do that?”

“With a little help.”

Darcy flashed him a smile. “Thanks for sharing. Speaking of dragons,” she added, “we need to talk about Smaug.”

The very last thing Loki wanted to think about was anything having to do with his current quandary. Her hand was still in his, and he preferred to concentrate on tracing the fine lines of her palm. “It matters not. The tesseract is safe enough, and I have no intention of retrieving it any time soon.”

“You need to read The Hobbit before you try to get it back,” she insisted, though her voice was not quite steady and her hand twitched under his ministrations. “Smaug’s no pushover, and he doesn’t take kindly to anyone messing with his treasure.”

From what little he’d seen of it, Darcy’s dragon was far bigger than the Asgardian version, but it wasn’t the first one he’d come up against. “You doubt my ability to defeat the creature? Perhaps you set this up on purpose, hoping it would kill me.”

“You know, that’s a good idea, wish I’d thought of it sooner,” she snapped and jerked her hand from his. “I’m trying to warn you, you idiot. If you don’t want my help, just say so.” She jumped up off the window seat and flounced toward the door.

She was not going to escape him so easily. Loki reached out to stop her, careful to catch her undamaged wrist. “Tell me, Lady Darcy of Midgard, why would you offer me your help? Have
you forgotten once again who I am?”

“You won’t let me forget,” she said with some asperity as he reeled her back in. “You’re the big, scary God of Mischief and Lies who tried to conquer my planet. But is that who you really are?”

“Who else would I be?” He tugged her down into his lap, enjoying the quick rise and fall of her breasts as she let out a soft huff of surprise. She didn’t fight him, though, her body melting into his. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders and her gaze delved into his, as if looking for something. He reminded himself that she was mortal, a friend of his oaf of a brother and mixed up in his mother’s schemes. He should banish her from his side.

“Who else indeed?” Darcy’s gentle fingertips skimmed his jaw. “If that’s all true and you’re so awful, why can’t I see it?”

“Silly wench,” he murmured. There was another reason to send her off. She was insightful for a mortal and he didn’t like it. All he could think about, though, was her plush lips, so close to his.

“What is it you think you see? You are blinded by too many fairy tales.”

“And you,” she said, “are the biggest freakin’ liar in the universe.”

It was Darcy who closed that final gap between them, her mouth brushing his, and coherent thought went straight out of his head. Clearly, he’d gone far too long without a lover, otherwise how could this impudent girl be so intoxicating? The minx feathered tiny kisses across his lips, then used her tongue to get him to open up to her. With a growl, he sank his fingers into her hair and kissed her back, simultaneously thanking the stars that she was no dewy miss and making rash promises to himself to track down and destroy every mortal she’d been with.

His hands slipped out of her hair, sliding down to her hips, pulling her harder against him. She took that as invitation to shift position, straddling his thighs and grinding herself against him. No Æsir woman would be so wanton, especially in a place where they might be seen. Darcy didn’t seem to care at all, and Loki was both delighted with her response and horrified that Thor might actually be on to something with these Midgard women. He slid one hand under her skirts, climbing upward. She wasn’t wearing stockings, and her skin was like silk. She really was a shameless hussy, and he wanted more.

Darcy sucked on his lower lip before letting go. Then she brushed her thumb across his mouth.

“How about you just be Loki?”

Then she was gone, slipping away from him and disappearing through the archway.

Loki stared after her for far too long. Then he threw himself back against the pillows with a groan. He should go after her, insist that she finish what she started. He should remind her who the god was and make damn sure she never thought of him as anything but a monster ever again.

If he caught up to her, though, he feared none of those things would happen. Like as not she would get a confession from him.

He had no idea who Loki was anymore.
Darcy fled the library, cursing herself with every step down the stairs.

What had possessed her to kiss Loki?

Then she’d gone on to dare him to be himself for a change.

Oh, she could admit she’d wanted to kiss him since she’d laid eyes on the God of Mischief. She could come up with a dozen different reasons, like he was hot and her libido wouldn’t listen to reason, or how many girls could say they’d kissed a Norse God? Jane would say it was just her craving for danger and excitement.

Darcy knew magic when it happened, though, and she wasn’t talking about the kind Loki was expert in. That kiss moved mountains and made the stars fall and the universe grind to a halt. It had felt like the fire between them would consume them both and at the same time she’d felt as though she’d come home.

“Cliché, much?” she demanded of herself as she stomped barefoot off in the direction she should have gone in the first place. She hadn’t thought to stop for her slippers, and be damned if she’d go back for them now. At the end of a long hallway, she took a right turn that opened onto a wide set of stone steps and an enclosed garden. There was a fountain in the center, a tall set of bowls that overflowed down into the shallow pool beneath. Darcy perched on the edge of it. The water looked cool and inviting, and she was without shoes anyway, so after a careful look around, she hauled up her skirts to her knees and dangled her toes in the pool. The temperature was perfect, not too cold or too warm. No one came running, so she presumed the water wasn’t sacred or anything.

Of all people, why Loki? He tried to conquer her world, and people died.

Maybe there was something wrong with her, that she couldn’t see evil in him. He was one hella hot mess, but the longer she spent in his company, the more certain she was all his supervillain nonsense was a façade. A very carefully crafted and cultivated one that he clung to as if he had nothing else, but it was a façade nonetheless. Supervillains didn’t read to mortals or make them laugh or try to heal their hurts. She peeled back her sleeve to look at her wrist. The bruising still stood out against her pale skin, but it no longer ached, and she could bend it like normal.

Too restless to sit still, she rose and waded around the fountain. She really, really needed to talk to Gran. She’d married Darcy’s grandfather, knowing full well she was marrying the mob, and she’d never remarried. Had Gran seen something in him no one else had seen or dared to look for?

“Lady Darcy!”

Fandral swept toward her, resplendent in blue. He was very good looking and she’d rather liked him during his sojourn on Earth. Maybe this was just what the doctor ordered, to forget about Loki for a while. Maybe it would give her some perspective.

The dashing blond swordsman took in the fact that she was standing in the fountain and paused. “Milady, are you well?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she assured him, wading back to the edge. “You guys don’t do this? The fountain in the little park near where I grew up was even more crowded than the city pools on a hot summer day.” She held out a hand to him. “Help me out.”

Fandral rose to the occasion, assisting her back over the edge and onto dry land. Since he was
already holding her hand, he bowed over it. “I thought you might enjoy a tour of the palace. Did Loki show you around at all?”

“No,” Darcy replied, and she couldn’t keep a hint of bitterness from her tone. There was no one in all of Asgard she’d rather be with, but Loki was not boyfriend material. “He’s got better things to do than entertain a mortal.”

“Then he’s forgotten his manners around a lady,” Fandral said it like he meant it, and it was like a balm to her heart. He held out his arm to Darcy. “Shall we?”

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Things went downhill so fast that Darcy’s head spun.

Fandral escorted her back to her suite for footwear, then off they went for a tour. For about five hallways, several statues and a number of turns, Fandral plied her with the history of Hlidskjalf and Asgard, employing his considerable flirting skills. She floated along at his side, enjoying herself, putting Loki from her mind (mostly. Maybe. Okay, not really, but she was trying.)

To the side of one enormous corridor was a sitting room, and Fandral turned her toward it. There she found Lady Sif and the other warriors, their expressions grim. “We wish to speak with you,” Sif said.

It was an ambush. Darcy pulled away from Fandral, glaring at him. “Thanks a lot.”

“My deepest apologies, milady,” he said with a bow. “I live in hope that you’ll bear no grudges and save me a dance on our next feasting day.”

“No promises,” Darcy returned sourly and settled onto the arm of a chair, facing them. Lady Sif stood across from her, one hand fidgeting by her sword hilt. Hogun leaned against the wall, looking forbidding, while Fandral joined his friends. When Darcy’s gaze landed on Volstagg, sitting in an oversized chair, he had the grace to squirm. “You tried to bring me here earlier, didn’t you?” she said to him. “After my run-in with Lady Sigyn.”

He stroked his enormous red beard and gave her a hopeful smile. “I hope you enjoyed some peace and quiet, milady.”

That reminded her, she’d forgotten her iPod with Loki. Whatever. She didn’t want it bad enough to go face the wolf in his lair, not after what had happened. “Go ahead, say what you want to say. On Earth we call this an intervention. Where’s the sign? You guys totally need one.”

“I do not care what it is called on Midgard,” Sif returned coldly. “We want to know what happened to Thor.”

“He is still alive, isn’t he?” Fandral asked.

“He’s Thor, of course he’s still alive,” Darcy said. “He came to New Mexico to visit Jane and the Chitauri came to visit Loki. Last time I saw Thor, he was beating the crap out of the Chitauri and loving it.” If she was not mistaken, Sif’s whole body twitched at the mention of Jane.

The four warriors exchanged significant looks. “How do we know you aren’t lying?” Sif asked.
“What are you to Loki?”

She didn’t have an answer to that, not after what had just happened. “Um, keeper? Handler? If you go ask Loki, he’ll probably tell you I’m either the bane of his existence or an insignificant mortal, depending on his mood.”

“You cannot blame us for being concerned,” Fandral said gently. “We expected Thor dragging Loki along in chains and what we ended up with is quite different. Somehow he is in charge again.”

“You should be careful,” Hogun said to Darcy. “He is not to be trusted.”

“An accomplished liar,” Volstagg agreed. “He loves to sow chaos.”

“We need Thor back,” Sif said.

“You can’t use the tesseract, Loki hid it,” Darcy told them. There was no way she was going to mention her role in the cube’s hiding place, though she might pay good money to watch this lot take on Smaug. It would be as big an event as Wrestlemania. “Even if you could use it, the Other would know.”

“How do we know what Loki says of the Other is true?” Sif turned to her companions. “All we know of these Chitauri has come from Loki. We are jumping through hoops again because of him!”

“I was standing next to him when he was talking to the Other,” Darcy said. “That creep was serious about invading Asgard to get the tesseract and Loki knew it. I don’t think Loki wants the fall of your pretty little realm. Can’t rule over a pile of rubble. No fun in that.”

They all stared at Darcy. “You’re defending him,” Volstagg said. “Did he not just try to conquer your world?”

Was she defending him? She had just kissed him. She was going straight to hell.

“Surely you remember the Destroyer,” Fandral added.

“Of course I remember the Destroyer!” Darcy returned crossly. “I saw what happened in New York too, I still have family there. You guys could stop treating me like I’m an idiot and let me try to explain.” Even as she stood her ground, she had no idea what she was going to say. Darcy cleared her throat and hoped the right words came out. “You guys used to be friends with Loki, right?”

Her only reply was a shrug and slight nod from Fandral and Volstagg. Sif scowled mightily. Hogun’s expression never changed.

“Do you ever think about saving him? Giving him a chance to redeem himself?”

It was probably the dumbest thing she’d ever said. The warriors clearly thought she was crazy.

“Save him from what?” Sif scoffed. “Loki has no one but himself to blame. He committed treason trying to wrest the throne from his brother. His jealousy of Thor knows no bounds.”

Darcy blinked, and several missing pieces of the puzzle clicked into place.

“You did not know,” said Volstagg shrewdly.
“Yes, I mean, no,” she said hurriedly. “I suspected.” It was the oldest story ever, wasn’t it? Two brothers, one throne. “I’m not sure he can pull an Anakin Skywalker and come back from the Dark Side. But I’ve seen glimpses, enough to make me think he deserves a chance to try.” She held up the gold bracelet on her wrist. “That’s probably why I’m the proud owner of this.”

“The queen is blinded by her love for her son,” Sif said. “She cannot see what he is, nor can you.”

Darcy stared around at the four warriors, and their expressions were forbidding. She was wasting her time. Too bad, she was in desperate need of allies. She stood. “Fine, then. You do what you think is right and I’ll do the same. At least I’m not afraid to try and save him.” She whirled on her heel, and marched off, hoping she was heading in the right direction to go back to her suite or somewhere other than the kitchens or the laundry. Otherwise, her dramatic exit would suck.

“Prove your words,” Sif called after her unexpectedly. “Prove to me that I am wrong and you are not in thrall to Loki.”

Darcy stopped. “How am I supposed to do that?”

A slight smile crossed Sif’s face. “Personal combat, of course. I will meet you in the training yard first thing in the morning.”
Chivalry isn't in my Nature

Chapter Summary

Darcy solves problems in true Darcy fashion and Loki has an attack of chivalry... or something.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, it's been far too long! I have not given up on this, though I keep stumbling over real life on my way through this story. Anyway, at long last, a new chapter for your perusal. Thanks to everybody who commented on the last chapter, I swear I'll get around to replying, because comments thrill me to my toes and keep me coming back to the computer.

As always, I love you, Marvel. Please don't sue. I don't have much.

Nice to meet you, where you been?

I could show you incredible things

Magic, madness, heaven, sin

Blank Space, Taylor Swift

Loki wasn’t a blind man. Not by half.

So he thoroughly enjoyed the view when Darcy Lewis blew into the Feasting Hall that night. She wore a gown of the deepest midnight blue with a matching cape flowing along behind her. The creation left her shoulders bare and dipped enticingly low to showcase the curves of her breasts. Loki sat back in his chair and watched as heads turned. The hall was full, and he suspected many had come to ogle his mortal. They could stare all they wanted, but the first nobleman to lay hands on her or make an illicit proposal would have to deal with him.

He knew he should keep his distance. Her ties to SHIELD and to his mother, plus her ability to draw truth from him meant trouble. Yet the sight of Darcy in that gown stole his breath away, and he couldn’t remember when that had last happened. Damn the consequences and the complications. He should never have allowed her out of the library and had no intention of letting her slip away again. Tonight, she would be his.

Darcy paused in the vicinity of Sif and the Warriors Three and gave them all a look of such loathing that Loki was disappointed they didn’t drop dead on the spot. Then she continued in his direction. He stood as she sailed over and dropped onto a bench to his right, not taking note of his
good manners. Loki sat again, hiding his amusement. “I presume the rest of your afternoon was eventful.”

That brought Darcy’s gaze, full of magnificent disdain, around to him. “Thanks to pretty boy Fandral over there, I got tricked into an intervention. Didn’t know I needed one, and Sif and company weren’t polite enough to serve food or have a sign. I blame you, Mr. Sassy, because you’re so freaking untrustworthy they felt the need to warn me. Oh, wait, I blame Thor too, because they don’t think he has his big boy pants on and can’t survive on Earth without them.”

Her chin rose as she spoke, and he couldn’t help but study the exposed line of her throat. Her skin was pale and smooth and he wondered what the sweet spot where her neck met her shoulder would taste like. He pondered further what sort of noise she would make if he sucked on that delicious spot.

“Are you even listening?”

If he wasn’t careful, he’d get something thrown at his head, but prevaricating was Loki’s specialty. “Of course. An intervention. Isn’t that where your fellow mortals try to save you from bad behavior? I presume Lady Sif and her cohorts tried to warn you against me. Certainly they told you I lie.”

“Like a rug.”

“That I am a hopeless trickster.”

“Duh.”

“That I am not to be trusted in any way.”

“Yes, yes, all yes,” Darcy said, hands waving. “They also implied that since I’m mortal, I must be stupid enough not to know any of this and I am your minion or thrall or something. Well, turn me yellow and give me a banana. Whatever,” she added bitterly. There was a mug before her, and she picked it up and waved it at one of the servants. “Can you please fill this up? I want whatever’s strong enough to put Thor under the table.”

“Wine for the lady,” Loki commanded the servant, who scurried off. No ale for Darcy. He doubted her tolerance came anywhere near to that of his idiot brother, and he had little desire to bed a drunken woman. It was no surprise that Sif and her three dolts had tried to turn Darcy against him, but she was still sitting beside him. What was it that kept her coming back? “You would make a fine thrall, Miss Lewis. I might even excuse you from polishing my boots.”

This was not exactly the way into her arms, but he couldn’t help himself. She had the most delicious fire, for a mortal. Her eyes narrowed, and Loki looked forward to discovering if she would throw her plate or goblet first. Then she leaned forward, giving him an expanded view of her very low neckline. Whoever had designed that gown ought to have a statue commissioned in their honor.

“We’ve played tonsil hockey,” Darcy snapped. “Swapped spit. Snogged. The least you could do is drop the formality and call me Darcy.”

“What in Hel is tonsil hockey?” he demanded, though he guess. How vulgar a term for such a glorious kiss. Darcy flew up off the bench and he reached out to stop her, catching her hand. He gave serious thought to pulling her down into his lap and trying that kiss again. Let the court watch. They were already wagering on whether the lovely mortal was warming his bed. “I jest,
milady. Darcy,” Loki added hurriedly at her thunderous look.

“Oh, so you do know my name!”

“Stay,” he said cajolingly, bringing her hand to his lips. “The feast looks sumptuous, and what mortal could turn down a meal in the halls of Asgard?”

She glared down at him, and he expected her to yank her hand away and stomp off while flinging insults at him. Instead, she looked around the hall and seemed to become aware of how many nobles were staring at her. Then she regarded Sif again. “I think I’m not hungry and it’s been a really long day. See you in the morning, Voldemort.”

He could have refused to release her. He could have tried harder to persuade her to stay. He could even have hauled her back and forced her to sit with him, but he didn’t care for unwilling companionship. So Loki let her go, watching with a frown as she left the hall, head high. Had he missed something? His gaze drifted to the warriors, sitting down the table amongst a sea of nobles. Hogun looked as inescrutable as ever, but Fandral refused to meet his eye and Volstagg looked downright sheepish, so much so that Loki began to grow suspicious. Mayhap there was more to this intervention than he knew. Sif met his gaze coolly, and then she rose and walked the length of the table. In passing, she leaned down to say, “No cheating, Loki.”

Hel. He hoped the next horse she rode dumped her on her gaudy armored behind in the mud. Loki hustled after her, weaving through the crowd, catching up at one of the back entrances of the hall. “What have you done, Sif?”

“She didn’t tell you? I challenged Lady Darcy to a duel in the training yard.”

“Challenging a mortal? How the mighty have fallen,” Loki mocked, thinking fast. There had to be a way to head this off, because Darcy might not back down. True warriors were few and far between on Midgard, and he doubted she had ever even held a real sword. “I know you don’t care that I’ll die if something happens to her, but I do know you care about what my mother thinks. Frigga won’t stand for you putting Darcy in harm’s way—“

“‘Tis Darcy now, is it? Not mortal or Lady Darcy or Miss Lewis,” Sif purred. “Have care, Loki, or I might think she matters to you. Your thrall won’t die by my hand, but one way or another, I’ll get the truth of why you’re here and free and Thor is trapped on Midgard again.”

With that, she left the feasting hall. Loki decided he would damn himself to Hela’s cold embrace before letting Sif stick her nose into his business with impunity. That was why he was thinking of going after Darcy, certainly not out of some misguided notion of protecting her. Chivalry wasn’t in his nature.

Loki left the Feasting Hall.

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It wasn’t long before Loki walked into an ambush of his own. One moment he strode toward his quarters, deep in thought on how he could turn the duel to his advantage; the next, Lady Sigyn latched onto his arm with a smile. “There you are, my prince. How fortuitous. I had hoped for a private word.”
He suspected she wanted more than words, and perhaps he’d oblige her later. Mayhap his lust for Darcy was nothing more than the passing need for a woman. He had been occupied with world domination lately, and Sigyn already knew her way to his bed. What came out of his mouth, however, was nothing resembling a proposal. “Are you certain you wish to speak to me? You might find what I have to say unpalatable.”

She frowned prettily. “You are displeased with me.”

“Why did you lay a hand on Lady Darcy? You nearly broke her wrist.”

“I did not mean to hurt her.” Sigyn lowered her eyes, as if embarrassed. “She was so very rude, Loki. She likened me to a servant.”

He buried a snort. No lady of consequence would accept such an insult, and he suspected Darcy knew it. He didn’t want to know what Sigyn had done to provoke Darcy’s sharp tongue. “She’s mortal and does not know our culture or how to behave here. Midgard is very different. She’s no threat to you.”

When her gaze rose again and met his, there was nothing of the delicate lady of the court. Her blue eyes glinted like uru, fierce and unyielding. “Is she not? You felt the need to take me to task for my actions. It certainly seems she means something to you.”

“She does not,” came out more forcefully than he intended. “I am tied to her for the moment.”

“What happens when you are no longer tied to her?”

Compared to some of his other difficulties, escaping the bracelets seemed unimportant. Then again, there would be life after Darcy at some point, and the idea was oddly unappealing. Before he could decide why that was and formulate an answer, Sigyn threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

His notion that he needed a woman and any would do, well, that went down in flames. Sigyn’s kiss left him cold. Once upon a time, he had craved her touch. Perhaps once upon a time was just the right words, for the life he’d lived before Jotenheim and before Thanos seemed like some sort of fairy tale.

Sigyn’s lips softened against his, but she demurely kept her tongue to herself and he felt disappointed. Æsir women believed it to be unseemly to appear passionate or experienced anywhere but the bedchamber. He wanted the wicked tongue of Darcy Lewis dueling with his, her sleek thighs grinding against him, giving him the most exquisite arousal he’d had in a century.

“Sigyn?”

It was a man’s voice. She gasped and pulled away, looking back toward the Feasting Hall. No one was in sight, but someone was certainly looking for her. Sigyn spoke hurriedly. “I have not forgotten what was once between us. My feelings for you have not changed. I would be there for you if you would but ask.”

A man lumbered around the corner and Loki drew himself up. Tyr. If Darcy was to be believed, the warrior and former general had tried to take his head the other night. The strength of Tyr’s glare alone confirmed the story.

“Sigyn?” Tyr asked. “Are you well, milady?”

“Oh course,” she said, gathering her composure. “I was just expressing to Loki how delighted
we all are at his return. The queen is back to her usual self.”

Tyr looked back and forth between Sigyn and Loki before putting his hand on Sigyn’s back. “Indeed,” he grunted.

Ever the sparkling conversationalist, Loki thought. The two men glared at each other.

Finally, it was Tyr who spoke again. “You may offer us your congratulations. Sigyn has agreed to be my wife.”

Loki rather thought he should have seen it coming. He had been dead to them, after all, and though there had been much talk of a match between himself and Sigyn, it had come to naught long before his abrupt departure from Asgard. He’d always suspected his mother had been against it and now he knew why. Sigyn’s face was white and her eyes appealing, as if begging him to understand. He did, only too well. There were plenty of willing men around Hlidskjalf that would have happily taken his place in her affections, yet she had chosen Tyr, a hardened soldier who had nothing to offer but his high rank. “Congratulations,” he said coldly. “I am sure the two of you are well suited. Excuse me.”

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Another fine mess Darcy had gotten herself into.

She frowned at the mirror as Brunhilde helped her into a nightgown and brushed out her hair in long, steady strokes. It should have been relaxing, but the last thing she wanted was to chill. She wished Jane was there, Jane and a big tub of Moose Tracks and two spoons. Over ice cream, they could solve any problem, even one as thorny as Lady Sif. A sigh slipped out.

“Is there anything I may do for you, milady?” Brunhilde asked.

“I haven’t had any luck making friends today.”

“Do not take anything Prince Loki says to heart,” the maid reassured her.

“See, that’s just it. If there was anyone who was kind to me besides Frigga and you and Jofrid, it was Loki. At least he’s been to Earth and gets me most of the time. To everyone else, I’m a mortal idiot.” She shuddered, remembering all the Æsir staring at her. They were probably just curious, but she didn’t like to be the center of attention. Not like that, anyway. It gave her the heebies and reminded her of things in her past best forgotten.

Brunhilde put the brush aside to begin to plait Darcy’s hair. “If I may be so bold, milady? All we Æsir remember of Midgard is its delightful but primitive people. For us, that was yesterday. To your people, generations have passed, isn’t that so?”

“Hundreds of generations.”

“We do not change our thinking easily.”

Hadn’t Frigga said the same thing? “So you’re saying I have to change everybody’s mind. That sounds like a lot of hard work.”
A hint of a smile crossed Brunhilde’s face. “You seem like a very determined young lady.”

Someone rapped sharply on the front door, and Jofrid paused in turning down Darcy’s bed for the night to go answer it. From the dressing area, Darcy couldn’t see the door, but she did hear Jofrid’s squeak of surprise. The maid bounced into the room and said, “Milady, Prince Loki would like to see you.”

Haven’t she already said goodnight? He might claim to not need sleep, but she did. Jofrid smiled at her, while Brunhilde looked stern. “I’ll tell him you’re abed,” the older maid said.

“No, I’ll see him.” Darcy rose and Brunhilde hurried after her, throwing a robe over her shoulders. Apparently the nightgown that covered her from chest to toe was not enough and she slid her arms into the robe’s short sleeves as she walked out into the sitting room. She was wearing enough fabric to make three outfits and a set of sheets back home.

Loki stood by the door, looking cross. “Get dressed.”

“Why?” Darcy crossed her arms at her chest and stopped by the firepit in the middle of the room. If he thought she was going to drop everything and obey his every whim, he was wrong. If he thought she was going to obey because he looked so damn good in black leather, he was still wrong. A girl had to have a little pride. Okay, so there was a lot of black leather, and he continued to favor the long surcoat, this one belted at the waist. If she had to guess, he looked dressed for adventure, or at least something more casual than a feast.

He stalked toward her, eyes ablaze, and she wondered what she’d done to piss him off. “I cannot turn you into a shield maiden overnight,” he ground out, “but I can at least teach you something of defense. Though why I should bother, I am unsure. You might have mentioned Sif challenged you.”

So word of the duel had reached his ears, and she couldn’t say she was surprised. If Asgard had a national pastime, it was gossip. She was surprised, though, that he seemed mad about it, or at least mad that she hadn’t told him. Darcy stepped back, putting the firepit between them. “No.”

“No, what?”

“I don’t need you or anyone riding to my rescue.” Darcy Lewis was no wilting flower, trembling in the slightest breeze. Wow, that was really poetic and cheesy; clearly, the Asgardian way of speaking was getting into her head. She depended on herself to solve her own problems, because other people couldn’t be trusted to hang around when trouble hit, or even when things were calm. “Especially you. I can fight my own battles.”

She swore she saw a flash of hurt in his eyes. Then his lip peeled back in a sneer, and Darcy braced herself. Loki held up his wrist, and the gold bracelet caught the firelight. “I am merely protecting myself, wench. You are mortal and could easily die by Sif’s hand through misadventure. Do not make me out to be a hero.”

“The bracelet tingles when you lie, you know.”

“Which part do you suppose is a lie?”

“All of it.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, and though his expression never changed, she thought she saw that tantalizing hint of vulnerability again. He just couldn’t bring himself to admit he cared. Darcy wanted to go to him, but she didn’t quite dare. If she made the wrong move, Loki
would run away. He never made it look like running, more like stomping or marching or stalking, but one way or another, he would get himself the hell out of the situation.

Finally, it was Loki who broke the spell, his stance loosening. “No, not all of it is a lie. Sif does not mean to kill you, but few of us know our own strength when it comes to mortals. Look what happened with Sigyn.”

“So you’re here to save my life?” Darcy asked. He glowered at her. Perhaps the fact that he was here at all was enough. “What Sif wants from me is some sign that I can be trusted, and where I come from, that doesn’t happen at the point of a sword.” Brunhilde’s words had inspired her, and Darcy had an idea. “If this was Earth, I’d invite her to Starbucks and we’d hash out our differences over Carmel Macchiatos.”

“Whenver I am around you, I end up wondering if I’m going deaf. So you would disarm one of the foremost warriors of Asgard with honesty and a hot beverage?” He sat down on one of the couches and stretched his long legs out toward the firepit. “Do as you will, milady. I expect you’ll do so anyway.”

Well, Darcy would count that as a victory. He was getting to know her as a person, not just something to be filed under the general heading *mortal*. “So will you still teach me how to fight?”

Loki studied her from across the fire, and she suddenly understood how the primitive Norse thought these people gods. The flames made his preternatural green eyes glow and outlined the sharpness of his cheek bones and the pout of his naughty mouth. Between the perfection of his features and the fancy armor, she totally got it. Hello, God of Mischief. He was stunning and she wondered how many mortal women had offered themselves to him over the centuries. The number was probably pretty high and she really shouldn’t get in a line that long and it might be better to concentrate on the conversation at hand. After all, learning to use a sword and a bow and whatever else they had here was what she wanted, right?

How was a girl supposed to focus when he was sitting there looking good enough to jump and she hadn’t been laid in so, so long?

“Before Lady Sif got in the way, I had something quite different in mind for the evening.”

Her mouth abruptly went dry. The look in his eyes was intense, and she hoped he didn’t read minds. “Really? Do tell, Magic Man.”

He flashed her a lazy, sexy grin and held out a hand to her. “Come here, Darcy.”

If she was going to hell for kissing him, then doing the nasty with him wasn’t going to change that. Darcy was about to obey him, not because he said so but because that’s where she wanted to be too, but there seemed to be something between them. She could still see Loki, but there was a hazy shape standing to the left of the firepit. The temperature in the room dropped and it was as if someone had run a piece of ice down her spine. The outline was big and broad, taller even than Thor. Not much detail could be seen of its face or clothing, except for two eyes that glowed with the same bright blue as the tesseract. Behind it, she thought she heard Loki shout, but he sounded very far away.

The shape spoke. “Who are you, and what are you to the Trickster?”

That voice struck dread in her heart, though she had never heard it before. It was deep and gravelly, like the words had been formed out of the crumbling of buildings, the screams of the dying and the destruction of worlds. She wanted to run or at least look away, but she was trapped
by its gaze. She wanted to scream, but she couldn’t even do that. The thing suddenly had a smile, and it was five times more malicious than any Loki had ever produced. Behind it, she saw Loki raise his hands, a massive ball of green light between his palms.

Before he could fling the spell, though, Darcy realized she wasn’t alone in her own head anymore. Then she did scream.
A Pretty Tangle

Chapter Summary

Thor has a temper tantrum and Loki meets a dragon who forces him to make a choice.

Chapter Notes

It's been too long since my last update, so thanks for your patience! I actually wrote the chapter, realized everyone was in the wrong place in their character arcs and scrapped most of it. Fortunately, I came to the conclusion that it was time for some more Smaug and the chapter flowed after that.

Much action here, so be warned. The heat in the next chapter will have nothing to do with the dragon.

No copyright infringement intended to anybody. The Nine Realms bring me joy but no money.

We, we don’t have to worry ‘bout nothing

‘Cause we got the fire

And we’re burning one hell of a something

Burn, Ellie Goulding

“It was a dark and stormy night,” Tony Stark intoned dramatically.

“It’s noon,” Jane Foster pointed out from her desk. It was gloomy for lunchtime and her tummy growled, but there was no going out for food. Storm clouds hung low over Puente Antiguo, rain lashed the windows of the lab and thunder rumbled. In other circumstances, it might be funny as her would-be boyfriend, the Norse God of Thunder, was the cause. Before the cable had gone out, the Weather Channel had been having a field day with the unexplained weather phenomena. She was betting Jim Cantore was on a plane to New Mexico at that very moment.

Then the lights went out. Jane heaved a big sigh and let her forehead hit the keyboard.

From somewhere, Stark produced a lighter and held it up. The tiny flame did little to cut through the murk. “Jane, you have to do something.”

Oh, how she knew it. How many more reboots could her computer take? How much of the data she’d just put in disappeared in a flash of thunder god fury? “What can I do? It’s not as if he’s here
to reason with.”

“What did the Chitauri say that got Thor’s man panties in a bunch?”

“Something about making his brother scream. He implied Loki had been tortured.” Jane supposed it was well deserved, but even thinking of the Other gave her the creeps.

Tony’s eyebrows climbed toward his hairline, making him look sinister in the glow of the lighter. Then lightning flashed and the electricity made a feeble attempt to come back on before plunging them into gloom again. “Come on, Foster. We either get Thor to cut it out or we go to SHIELD for an emergency generator. I could have Pepper fly one in, but I’m betting there’s at least three in that super secret spy base that SHIELD is building outside of town. You know, the one that’s supposed to look like a cattle ranch, but everybody wears suits to work at? I always wear a suit to step in cow shit.”

Asking SHIELD for anything meant forms in triplicate, paper that the agency would ignore for three months, longer if they dragged their feet about repairs to the lab. Darcy had been the one who could get the secret organization to pay for things. For the millionth time, Jane hoped her assistant was okay and shrugged out of her lab coat. “Talking to Thor is easier. I’ll go.”

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Darcy came close to waking several times.

She would have much preferred to stay asleep. Her bed was snug and she was very cozy and there was something she was trying to avoid, wasn’t there? Unfortunately, there were people talking close by and they wouldn’t shut up and she didn’t have the strength to tell them to zip it.

The first voice she didn’t recognize. It was female and sounded firm. “I see no evidence of trauma. Let her rest, Loki, and summon me when she wakes.”

It was a doctor of some kind. Why did she need a doctor? Darcy dove back into sleep.

The next voice she heard she definitely recognized, and it was also female. “What have you done, Loki?” Frigga demanded, in full queen mode or furious mommy mode. Darcy would pay to see her chase Loki around with a wooden spoon. “Why would this Thanos come looking for an innocent mortal girl?”

Silence. Then, “She is the only other person beyond myself who knows where the tesseract is. I do not know how the Titan found out, but I suspect the magical construct he sent had enough time to see into her mind before I destroyed it.”

Loki’s voice was reasonable, as if he hid ancient space artifacts and attracted the eye of evil space dudes every day. Fuck him anyway. He’d dragged her into something bad.

Fuck him. That was funny. She had wanted to, really bad. The last thing she remembered was Loki holding his hand out to her with his delicious come-hither grin that seemed to say if you want me, girl, come get me.

“You’ve put her in terrible danger,” Frigga said. “Why would you do this?”
“I needed a place to hide the tesseract so outlandish no one would dream of it and I found it with Miss Lewis’ help. Then I intended to send her back to Midgard, for how could Thanos find her among seven billion of her kin? Until you came along with your accursed bracelets!”

“Do not try to shift blame, my son. You used a mortal woman you barely knew for your own purposes. Now what?”

Darcy would have stood up and applauded Frigga if she could have. Loki spoke again. “I can’t know if he pulled anything from her mind, but I can stop him from doing so again. In any case, the tesseract must be moved.”

“Finally, you are making sense. See to it at once.”

“Mother,” Loki said, as if Frigga had gotten up to leave. “You know what this means. In order for Thanos to have gotten such a creation past all the spells that protect Asgard, into the heart of Hlidskjalf itself, he would have to be close.”

Darcy never did hear the reply, as sleep claimed her again.

Then she remembered the worms.

They were bright white and blue and they crawled through her mind. She tried to fight them back, but they were too strong, too insistent. They wanted to know everything about her. She tried to reason with them, but they didn’t seem to understand anything but what they wanted. She focused on building a wall in her mind, a fortress, anything to keep them out, but they were crawling over and around her barriers and she couldn’t stop them.

Suddenly, she was lying in bed, gasping for air as if she’d been under water. It was dark, the firepit burning low. Darcy swallowed, and her throat felt raw, as if she’d been screaming. “Hello?” she croaked.

Only silence met her words, and that was weird. Where were Brunhilde and Jofrid? The sound of her voice echoed strangely, and if she squinted at the ceiling, she could swear it was very high and cave-like.

Darcy sat up fast and had a good look around. It was still her bed, but it was somehow situated on the side of a long stone hall. The only light came from firebowls set around the chamber, and she was definitely alone. The walls were smooth, as if straightened by tools, and were covered in runes. Funny, now she could read them. *Herein Lies the 7th Kingdom of Durin's Folk…*

The Lonely Mountain. She was in Loki’s illusion of Erebor.

It was safe to presume the creeper she’d seen earlier was Thanos, and she suspected he’d gone through her mind for the location of the tesseract like somebody going through a junk drawer. She hoped her brain was so loaded with pop culture that what he’d found made no sense to him, that he’d gotten tangled up in words like horcrux or TARDIS and why one ring ruled them all. Loki was no doubt here to get the cube back from Smaug the Magnificent and Terrible, without any real idea what he was up against.

She should let Loki roast, for New York and for what he’d gotten her into, but that wasn’t in her heart. If she let Smaug destroy him, she’d never get a piece of his ass, right?

If only that was all there was to it.

Darcy stumbled out of bed and ran.
Jane put on a rain slicker and stepped outside. The wind was howling and she didn’t dare take more than a couple of steps away from the building. Very little could be seen in the blinding sheets of water falling from the sky. Jane did the only thing she could think of to do. “Thor! Thor? I need to talk to you!”

Nothing happened. The storm didn’t slacken off in any way.

Well, Jane was no quitter, even if she did feel a bit silly, shouting at the weather. “Thor! Thor, where are you? THOR!”

Still nothing happened. She hoped Stark hadn’t talked her into coming out here so he could make a video of her for future blackmail and uploading to YouTube. She thought of Darcy, and decided she was going to stand outside until she had Thor’s attention. There was no telling what Loki was doing to her assistant. Maybe she was already dead.

No, she couldn’t think that way. She wasn’t one to give up hope.

Finally, Thor came striding out of the storm as if it was nothing, his expression forbidding. “Jane, go back inside. It is not safe for you out here.”

“If it’s not safe for me, then it’s not safe for anybody else in town. Can you turn down the waterworks?” Rain soaked through her jeans and she decided to get right to the point. “You don’t know if the Other told the truth or not. About Loki, I mean.” Jane had a brother and a sister, also in academia, and tried to imagine how she’d feel if they went off the deep end and tried to take over the world. She just couldn’t do it. It’d be as believable as Pinky and the Brain.

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“Nay,” Thor grumbled. “He spoke true. The desperation I saw in Loki’s eyes, heard in his voice during the battle makes sense now.” He shook his head, and the rain slowed. “This is my fault, Jane.”

She wasn’t too sure about that. As far as she could tell, Loki seemed to dive headfirst into trouble and Thor had an immense capacity for taking responsibility for it. “How so? You didn’t make him attack New York.”

“When he fell from the bridge in Asgard, he was presumed dead. I listened to those who said I should not go after him.” He sighed. “In my heart, I knew I should, if only to bring back his body. But I was angry.”

“I should think!”

“I am still angry,” Thor continued, and the sky began to clear. “He has much to atone for, both here and on Asgard. But Jane, if he suffered in the hands of such loathsome creatures and I could have stopped it, then I, too, have much to atone for.”

If only there was an equation to come up with the right thing to say. She was a scientist, after all, and dealt in logic, not emotions. “So what do you want to do?”

He dropped his hammer to the ground and took her hands in his. “What do I want? I want to be selfish and forget my brother and his nonsense and just be here with you.”
Jane had never been into princesses as a child, but he always made her feel like one. She let him draw her in closer. “I like selfish. But Darcy—”

Thor looked to the sky again. “Yes, exactly. I want to get Darcy back. I want to shake Loki. I want to beat sense into him and at the same time embrace him and beg his forgiveness. Does that make any sense?”

From her own siblings, she knew the urge to strangle and hug at the same time. Maybe the best thing she could do was offer him a way to help, so Jane went for the practical. “You want your brother back and I want my assistant back. The only way to get to them is to build our own Bifrost. You probably have a good idea of how it works and your help would be invaluable.”

Thor nodded gravely. “Aye, I will help,” he said. “But first, there is something I must do.” He pulled her closer yet and planted a kiss on her lips.

As she returned his kiss, Jane hoped Darcy wouldn’t mind just a little selfishness.

***

The irony of his situation did not escape Loki.

Since New York (if he were honest, since the Hulk), he’d felt nothing, drained dry of emotion. It mattered not what had happened to him, he couldn’t produce any anger on his own behalf. Then Thanos had dared attack Darcy.

It had only been seconds, but enough for the Titan to discover what he wanted to know, especially if he’d had no regard for causing damage. Thanos wouldn’t hesitate to destroy to get what he wanted. Though Asgard’s foremost healer, Eir, assured Loki that the mortal would be alright, he didn’t quite believe it. The Titan was expert at leaving few signs when he brutalized someone.

Loki wasn’t entirely certain how he knew that.

He flew down the stairs and long stone passageways of what Darcy called the Lonely Mountain, fueled by rage, and it was like having an old friend back. He didn’t know where he would hide the tesseract next and mayhap it did not much matter, as long as it had nothing to do with his mortal. He would draw the Titan’s eye elsewhere.

The warren of the dwarves should have been impossible to navigate, for as a rule, dwarves didn’t care where they were as long as they were tramping about underground. There was very little by way of road signs. He could feel the power of the tesseract calling to him, though, and it lead him unerringly through the maze of galleries, passages and forges to the massive hall that held the treasure hoard.

Loki had no use for illusory gold and jewels, but it was an impressive pile nonetheless, enough to make even Odin himself a little green with envy. Darcy had quite an imagination. The hoard was so huge he couldn’t see the other side, it just flowed away into the darkness. What else did she do with that imagination of hers? That was worth exploring, if the universe would stop getting in his way.

All he needed was the tesseract and he could be done with this place. Though he didn’t see the
cube on top of the heap where he’d left it, it couldn’t have gone far. Perhaps it had slid into a valley between piles of gold from the movement or breathing of the dragon. Did the dragon continue its illusory existence, wallowing happily in its mounds of gold, when no one was looking? It was both a practical and philosophical question, one he would take to the Collegium of Magic for debate if he lived through this predicament.

Loki cast a spell to bring the tesseract to him, and nothing happened. It must have gotten buried or wedged somehow. It was still in the hoard somewhere, its power pulling at his consciousness. There was nothing to be done but start climbing, dragon or no dragon. He tried to dislodge as little of the treasure as possible, but every step he took was a shower of gold coins. Over one mountain and on to the next and Loki began to wonder if he’d imagined a dragon here. Once he’d scaled the pile where he’d put the tesseract, he paused to take in the hoard around him. There was no sign of the accursed cube. Where could it have gone?

Where was the damned dragon?

Some sixth sense, honed after centuries of adventures with Thor, told Loki he ought to move even before the mound beneath him began to shift. He took two running steps and leapt from the mountain of gold. It exploded, just beneath where his boots had been but a moment before. He landed hard on the uneven treasure and tumbled into a golden valley.

“Looking for something, thief?”

Sprawled on his back, Loki had his first good look at Darcy’s dragon. It was easily three times the size of an average Asgardian wyrm, with scales of brown, red and gold, and enormous wings. It stared down at him malevolently with reptilian eyes and had the tesseract wrapped up in the coils of its tail. Apparently, Loki had been standing on the monster’s massive horned head. Eyeing its rows of sharp teeth, he rather thought he preferred taking on the Hulk. “I am no thief,” Loki replied. “Keep your gold and jewels. I only want the tesseract.”

“This?” The dragon’s tail slithered by, carrying the cube within enticing reach. “I like this bauble. You put it in my hoard, so it’s mine now. How do you plan on getting it back, little man?” With its long neck, the creature leaned closer and took a deep sniff. “You are neither man nor dwarf. Introduce yourself, then, though I suspect you are a liar as well as a thief.”

Why was it that everyone assumed he was a liar? Loki stood and brushed himself off. “I am Loki of Asgard, prince of this realm, and I’ll thank you to keep your insults to yourself, beast.” The tesseract was so close, yet so far. The spell to bring the cube to him was not up to slipping free of a dragon’s tail, so he would have to get the creature to let go. He might as well convince Thor to let go of his hammer.

“Asgard,” it repeated, rolling the name around with its great tongue. “So, a godling. Men worship you. I do not.” The enormous head shot forward, jaws snapping. Loki dove to the side and slid to the bottom of the pile, finding solid stone. Damned if he would let the dragon keep the high ground. He left an illusion of himself for it to chase and teleported himself to a walkway over both the treasure and the dragon.

It didn’t take the creature long to discover it had been duped. For all its size, it was fast and its jaws closed on the illusion, only to find nothing in its teeth. The dragon turned and spotted Loki above, lounging against the wall in full armor. “Not only a godling, but a sorcerer as well,” the dragon said. “I am impressed.”

“So you should be. Give me the tesseract or I will destroy you.”
The beast snorted, its breath hot and foul. “You think me a fool? This place was created to hide your precious artifact. I was created to protect it. If I give it back, what then?”

So many things had gone wrong for Loki lately that he couldn’t even pretend to be shocked. Something had gone awry with the illusion, for the dragon had existed only in Darcy’s imagination, and it only had life through his magic. Yet somehow, it was self-aware. It knew what it was, and it wanted to live.

This was a problem, on top of all his other problems.

Loki needed to get the tesseract back, and then he could break the spell, destroying the dragon, the gold and the mountain. Unfortunately, the cube might as well be back on Midgard for all the chance he had of getting it. The dragon’s tail swished menacingly with the tesseract in it, and he had no doubt if he tried for it, he’d either be eaten or roasted. He was inside the illusion, after all, and subject to its rules. If he died here, it would take another mage to break the spell and wake him from a comatose state. There was no telling what would happen to Darcy.

Loki’s only choice was to keep the dragon talking while he scrambled for a plan. “You lack sorely in manners. I have introduced myself, yet you have not done the same.”

“I am Smaug, Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities of Midgard and King under the Mountain. I am destroyer of cities, eater of both dwarves and men—”

“I am offended, monster,” Loki retorted. “I am the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities when it comes to Midgard. I just destroyed their largest city with an army.” Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but he had taken a bite out of New York. He’d never denied being a liar anyway. He studied the hall, and saw nothing that gave him inspiration, only floor upon floor of dusty, gloomy passages and walkways. Dwarves had no imagination.

Smaug looked unimpressed. “An army. I have no need of an army to destroy.”

The creature looked as though he was considering a meal, and Loki spoke faster. “You are intelligent, I will give you that. Come, let us negotiate like reasonable beings. What do you desire in exchange for the tesseract?”

“Intelligent, am I?” Smaug demanded. “Then treat me as such. The cube is the reason I exist, its power has made me more. You think I will give it up for more gold? For anything?”

To say that the illusion had gone awry seemed like wretched understatement. The Norns were laughing at him again, uproariously. The dragon lowered his head, eyes narrowed. “You cannot destroy what you have created as long as the cube is here. Go, little godling, before I decide to snack on you.”

“Oh my God, it really is Smaug!”

“Damn,” Loki muttered. Darcy stood on one of the upper walkways, staring down at Smaug. He’d hoped she would stay unconscious until he had the tesseract back, and yet he was glad to see her. Mayhap this meant there were no lasting effects from Thanos’ attack. She was wearing a nightgown and going about barefoot, in no state to go adventuring with a dragon involved. “Darcy, go back and wait for me.”

Smaug turned toward her, his tail still wrapped around the tesseract.

“Nope, not going anywhere,” Darcy said, though her wide eyes never left the dragon and her voice wasn’t quite steady. “Not until I’ve had a good look at him.”
Was she going to stand and gawk? His worst fears were realized when she pulled out her Starkphone and snapped a couple of pictures. The dragon rose up on its hind legs to get a better look at her, and Loki began marshalling his magic. “Be off, wench,” he said, trying to keep the urgency out of his voice. “This is no time for fangirling.”

“Hey, listen to that big cool Midgard word coming out of your mouth.” Her eyes latched onto his, then shifted toward the exit.

By Odin’s mangled eye, she was trying to save him again.

“What have we here?” said Smaug. “Another tasty morsel, this one of the race of men. Have you come for my treasure too, girl?”

“I had to see you,” she babbled as she threw Loki a beseeching look, and he cursed himself for not thinking of tying her to the bed to keep her from trouble. “Oh Smaug,” Darcy continued, “you were always my favorite character in the Hobbit, you know. The dwarves were all idiots, they would never have even made it to the mountain without Bilbo and the ring.”

“Dwarves are fools,” the dragon agreed. “I like you, you have nice conversation.” He turned to Loki, reptilian face shrewd. “Does the lady mean something to you, princeling? Perhaps I will agree to a trade after all: the lady for your cube. I suspect you won’t destroy this place or me if she’s here.”

If Loki had thought fury carried him along before, it was nothing compared to the wrath that suddenly filled his veins. “I won’t bargain with her life, beast.” He drew Gungnir, Odin’s golden staff, from its dimensional hiding place and leapt off the walkway. Smaug snapped at him, but too late. He brought the staff down on its tail, and it reared up, howling in pain and rage. Even Gungnir could not pierce the scales, but it gave the creature enough of a magical shock that the tail uncurled and the tesseract sprang free. Out of the corner of his eye, Loki saw Darcy turn and run. He snatched up the cube and sprinted into the nearest tunnel.

Fortunately, the passage was far too small for a dragon and intersected with other tunnels. Loki dove into a side passageway, not a moment too soon. Fire filled the tunnel behind him, along with Smaug’s furious roars. Loki paused long enough to drop the tesseract and cast a spell on it so it would follow him, for even he couldn’t hold it for long. Then he put Gungnir and his helm back into hiding and took off running again.

He had the tesseract, now all he needed was Darcy and he could destroy this nightmare. The roaring continued behind him, along with a lot of crashing and rumbling. It sounded as though Smaug was trying to dig his way through the rock to catch him. Loki hit a set of stairs and started climbing. Darcy was somewhere above him, and he had to find her before the dragon did. Teleporting was useless, for he had no clear idea of where he was going. The only way he could find her was to follow the pull of the gold bracelets.

Two flights up and the stairs ended. He could go either left or right, and the bracelet pulled him to the right. Off he went, running flat out. Loki soon realized this was a bad choice when the tunnel opened up into a massive cavern. There were mine cars on tracks and cables beneath him. There was no sign of Smaug—

“There you are,” the creature said in malevolent glee as it dove down from above. Its chest lit with an orange fire, and Loki cast a fog spell to confuse it, then jumped down into the midst of the mine cars, taking cover behind several overturned ones. Unable to see through the thick fog, the dragon bathed the cavern in fire. As soon as he was able, Loki ducked between cars and piles of debris as rock rained down from above. The fog continued to hang in the chamber, glowing orange
from fires the dragon had started, and Smaug didn’t seem to notice when he made it into the tunnels again. There were ramps leading upward this time and he took them at full speed.

Loki burst into open space again and Darcy was at the far end. She ran toward him, waving desperately. “Come on, let’s go! He can’t be far.” Then her expression changed to one of horror. “Look out!”

The sneaky dragon roared up from below and took a swipe at him. Loki dodged and rolled, felt the monstrous claws pass over him and the spell tying him to the tesseract broke. The walkway crumbled beneath him, and he found himself dangling over the hoard while the dragon cackled.

“Well!” it said, cheerfully menacing. “Here’s a pretty tangle for you, godling. Which will you choose, the bauble or the lady?”

Loki dragged himself up. The walkway between himself and Darcy had been destroyed, creating a chasm between them. The tesseract lay far below, once again on top of the treasure hoard. He could get to one or the other before the dragon did, but not both.

“What’s it to be, prince of the realm?” Smaug demanded. His head turned in Darcy’s direction, chest brightening.

The tesseract was the logical choice. Loki could hide it again or use its power to destroy Thanos. Darcy gaped up at the dragon, then she looked at him before backing toward the nearest tunnel. She mouthed one word: go.

For a mortal, she had courage. Once the Titan was defeated, he could come back for her. Smaug saw her move and swiped at the walkway she stood upon. It swayed dangerously and Loki wondered if there would be something left to come back for.

Never mind logic. Mayhap he had a scrap of chivalry left in him after all.

Loki backed up and took a running leap across the chasm. He landed without breaking stride and scooped up Darcy. She stared at him as if he was mad, then squeezed her eyes shut and threw her arms around him as Smaug opened its mouth, its maw fiery. Loki spun and threw up a shield spell. Dragonfire hit the charm, and he could feel his magic falling back under the onslaught. Then the pathway fell apart beneath them and Darcy screamed. Loki released the shield spell and flung them both back into the real world.

Loki was back where he’d started out, sitting cross-legged on Darcy’s bed, with her in his lap, his arms wrapped around her. He took note of her breathing and his own; they were both still alive. For a long time, he sat there, inhaling the smell of her hair, enjoying the feel of her against him. His hands ached fiercely, but he ignored it.

“Hell,” Darcy said finally. “Smaug’s a lot scarier in person. Like, really scary. I did try to warn you.”

“You failed to mention that the cursed dragon is roughly the size of a helicarrier.” Loki held up his hands. They were red and beginning to blister.

“Oh, she said. Then she turned to look at him over her shoulder. “Wait, I thought the illusion was like Las Vegas. You know, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas? How can a dragon that doesn’t really exist harm you in the real world?”

“I do not know.” In his head, Loki knew he should have taken the tesseract, but his heart rebelled. Who knew he still had one? Darcy had become a weakness of his, one Thanos and the
dragon had already tried to use against him. He should send her away, let her go back to her mortal life and live it out as she was meant to.

Darcy snuggled back against him as if she belonged there, and that made Loki’s decision easy. He wasn't sending her anywhere. He was far too selfish to let her go.
“Stay still, child.”

Darcy resisted the urge to wiggle as hard as she could, but her nose itched something fierce. She scrunched up her face, and that didn’t help at all.

“For pity’s sake,” grumbled the healer standing next to her.

“Sorry,” Darcy said and gave her nose a satisfying scratch. Asgard’s foremost healer, Eir, had insisted on giving her a thorough check-up after bumping into Thanos. The exam involved Darcy lying still on a cushioned table (fully clothed, thank goodness) while Eir ran several tests above her that looked like her body in shiny gold virtual reality. They sure loved their gold here. It didn’t hurt or even tickle (except her nose), but she was impatient to go.

“Relax,” Eir said firmly, her hand on Darcy’s shoulder. The healer looked to be about Frigga’s age, with short brown hair and that same style of motherliness. “Where is it that you are so eager to
be?"

“I have to go fight Lady Sif to prove my worthiness or my awesomeness or something.” Though she had no intention of battling the warrior woman, Darcy still had to deal with her. There were other places she’d rather be. “I might be back later, in several pieces.”

“You won’t be fighting Sif this morn. She came for healing stones, as she always does when she leaves on a mission. The queen sent her off with Volstagg and Hogun to check on preparations for attack in the surrounding towns.”

Darcy couldn’t help but be relieved, and she shouldn’t be surprised. If what she’d overheard the night before was true, the queen knew trouble was coming.

“Now,” Eir said shrewdly, turning virtual dials and pressing buttons, “you can tell me where you really want to go.”

Darcy’s hot blush said it all. Loki had carried her to the healing rooms (she’d been capable of walking, but he’d insisted and he had even been nice enough to carry her bridal style rather than throw her over his shoulder like the Viking he was). Once here, though, Eir and her small army of healers had whisked her away and she hadn’t seen him since.

He’d chosen her over the tesseract. Um, wow? She didn’t know what to think. She knew what she wanted to do, though.

Eir chortled at her reaction. “Check Loki’s rooms first. I sent him off with strict instructions to soak his hands, for dragonfire can scar, and it certainly didn’t look like the dragon was an illusion. The things that boy gets himself into. Loki and Thor probably spent more time here in the healing rooms growing up than they did with their tutors.”

“You’ve probably got some stories,” Darcy said wistfully. The two brothers had not always been at each other’s throats. She would love to hear about their adventures, but she wasn’t holding her breath that she’d hear it from Loki. She’d die of asphyxiation first.

“I do. Let us have tea and share stories one day,” said Eir warmly, helping her to sit up. “I haven’t been to your world in centuries and I would love to hear of it and what Loki and Thor have been up to down there.” Before Darcy could think of a reply that didn’t include the words *alien army*, the healer continued. “I see nothing wrong with you except this.” She tapped the bridge of Darcy’s glasses.

“I’ve had them since I was a little kid,” Darcy explained. “Bad eyesight is pretty common on Earth.”

“Would you like it fixed?”

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It had taken Eir no more than a minute.

Darcy walked slowly out of the healing rooms, her glasses clutched in her hand. She’d been in first grade when she’d gotten them and she felt oddly bereft. Her mom had yelled as if it was her fault she had bad eyes and demanded of the optometrist how soon she could get contact lenses.
Glasses, like Darcy, were apparently not good enough and she’d felt an instant kinship. She rarely wore contacts and now she’d never need them again. Asgard seemed clearer and brighter than ever before.

What would her mother say? Something like it was about time and one of her friends had a son who was a single optometrist with a thriving practice and she should meet him. Joy. Gran, on the other hand, would encourage her to get out and see everything.

Yeah, she had something she wanted to see.

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Brunhilde and Jofrid outdid themselves. In no time at all, the maids had Darcy bathed and dressed and her hair done up into a pile of curls. The dress she picked out was a dark wine color, with gold embroidery at the hem and along the low neckline. There were no sleeves, just gold bands on her upper arms.

“You look beautiful,” Brunhilde said. She had an air of pride, but had also expressed her disapproval. “Are you certain of this, milady?”

In the mirror, Jofrid grinned and winked and Darcy smiled back. Who was that woman in the reflection anyway? It wasn’t Darcy Lewis, excitement junkie and assistant to the geek set. This was a woman of the royal court of Asgard who knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to go get it. Heat and butterflies pooled in her stomach, and she realized it had been years since she’d had such aching anticipation for someone. Then again, this was Loki, God of Lies and Mischief and Chaos and Brooding and if she was any judge, Really Good Sex. “I’m sure,” Darcy said.

Loki’s quarters were just down the hall from hers. Guards stood at the door, in gold armor and helmets reminiscent of Big Daddy Odin’s throne. She’d learned these soldiers were the Allfather’s elite Einherjar, and they were hard at work. A knot of about five ladies stood outside the door, trying to get in to see the Prince of Snark. Thankfully, there was no sign of Sigyn.

One lady, a pretty strawberry blond with an earnest expression and a basket was saying to the guards, “I am certain Prince Loki will want to see me. I made these muffins myself. They are the best in the province.”

“They smell good,” Darcy offered politely as her stomach growled. She preferred not to think about how many meals she’d skipped, starting with last night’s feast. She’d shoveled down some fruit while her maids were doing her hair, but that had clearly not been enough. None of the noble ladies paid her much attention, as if they presumed she was one of them. Her glasses had been like holding up a sign: Hi, I’m mortal. Please beat up on me.

“Of course the muffins are the best in the province,” another noblewoman mocked, this one a brunette with perfect porcelain doll features. “You took them from the palace kitchens.”

“I did not steal them!” Basket Lady returned hotly. “My mother always says the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

“That’s why your father weighs 30 stone and you’re still a virgin,” said someone else, a blond with the build of a ballerina. “The way to a man’s heart is between his legs.”
“You would know,” commented another noblewoman with shimmering midnight hair. “You’ve knelt for every man in the palace short of the Allfather himself.”

Darcy facepalmed. This must be Asgard’s version of *The Bachelor*.

Suddenly, all of the women were staring at her. “Who are you?” Porcelain Doll Lady asked.

The door opened and a servant stood there, glaring at them all forbiddingly. He was very well dressed in tunic, pants and boots in Loki’s colors of green and black, a dagger in his jeweled belt. She presumed he was either Loki’s valet or head of a small army of servants dedicated to princely whims. His hair was very long and straight and dark brown and he had eyes of silver-gray. She barely had a moment to wonder if he was a species other than Æsir before he said, “Lady Darcy?”

Three of the noblewomen surged forward, including Basket Lady and Ballerina Lady. “Oh, that’s me!” exclaimed Basket Lady.

“I am Lady Darcy!” insisted Ballerina Lady.

“No, I am!” said yet another woman, this one with hair so blond it couldn’t possibly be real. “What sort of name is Darcy?” she asked after a moment.

“That’s the name of the Midgard whore,” Porcelain Doll Lady said, her gaze still on Darcy.

That was getting old fast, and in any other situation, Darcy would have punched out the bitch. Here, she stood no chance of surviving a brawl, even with these pampered ladies. She decided to ask herself what Frigga would do. “I’m Lady Darcy, the Ambassador from Earth,” she said coolly, stepping forward. She stopped in front of Very Blond Lady and Porcelain Doll Lady. “Darcy is a rare sort of name on my world. It’s from the Celtic, meaning dark, or from the French, meaning from the town of Arcy, although in my case it’s Darcy Elizabeth, named for the two main characters in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. It’s a wonderful book, and I see it’s in the palace library. You should read it. You can read, can’t you?”

Very Blond Lady’s mouth dropped open, but no sound came out. Somebody behind her tittered. Darcy paused in the doorway and turned to Basket Lady as the servant bowed her in. “By the way, thanks for baking. I’ll see that Loki gets them.” She took the basket from the shocked noblewoman’s unresisting fingers and sailed into Loki’s quarters.

Once the doors were shut behind her, Darcy leaned against them and let out her breath slowly. She suddenly understood why the Klingon practice of running the gauntlet was so scary. Those girls didn’t even have pain sticks. “I survived,” she said wonderingly.

“My apologies, milady,” the servant said. “I could say they are not normally this rude, but they are. You handled them well.”

He smiled at her, and when he did that, he seemed to have an aura of well-being that affected everything around him, including her. She felt warm and fuzzy. “Thanks. I guess it’s my turn to be rude, because I’m just dying to know. Are you an elf?”

He inclined his head. “I am Finglorfin, head of Prince Loki’s household, and yes, I am an elf. I was under the impression Midgard is isolated among the Nine. You have heard of us?”

That took a bit of explaining, which Darcy did, though condensing the entire *Lord of the Rings* saga into less than a minute was tough. She talked while they walked through the suite. She’d never been in Loki’s rooms before, and they were twice the size of hers. The main room was open, with columns and enormous windows and scattered furniture. It didn’t look lived in at all, but a
place to entertain dignitaries. There were three sets of double doors and Finglorfin guided her
toward the open ones.

The next room turned out to be a library. This space was cozy and five steps down from the
main room, with rugs as thick as bear pelts on the floor and doors that were open to a massive
balcony. It was midafternoon and raining outside, and she realized she had never seen Asgard
under anything but sunshine. Clouds hung low over the city, and the mountains in the distance
were wreathed in mist. Rain pattered gently on the paving stones.

The walls of Loki’s personal library were covered in overloaded bookshelves and there were
books stacked on the steps and on the floor. There was also a large, ornate desk and a table, also
covered with books and parchment. Darcy paused in the doorway with a smile. This was probably
where Loki spent most of his time, and beneath his swagger, he was a nerd after her own heart. Her
fingers itched to dive into the nearest pile and start reading. If Hogwarts existed, he could forget
about getting sorted into the too-obvious Slytherin. They’d both end up in Ravenclaw together.

Speaking of the God of Mischief, Loki sat cross-legged on a divan near the open doors, with a
bowl in his lap and a book in front of him. His hands were in the bowl, which looked to be filled
with strawberry Jell-O but must be some sort of healing concoction. The pages of the book were
turning themselves. He must have recently come from the bath, because his hair was still wet and
he was barefoot. The black leather pants he wore were deliciously tight, while the shirt he wore
hung open, giving her a glimpse of chiseled chest and a six pack to die for. Loki’s attention was on
the book, and it was one of those rare moments where he was unguarded. There was a hint of
boyishness there, of the young prince he’d once been.

She had some of the pieces to that puzzle, but not all, and Darcy was willing to wait for him to
tell her the rest. Maybe she was far too trusting; Loki had caused terrible death and destruction on
her world, and he’d betrayed those who’d loved him best in Asgard. Yet every time she looked at
him, she knew she wasn’t wrong. He worked almost too hard at being a supervillain. There were
times when he forgot to be bad.

Take, for instance, a few hours ago, when he’d picked a mortal woman over an artifact of
power.

Finglorfin opened his mouth to announce her, but Darcy touched his sleeve. She would
announce herself. The elf bowed and withdrew as she pulled her Starkphone from the neckline of
her gown and snapped a couple of pictures of Loki. The low battery indicator blinked at her. Her
days of taking pictures were numbered and that sucked. She wanted to remember everything,
especially him, as there was no telling how long this would last. She had no illusions about forever.

Loki looked up at the camera click, his expression unreadable. “What did Eir say?”

Was that concern? She was the only one allowed in the door. “She says I’m fine and should get
out of her business and back into yours.”

His lips twitched, but he resisted a smile. “Will you never stop trying to save me?”

“No,” Darcy said, taking up what she hoped was a sexy pose against the door frame. She’d
chosen the gown because it clung to her body in all the right places, showcasing her curves, and
wait until he discovered she wasn’t wearing much of anything beneath it. “Maybe you’re worth
saving. Maybe I haven’t gotten what I want from you yet.”

His gaze became wicked. “Indeed. So milady has come to seduce me?”
When he stared at her like that, he could make her panties wet from across the room and she wondered who was seducing whom. He probably suspected her lack of lingerie, since her nipples pressed against the fine material of her gown. “How am I doing so far?”

"Come here and let me show my appreciation properly."

That sounded like a command, and he should already know she wasn’t the obedient type. “Proper isn’t in your vocabulary. Say please.”

“Proper is boring and you’re an impertinent wench.”

“You like that I’m a wench. There aren’t nearly enough wenches in your life.” She angled her thumb back toward the front door as she sashayed down the steps and dropped her phone and basket on the table. “If you change your mind, though, there are plenty of ladies waiting outside. I guess that’s how you know the word fangirl.”

“There is a line, I suppose,” Loki said flatly.

Most guys would celebrate by buying a keg and calling all their friends. She’d been to that kind of party. “Calling it a line is being generous. Melee or scrum, maybe? There might be rioting by now, since the Midgard whore was the only one who actually got inside.”

His buffaloed expression was priceless.

“Oh, so hadn’t meant to say that,” Darcy muttered before slapping her hand over her mouth. What she had meant to do was put it out of her head and enjoy the time she had with him. She wouldn’t waste time obsessing over the insult.

Loki flung the bowl aside, and it smashed near the doors to the garden, spilling red goop all over the stones. He grabbed a towel, and wiping his hands as he went, stalked toward the front door. Darcy put herself in front of him. “Don’t go out there. I handled it.”

“How?”

“I may have made them look like a bunch of uneducated skanks…”

“Skank?” Loki repeated, then shook his head. “Never mind, I can guess what it means. They are akin to vultures picking over a carcass, and it happens to be my carcass right now. If Thor were here, that’s where they’d be.” His expression softened. “They know naught but to put themselves forward at the expense of others, and they are jealous of you.”

That continued to be weird. These women were gorgeous, powerful beings, once thought of as goddesses. “Then let them stew out there and wonder what we’re doing in here.” Darcy took his hands in hers and turned them over. The dragonfire burns were gone. “Your hands look better. I’m glad.”

“I can use them, in case you’re wondering.”

She’d been hoping Eir was up for one more healing miracle today. Darcy slipped her hands into his open shirt and slid upward, skimming his stomach and chest. It was interesting that he didn’t feel any different, even though he was not human. His skin was warm and smooth, with no chest hair but definitely a happy trail. With her finger, she traced it downward, coming to stop at the ties of his pants, and she thought she heard a catch in his breath. Then she looked up at him. “Those girls outside the door, I won’t share anything with them, not even the way you look right now.”
“I didn’t suspect you of having a possessive streak.” With a wolfish grin, Loki pressed her backwards until she was up against the table. With a snap of his fingers, the books on the table jumped off, scattering on the floor. “What is it about the sight of me that you like so much?”

Darcy yanked the shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, letting it flutter to the floor. For somebody who claimed to be a sorcerer, he was all gorgeous lean muscle, and why hadn’t she done this sooner? “You’re always the perfect prince, unflappable in the face of dragons and frost giants and space freaks. I like the casual look better.” She reached up to mess with his hair, then sank her fingers into it and drew him down her.

Loki kissed her thoroughly, starting with her lips before he worked his way inside, and she felt every thrust of his tongue all the way to her toes. His hands were at her waist, then at her hips. He lifted her up as if she weighed no more than a feather to sit her on the table. “I shall save you from dragons more often,” he murmured.

“You got lucky, because I don’t normally play the damsel in distress. Although,” she added, sounding indecently breathless, “if you feel like doing it again, I might go along—oh.” Darcy stuttered to a halt as he reached down and found her ankles under her skirts. She hadn’t wasted time with stockings and the feel of his hands on her bare skin only stoked her desire. He glided upwards, caressing her legs, pushing her skirts up. Then he spread her thighs and settled himself there. She wiggled to the edge of the table and was quick to discover His Naughtiness had a serious hard-on. Grinding against him, she dragged a hiss out of him. “Is that for me?”

“You see any other woman here?” Loki returned, leaning over her, his strong arms on either side of her. Then he reached up to release her hair, letting it tumble over her shoulders. “I would like it noted that I haven’t lacked for offers of companionship.”

Even with his hands traveling back up her skirts, he was reminding her of her place. Darcy wasn’t having any of it. She made a line of tiny kisses along his jaw, then traced his ear with her tongue. “We have names for ladies like that on dear old planet Earth. Skank, ho, slut…”

“Can you not be a good little mortal just once?” Loki’s hands climbed higher, squeezing her ass. “That’s not the sort of noise I want from you.” He used that sinful tongue of his to taste where her neck met her collarbone before sucking hard on it. Darcy threw her head back and let out a mewl of pleasure.

Fuck all his other titles. The only one that mattered was the God of Really Good Sex.

“That’s what I want,” Loki said with satisfaction. “I will have you, make no doubt of it. I will explore every part of you and mark you as my own. ‘Tis my name you will scream to the skies.” He leaned even closer, his mouth by her ear. “You are already mine.”

Darcy brought her legs up to his hips. She slipped a hand between them to loosen the ties of his pants. “Maybe you’re mine.”

A soft groan escaped his lips as she worked her way inside the leather to grasp his cock. With a slow stroke, she discovered he was large and slick and very hard. She could definitely help him with that. Loki rocked into her hand, then he seemed to get himself under control and escaped her grip. He followed the strap of her thong to where it covered her pussy, and one finger dipped beneath it, finding the moisture there. “Is that for me?” he purred, echoing her earlier words.

“You know it is, bad boy.” Darcy didn’t try to hide her gasp as his finger moved over her slick folds. “You could, um, keep doing that.”
His chuckle was low and mischievous. “You’re so ready, aren’t you, my Darcy? One touch and I could give you sweet release.”

His words were almost enough to send her over the edge, but it was pretty obvious he had no intention of letting her go so easily. His touch remained light, avoiding her clit, confirming Darcy’s suspicions that he knew his way around a lady’s private parts. Even when she shifted her hips in an attempt to create more friction, he expertly avoided it. She moaned. “Don’t be a tease, Loki.”

His grin was positively evil. Even as he continued to toy with her, he lowered his head to trace the edge of her neckline with his mouth, nipping at her bare skin. Then, with a sharp yank, he pulled her gown down and freed her breasts. “You shameless hussy,” Loki growled. “Now who is the tease? I’ll never be able to see you in a gown again without wondering if you’re wearing anything at all beneath it.”

“That was the idea.” She’d had quite the discussion with Brunhilde over going out without the required underthings, as her maid had been able to convey her disapproval without stepping outside the bounds of propriety. Clearly, it had not been a bad decision. His masterful tongue drew her nipples to taut peaks, and he slipped one finger inside of her, then two. Darcy thrashed and came close to begging. “If you don’t fuck me in the next two minutes, I’m gonna die.”

“Do you think so?” His words were idle, as if they were talking about the rain outside, but he was tense under her touch. “Is that what you want? To be taken right here, as hard and fast as I can?”

On some level, she thought she ought to be afraid, that she shouldn’t trust him with anything, much less her body. He was the liar, the would-be conqueror, the usurper.

If Loki was all of those things, why did she feel so safe with him?

Her hands didn’t shake, her fingers sure as she slid his pants down over his hips. She fondled his hard length once, twice, drawing moisture from the tip. As she swirled it along his shaft, she met his gaze and squirmed closer yet to the edge of the table. “Yes,” Darcy said. “I want you, and I want you right now and don’t you dare make me wait.”

His green eyes widened, and she wondered how long it had been since anyone had told him they wanted him and meant it. He closed his eyes, as if savoring her words, before he wrenched her panties off and entered her in one furious thrust. Darcy’s breath came out in a gasp, for she hadn’t done this in a while (Toby Tucker hadn’t gotten past second base). She gripped Loki’s shoulders as he pulled out and slammed into her again. Tilting her hips, she met his next thrust, taking him deeper yet. He growled against her skin, her hair, before dipping his head to lavish more attention on her nipples.

He alternated deep thrusts with quick, shorter stabs and long, slow invasions that had her writhing beneath him, desperate for more, and she couldn’t find his rhythm. He was purposely keeping her from coming, prolonging her pleasure and his own. “Please, please, please,” Darcy found herself babbling, dragging her nails down his back.

“Please what?” Loki’s breath came in short gasps. “Say my name.”

“Loki,” she breathed.

“Louder,” he snarled, and he seemed to spiral out of control. Now she could find his rhythm and strained to match him, though it wasn’t easy on the edge of the table. The coil of pleasure grew and tightened and she forgot everything but him and the sweet spot where their bodies came
together, angling her hips further—

“Loki!” The rush of heat and pleasure overwhelmed her and she came apart, breaking into what felt like thousands of microscopic pieces. The only thing holding her together was her grip on him and the thought that she’d waited her entire life for that orgasm.

She was spoiled forever. No Earth guy was ever going to come close.

“Is that what you wanted, rapacious wench?” Loki never stopped, tautness in his every muscle. “You’re so damn tight and wet and eager for me—”

He abruptly shut up. Silver Tongue finally ran out of words as his eyes glazed over, and Darcy clenched her inner muscles around him and twined her arms around his neck. “Say my name,” she whispered in his ear.

His breath came out in a fierce rush and she thought he was going to tell her where to put that idea. Then, “Darcy,” he gasped out, somewhere between bliss and desperation. He buried himself in her, coming in deep, uneven thrusts.

She held onto him as he sank into her arms, his face buried in her neck. Darcy stroked his hair, his skin, listening to his unsteady breathing. Gradually, she became aware of the world around her again: the hard table, the books strewn on the floor, the rain outside.

He didn’t try to shake her off. Loki was hers, at least for now.

“Who are you, girl?” He lifted his head to search her face, his tone wrecked. “Who are you to make me come apart like that?”

This she had an answer for. She brushed a slow, soft kiss across his mouth before saying, “I’m the woman who doesn’t give a rat’s ass that you’re a prince. I’m the woman who wants to know who you really are and has every intention of spending the rest of the night making love to you.”

Interest kindled in Loki’s eyes and he glanced sideways at the open doors of the balcony. “It’s not dark out yet.”

“Yep,” said Darcy.
Trouble

Chapter Summary

Loki and Darcy indulge in more sex, Truth or Dare, dragon pestering and maybe just a hint of honesty.

Chapter Notes

If you haven't seen Age of Ultron, don't worry, no spoilers here! Go see it, though. It's not as good as The Avengers, but of course, it lacks Loki. I might be biased.

More sexytimes in this chapter, be ye warned!

As per usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody. Just happy to be here.

I'm hurting baby, I'm broken down
I need your loving, loving
I need it now
When I'm without you, I'm something weak
You got me begging, begging, I'm on my knees
Sugar, Maroon 5

By sundown, Loki knew he was in some trouble.

Of course, he already knew he was in trouble with Thanos, with the Allfather, with the Frost Giants, with Thor and his Avenger cohorts, with the denizens of Midgard, was there anyone he had forgotten? Like as not there was. He couldn’t remember where he stood with Amora the Enchantress or her sneaky sister Lorelei and he thought he owed money to that damned Ravager idiot Peter Quill (Loki flat refused to call him Star-Lord), not to mention various favors owed to mages, dwarves and other odd beings.

Darcy was a different sort of trouble altogether.

She straddled his hips, sinking slowly, achingly, onto his cock until she had all of him, and they
both moaned. She surrounded him in her slick, wet heat, and he didn’t think he’d ever had a woman so tight and lush. With her hair tumbling wildly over her shoulders, her hips moving with his, her breasts full and taut, she should be a goddess of the Æsir. She slid upward, then down again, searching for that perfect angle that would afford them both the maximum amount of pleasure. As Loki had long suspected, she was no innocent, and he’d taken her to his bed to explore the breadth of her experience. Her skill in the bedchamber impressed him, for if he understood correctly, she was quite young to know so much. It made Loki reiterate his promise to dispatch her former lovers, especially the one who taught her the fine art of pleasing a man.

Somewhere along the way, she’d ended up on top, and Loki had decided to let her have her way with him. How did the mortals put it? Best decision ever. Darcy leaned over him, her hair falling around them as she picked up the pace. “You like that, don’t you?”

He laughed. Like was a vast understatement, and he didn’t think he was alone in his delight. Her breathing was uneven, eyes bright, cheeks flushed. His hands were on her hips, but he made no effort to guide her, for she was doing just fine on her own. “Ride me, milady, and do not stop.”

“You don’t get to give orders,” Darcy purred. She grabbed his wrists, pressing them into the pillows above his head, and he fought the instant and startling urge to shake her off. What did he have to fear from her? Then she distracted him by doing just what he’d told her not to, halting her pumping hips. “Why?” she asked. “Why me instead of the tesseract? You could have taken it and never looked back.”

“Darcy,” Loki groaned. No Æsir woman would dream of interrupting such a moment, and mayhap that was part of his fascination. He never knew what was coming next, and he couldn’t decide whether to strangle her or roll her over and fuck her until neither of them had a thought left in their heads. “The bracelets still tie us together,” he reminded her, his own voice rough. “Is not a healthy sense of self-preservation and a case of lust answer enough?”

“Not really, no,” said Darcy. “Just in case you forgot, the bad guy is supposed to pick the treasure and leave the girl to roast or whatever, like in Raiders of the Lost Ark.” She nibbled tiny kisses on his lips, as if she was teasing, yet the look in her eyes was intense. “Tell me the truth. And if the truth sucks, if this is all part of some enormous, crazy plan of yours and none of it is real, then make it the best lie you’ve ever told.”

There was no doubt he could concoct a lie so wonderful that even he would believe it, and it wouldn’t be the first time he’d done so in a woman’s arms. Mayhap, though, she deserved better from him than pretty lies. “I could not have left you to the dragon. I feared there would be nothing left of you to come back for.”

“You were going to come back for me?” Darcy burst into a radiant, impish smile. “I suppose now’s a bad time to tell you I wasn’t going to stay in Erebor? There’s a town nearby, on a lake. Laketown. Original, huh?”

Loki threw his head back with a growl. Would he never stop underestimating her? If she didn’t start moving on him soon, he was going to die, or be reduced to begging, or something. “Helborn wench. You would have me regret my choice?”

“If you had listened when I told you to read The Hobbit, you would have known about Laketown,” she told him, her eyes alight with laughter even as her hips rose until she’d almost released him, then sank down slowly on him again. The feel of her was so exquisite he almost came on the spot. What was it about her that made him forget centuries of schooling himself in patience and behave like a randy schoolboy?
She was trouble incarnate, and he never wanted to escape.

Loki thrust upward, losing himself in her heat. Above him, Darcy gasped and arched her back and her expression became one of bliss. “You know what, Magic Man? I don’t think you’re going to regret anything.”

By the Nine, she was right.

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By midnight, Darcy knew she shouldn’t have taught Loki how to play Truth or Dare.

She’d had the best of intentions. Sprawled next to him in bed, it had seemed like the ideal way to get him to talk, better than holding him down and prying answers out of him. He’d been totally relaxed, and she’d made the mistake of presuming he’d take truth because he was too lazy for anything else. It had worked on guys before.

So, so wrong.

“Dare,” said Loki.

She’d had to think fast, not easy since they’d been fooling around for hours and she had the brain capacity of a sponge in a rainstorm. “The noblewoman who called me the Midgard whore. I dare you to go make her spit up slugs like Ron Weasley in The Chamber of Secrets.”

As soon as it was out, she wished she could take it back. Revenge never quite worked out the way she planned it, and with Loki, complications happened.

“That’s no challenge,” he scoffed. He grabbed a robe and headed for the door.

“Hey, wait for me,” Darcy called after him. If he was actually going to do it, she wanted to see. Unfortunately, her gown was nowhere in sight, nor was any other article of clothing. She snatched up a green sheet and wrapped it around herself. It would be nice if the ladies in the hallway thought it Midgard style, but of course, the fact that she’d been seen wearing nothing but one of Loki’s sheets (did everything have to be green? Really?) would be all over Hlidskjalf by morning.

Loki flung open the front door. The only people out in the corridor were the Einherjar on duty. Darcy, who had hidden herself next to the door in case of bitches, peered out and sighed. “They must have gone to the evening feast.”

“They have gone in search of other prey,” Loki said. “The lady in question, whose name you do not seem to know—”

“Porcelain Doll Lady isn’t good enough?”

“You’ve just described half the women in the palace. If I’m to cast such a spell, she must be within my line of sight. Since I have no intention of getting dressed and going to look for this mystery noblewoman, your dare is for naught. My turn then? I dare you—”

“That’s not the way this game is played,” Darcy broke in. He was a little too eager to put out his dare, and she had a terrible feeling where this was going. “I get to pick.”

His green eyes were full of mischief and he was grinning. “Are you not the Darcy Lewis who
claims no one has ever called you a chicken and lived to tell? Perhaps you are afraid. Cluck, cluck, cluck.”

What was she supposed to say? She had no one to blame but herself. “Dare.”

Loki’s grin grew to diabolical proportions. “Your enthusiasm overwhelms me. All I am daring you to do is run back to your quarters.”

Darcy glared at him suspiciously. “That’s too easy.”

“Wearing nothing,” he added, and like a magician with a tablecloth, he tugged on her sheet. She tried to grab it, but the material was smooth and slipped easily through her fingers. Off it went.

“I hate you!” Darcy threw back as she crossed her arms at her chest and ran like an entire garrison of Frost Giants were on her tail. The last time she’d done this had been in college, and at least she’d had on bra and panties to run down the block and back. Could her ass blush? She was pretty sure it could. Behind her, she could hear Loki laughing. She didn’t run into anyone else in the hall, and maybe (just maybe) it was worth it, to hear genuine laughter from him.

She slipped into her suite, which was thankfully empty of maids, for Darcy had no desire to explain herself. She took her time finding a robe, choosing a shimmering purple, and found herself smiling at it like a goofball. Why not? Loki admitted he cared about her. Well, that’s not what he’d said exactly, but for him, it was quite a declaration. He’d cared enough not to leave her to Smaug, or to lie to her.

It was only then that she wondered if he was trying to get rid of her after he’d gotten what he wanted. Well, she wasn’t so easy to shove off. Properly covered, Darcy sauntered back down the corridor.

Loki was right where she’d left him, though his grin turned to a pout. “I did not tell you to come back dressed.”

“You weren’t specific,” she said as she sailed past him. “Truth or Dare?”

Food had appeared (magically or otherwise) on a table near the bed. She grabbed one of two goblets of wine and a tray laden with fruit and cheese and the muffins she’d taken from Basket Lady. She took it all with her as she crawled back into the middle of his bed. It was a massive thing, golden and shaped like a Viking boat. Earlier, it had been covered with pillows and furs, though most were now in piles on the floor. The bedroom also contained an enormous hearth with a bright fire and a mantel held up by stone wolves. This was the bedroom of a prince, and she wondered how often Loki actually slept here. Her stomach growled, and she dove into the plate of snacks.

Loki took the other goblet of wine and followed her onto the bed. “Truth.”

Oh, of course. Now he picked truth, after she had bared her ass to the Einherjar. She wondered what the rumor mill would make of their game (she wasn’t stupid enough to think the guards wouldn’t speak of what they’d seen). She inhaled a few bites of a white cheese that was supposedly goat cheese, but tasted much sweeter than the Earth kind. What sort of goats did they have on Asgard? She remembered a picture of big ones pulling a chariot for Thor in Erik’s book of Norse mythology. She’d have to ask, but not Loki. She knew better than to bring up the T word. “Really? I thought you were allergic to truth.”

“Whatever it is you want to know, you could have just asked.”
He gave her a knowing look, and she shouldn’t be surprised. He was centuries older than she and still a bachelor. He’d probably seen it all from women. Darcy swallowed the cheese and went for a muffin instead. It was similar to a corn muffin and actually quite good. “Your track record for truth telling isn’t the best.”

“Try me,” Loki said, putting his wrist with the golden bracelet on it next to hers. “You’ll know if I’m lying. What is it you want to know? Why I tried to conquer your world?”

There was a not-so-subtle dare in his words, and Darcy knew she was suddenly on dangerous ground. She did want an answer to that question, but not at the expense of ruining the rest of the night. She went in a different direction instead. “Tell me about the first woman you were ever with. Experienced noblewoman or dairy maid? If you tell me you’re so old you’ve forgotten, I’m going to throw something at your head.”

He looked amused. “Why would you wish to know this?”

She took his hand in hers, intertwining their fingers. “Why not? You’ve lived for freakin’ centuries and have led a life I can’t imagine. I want to know everything about you. I want to know what makes you tick.”

The expression in his eyes turned either horrified or pensive. He popped some bread in his mouth and chewed slowly, perhaps to give himself time to think, but he didn’t try to escape her hand. Finally, Loki shrugged. “They were elvish, and there were three of them.”

“Oh, I call bullshit!”

He flashed a roguish smile and shook his wrist. “Am I lying? It was Mereth Nuin Giliath on Aelfheim, when elvish maids go in search of lovers. They were the youngest daughters of the king and already well versed in a thousand pleasures of hand and mouth. This wasn’t unusual, for elves are sensual creatures. They decided not to fight over me, but take turns.”

There was no betraying tingle from her bracelet. Damn him, Loki was telling the truth, as outrageous as it sounded. What had he looked like, fresh out of boyhood, without all his sharp, cynical edges? “Wow. Do elves do things differently?”

Something lit in his eyes, and he pushed the platter aside. Loki untangled his hand from hers to trace the fine lines of her palm. Then he sucked on each of her fingers in turn before answering. “Elves believe that the union of bodies is not the most important aspect of lovemaking. Foreplay is all.” He kissed her inner wrist, then nipped the delicate skin there before soothing it over with his tongue. “They believe in the slow building of anticipation, of arousal, of pleasing your partner, or partners. They can spend hours at it and have a thousand ways to go about it.”

“Oh you show me?” She suspected he already was, and her skin sang in anticipation, even though he’d hardly touched her.

“If you answer a question.”

“I guess it’s my turn, isn’t it? Truth.”

Loki moved to sit behind her, though he did not touch her. “No more games,” he commanded, but his tone was gentle. “During the time you’ve been here, you have never once asked to go home. Why?”

Home. Where was that anyway? With Jane in the hot, empty New Mexico desert? Back with her family in Manhattan? With Gran? She loved her grandmother, but the old dear would be the
first to tell her that a retirement community in Florida was no place for her. As for the rest of her family, they probably had yet to realize she was missing. Jane and Erik and the lab was the closest she’d come to having a home in years.

Until now.

Loki still didn’t touch her, but he teased her robe off of one shoulder. His breath ghosted over her skin, sending warmth shooting down her spine. “It’s like a dream here,” she finally said. “It’s like stepping into Harry Potter, or The Lord of the Rings. As a kid, I always wanted to live in a place like Asgard. I wish I belonged here.”

“As do I.”

Darcy turned to argue, for this was his home, then she closed her mouth. What Asgard wanted from its heroes was brawn and prowess in battle, not brains and magic. How sad that they could not see his awesomeness, and maybe that was one of the reasons he had gone out and done all sorts of bad things.

Loki lifted her hair and draped it over her shoulder, then tugged her robe to her waist. He had yet to really touch her, and it was driving her crazy. She waited, hardly daring to breathe, and at last, he kissed the back of her neck. Then he began to trace her spine with kisses. “So, this elvish thing,” she said haltingly, “does it take patience?”

He chuckled, his laughter vibrating against her skin. “It does.”

“Yeah, I’m not patient. Not where you’re concerned. In case you hadn’t noticed.”

“My sweet Darcy,” Loki said, “you’re going to have to be.”

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By early morning, Loki knew what needed to be done.

Darcy was spooned up against him, her back to his chest. He had one arm firmly around her while his other hand wandered over her honeyed skin. He couldn’t get enough of touching her, and he meant to enjoy her for as long as he could. It was a selfish impulse, to be sure, but he would see to her protection.

He would also see to a little harmless revenge in her name. When he’d sent her running up the hall in naught but what she’d been born in (a charming sight indeed), he’d been able to question the Einherjar and find out who had been outside his door earlier.

Darcy smiled, though her eyes were closed. “I didn’t take you for the cuddling type.”

“Possessive,” Loki murmured into her hair. He hated the question he knew he must ask, and he brought her closer. “Tell me what you remember of Thanos.”

She said nothing at first and mayhap he should let it be until morn, at least. Then, “Worms,” she whispered. With her eyes still shut, she seemed to curl back into him. “It sounds stupid when I say it out loud. It was like worms crawling through my brain. Maybe it was a nightmare.”
She didn’t need to explain further, for though he could not recall ever encountering such a thing, Loki knew what she was talking about. They were a bright blue and had no features, and they existed only to discover what their master wanted to know. “‘Twas no nightmare. They are not worms, but coils of magic designed to search your mind. No matter how hard you try, you cannot hide from them. No matter how deep you bury your secrets, you cannot conceal them.”

She was silent for so long he might have thought she’d fallen asleep, except from the sudden tension in her body, as if she struggled with some strong emotion. “I tried so hard to fight back. I’m sorry.”

Loki held her tight, as tight as he dared. “I will not allow him to touch you again, in any way. Will you permit me this, Darcy? Will you trust me enough to protect you?”

“I already trust you too much.”

“Aye, you do, milady.” Fury burned in his chest at the thought of what had been done to her, his magic white-hot and barely held in check. It was better than feeling nothing, yet it was never for himself, always for her. There could be only one explanation.

He was going mad.

“You knew what the worms were like,” she whispered. “He used it on you.”

“I do not know. I suspect—” Loki hesitated, swallowed, and began again. “Thanos is a brutal, unforgiving creature. I did not recall such a thing existed until you described the experience. I must assume there is much about my time with him I do not remember.”

“What now?”

“We fight back.”

Darcy drifted off in his arms. Sleep nibbled at the edges of Loki’s consciousness, but he wouldn’t let Thanos creep into his dreams. Instead, he turned his mind to other ways of thwarting the Mad Titan. The tesseract needed to be moved, since he almost certainly knew where it was. Then again, even if Thanos were able to access the illusion, he’d have to find his way through the maze that was Erebor and then deal with a testy and overlarge dragon.

Thanos versus Smaug would be most amusing, especially if, as Loki suspected, the dragon had access to the power of the tesseract. He’d let it be, if Darcy wasn’t involved.

Unfortunately, he might have to let it be anyway.

Loki closed his eyes and stole into the illusion. As planned, the bed arrived with him, though it was placed awkwardly at the crossing of two corridors. There was no one here to care. He slipped from Darcy’s arms and tucked furs around her securely. Then spelling himself some clothes (he still had some control over the illusion), he teleported himself to one of the walkways high over the treasure hoard and sat down.

The tesseract once again occupied one of the highest piles, its soft glow a beacon among the gold and gems. Of the dragon, there was no sign, though Loki was not fool enough to believe that would last long. He took advantage of the momentary quiet.

He should be thinking about ways to thwart the Mad Titan, for he was coming, the might of Asgard be damned. He should be making plans to escape if things went horribly wrong. Yet all he could think about was Darcy, and how her thighs fit perfectly around his hips and how his name
sounded on her lips. She’d proven herself to be impatient indeed, and he’d pushed her to the point of promising first born children and indentured servitude before he’d given in to their mutual desire.

The enormous, horned head of the dragon rose before him. “You again? You’re a stubborn one, aren’t you?”

Even his illusory self was not as cautious as he should have been. He didn’t move, hadn’t even jumped when the creature rose from below to peer at him. “Leave off, monster,” Loki told Smaug. “I am not here for the damned cube. It is yours, at least for now.”

“You think to trick me?”

Loki raised his empty hands. “No tricks. I am unarmed.”

“You are a sorcerer and therefore never unarmed. If you do not want the bauble, then what do you want?”

Why was he here? Mayhap to reassure himself that there could be no better protector than Smaug. Mayhap to reassure himself that to leave Darcy in danger because of her involvement with the illusion was the only decision he could make right now. “There are others who desire the tesseract. Creatures who are powerful and angry and desperate. I thought you should know.”

“More desperate than you? How diverting,” was the dragon’s comment.

“Sometimes I wonder if she planned it this way,” Loki said. “Could Darcy have understood that in giving the tesseract to you, it would be out of my reach as well? She is always trying to save me, even from myself. No doubt my brother and his cohorts would be delighted to know I can’t get to it, but then, how amusing for me that they can’t get it either.”

“Darcy?” Smaug sounded out the name carefully. “The lady of the race of men? My offer still stands, godling. I would trade the cube for the lady.”

That chilled Loki to his bones. He stood, knowing he’d been far too complacent in the presence of this cunning beast. “What need you with the lady?”

Its mouth stretched into something echoing a grin. “She is the creator, is she not?”

“I created the illusion—”

“You supplied the magic, but you plucked me from her mind.” Smaug leaned in closer, his breath full of brimstone. “She’s the one who knows me, what I truly am and where I came from. She knows what I must become. Bring her to me, godling, and I will give you what you want.”

Why couldn’t anyone offer him what he wanted with no strings attached? Only days ago, he would have taken the dragon up on his offer, but he feared Smaug had as dark a purpose for Darcy as Thanos had for him. “Mayhap,” Loki suggested coldly, “what I want has changed. Enjoy the tesseract.” He raised his hand, casting a killing curse at the dragon. It didn’t come close to destroying Smaug, but the creature did fall back under the onslaught. Loki retreated and teleported himself back to Darcy.

For once, she was right where he left her, and even as the mountain jolted under Smaug’s fury, Loki sent them both back into the real world.

“You just can’t leave him alone, can you?” Darcy muttered, rolling over and burying her face...
in his chest.

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By dawn, Darcy found herself staring at the ceiling, unable to go back to sleep.

She rolled over, to gaze at the man next to her. Wonder of wonders, Loki was asleep. She hadn’t thought he indulged himself in such mundane activities, but he was definitely out, his breathing even, his face relaxed. She reached out to trace his cheekbones and his mouth, and then thought the better of it. She didn’t want to disturb him, especially when she knew he slept so rarely.

She so didn’t belong here, in Asgard or at his side.

Then why had the feeling of home crept up on her, and now refused to be shaken?

Perhaps she needed a little air. Darcy slipped out of bed, throwing her robe on and wandering through his suite. Off the bedroom, she discovered a dressing room full of clothes that was roughly the size of her apartment back in New Mexico. There was also a bath with a tub the size of a swimming pool, full of gently steaming water. A dip might be nice, but it would be more fun with two. She kept moving.

Another door led her back to the large entertaining room. She meandered through it, the windows giving her an amazing view of the night sky of Asgard, full of stars and nebula in a rainbow of colors. The fire bowls were cold and empty, the furniture as if it had never been sat upon, and she moved on to the library. Here, the fire burned low, and the balcony doors were still open. She went to the doorway and took a long, deep breath. The pre-dawn air was cool and wet, the paving stones still damp, yet the sky had cleared.

Hadn’t she learned her lesson? Asgard, at heart, wasn’t so different from the Manhattan social scene she’d grown up in and she’d gotten the hell out for a reason. With very few exceptions, the in-crowd didn’t want her here and wouldn’t hesitate to say so. She was mortal and they would never consider her an equal. She hadn’t been here that long, and she already had the really sucky nickname of the Midgard whore. Nice.

Yet she’d dreamed of this place her whole life. It was Hogwarts, Rohan and every time travel romance she’d ever read all rolled into one, and she’d be damned if she’d let them chase her away.

She wouldn’t let them chase her away from Loki.

Darcy wasn’t foolish enough to confuse great sex with love, but there was definitely something between them. Still, she wouldn’t let herself dream of any sort of forever. At some point, Allfather Odin would wake from his magic sleep, and he’d be coming for the Master of Mischief to hand out punishment that was sure to be worse than a spanking. There was also the matter of her mortality, for how could they work out the massive difference in their lifespans? As far as she could tell, the mythical golden apples of Asgard were just a myth.

It was heartbreak for Darcy no matter how she looked at it.

She turned back to find her Starkphone on the table. The low battery indicator was more insistent than before, and of course, there was no service. How she wished she could share all this with Gran. She’d definitely taken her grandmother’s favorite piece of advice and slowed down and
used her head. She’d thought of nothing else but Loki lately, hadn’t she?

Darcy decided she wasn’t going to let anything stop her. She was going to enjoy what she had right now, however it ended.

Turning, she spotted her IPod on the divan, half hidden by the book he’d been reading earlier. She flipped to the cover and smiled. It was *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. She’d have to ask Loki what he thought of Professor Umbridge. There were more books under the divan, and there she found the rest of the Harry Potter series, along with brand new copies of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Where did he keep getting books from?

Darcy picked up her IPod and turned it on, curious to see what he’d been listening to. It was on Coldplay’s *X&Y* album. So he’d taken her advice to check out Coldplay, or he’d barely listened, because the IPod had a full charge.

She heard a low moan.

Darcy whirled around, but there was no one else in the room. Mentally, she shook herself and didn’t take the time to put down her phone or her IPod. She’d already known from the other night in the library that Loki suffered from nightmares. Rushing back to the bedroom, she found him hopelessly tangled in the sheets. His hands were above his head as if manacled there, and he thrashed as if he was trying to escape invisible bonds. Among his muttering, she thought he was begging for something to stop. Throwing her devices aside, she slipped into bed behind him, wrapping herself around him. “Loki,” she called softly. “Loki, wake up. Come back to me.”

He jerked to wakefulness, freeing himself as he sat up with a start, taking great lungfuls of air. His eyes were unfocused, panicked, then he blinked and ran his fingers through his hair. Darcy reached out to touch him, reassure him, and he jumped away as if scalded. She decided it was better to reach out with her voice. “Are you okay?”

“Why are you here with me?” When he did turn to her, there was a wild, haunted look in his eyes. “I tried to rule your world.”

They were back to that again, and yes, he had. She had seen the devastation on all the news channels and had heard stories from family members. She should hate him, and she’d had ample opportunity to slide a dagger between his ribs. It changed nothing, though, didn’t bring anybody back, just added another body to the funeral pyre. “Yeah, about that dude who laid the smack down on New York? I’ve never met him.”

“Haven’t you?”

“No,” said Darcy, more forcefully. “He had no use or respect for my kind, and he’d have killed me long since. I’m kind of a loud mouth, too, never know when to keep my mouth shut. Right? I should be dead.” She picked up her IPod and held it out to him.

“Sometimes music can silence the demons,” she said. Darcy gathered up as many pillows as she could find and piled them against the elaborate golden headboard. Then she made herself comfortable and pulled him back into her arms, his head resting against her shoulder. He didn’t resist, otherwise she couldn’t have moved him. She pressed the IPod into his hands. Loki took it and even put the earbuds in, but didn’t turn it on. He fussied with it, turning it over, tapping it against his fingers. Maybe he wasn’t done talking yet. “Do you want to talk about the nightmare?” Darcy asked.
“No.” Loki, though, didn’t sound at all sure of his answer. Then he added, “Perhaps he who tried to rule your world is dead.”

She could pretend not to understand what he meant by that, but she did, only too well. There was a point in her life where everything that had gone on before seemed like the life of someone else. “Why do you think he did it?”

Loki hit the menu button and started flicking through her albums like he’d been born to technology, and she figured that was the end of the conversation. Maybe all she could do for him was hold onto him. Maybe if she held him tight enough, she could squeeze all his shattered pieces back together.

“Because he felt he was owed a throne,” Loki suddenly said. “Because he wanted to hurt his father and his brother in the same way they’d hurt him. Because, in the end—” He stopped, as if he couldn’t go on, then said, “I am only guessing, but I think he was too cowardly to die and gave himself instead to the poisoned creature who held him prisoner for so long.”

Darcy didn’t need the bracelet to know his words were unvarnished truth. She swallowed a lump in her throat the size of a softball and had no idea what to say.

Loki stared at the IPod’s screen. The album pictured was Coldplay’s Prospekt’s March, and she didn’t think Viva La Vida would do much for his peace of mind.

I used to rule the world
Seas would rise when I gave the word
Now in the morning I sleep alone
Sweep the streets I used to own

Darcy suddenly decided maybe Chris Martin and the boys could do the talking for her after all. Reaching around him, she switched the album back to X&Y.

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try
To fix you
Science and Magic

Chapter Summary

Slugs, mages and a new Bifrost, oh my!

Chapter Notes

Let's just call this chapter the calm before the storm, shall we?

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody. There is nowhere else that so many different fandoms can be brought together with such joyous abandon, and I am thankful for it.

_I was just guessing at numbers and figures_

_Pulling your puzzles apart_

_Questions of science, science and progress_

_Do not speak as loud as my heart_

_Coldplay, The Scientist_

When Darcy woke again, the sun was up and shining across the fabled land of Asgard. It was also shining in her eyes. She groaned.

“Wake up, Milady Sluggard,” Loki said in her ear, and he was too cheerful. “Trust me, you don’t want to miss breakfast.”

Apparently the angst of a few hours ago, or maybe a couple of hours ago, or heaven forbid an hour ago, had been forgotten in the bright light of day. Being with Loki was like riding a rollercoaster blindfolded. She never knew if he was going to be up, down, sideways or flipped over. “Fuck you,” Darcy mumbled. “Oh, that’s right, I did, several times. That means I get to stay in bed until noon at least.” She rolled over and pulled the covers over her head. If he thought she was going to be able to function on almost zero sleep, he could forget it.
“What a filthy mouth you have,” Loki declared, yanking all the furs away. “Meet me in the Feasting Hall and be quick about it.”

Darcy squeezed her eyes shut and curled into a ball and hoped he would go away. Actually, what she wanted was for him to get back into bed and be her squishy for a couple more hours.

Then it penetrated her foggy brain that she really ought to be paying attention. She cracked her eyes open to behold the fact that he was standing at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed at his chest, completely dressed. So the Prince of Badassery was back, and he had a twinkle in his eye that boded ill for somebody. Darcy sat up. “Wait, what?”

“The Feasting Hall,” he repeated impatiently. “I’ll see you there.”

Without another word, he disappeared in a swirl of green-tinged magic. So unfair. Loki never had to do the Walk of Shame, he could just poof himself wherever he wanted to be. Then she realized she didn’t have to do it either, as she was somehow in her own bed and she was wearing a nightgown so prim even Professor McGonagall couldn’t find fault with it. Too bad the damn thing was strangling her. Darcy tugged on the neckline and yelled, “Loki!”

He didn’t reappear. Her maids, however, peered at her from the dressing room. “Are you well, milady?” Brunhilde asked.

So much for wallowing in bed until noon. “He’s up to something,” Darcy said, getting up. “I think I need to get to the Feasting Hall fast.”

Her ladies did magic in record time once again, and Darcy was on her way in a charming tunic and trousers ensemble, black and sky blue with boots and golden armor at her chest and forearms. It seemed more fashionable than useful, but she suddenly understood why Sif dressed the way she did. Darcy felt like a warrior, and God help anybody who got in her way, because she was going to kick their asses, Æsir or not. It was a good look.

The Feasting Hall was full when she arrived, crowded with nobles breaking their fast. Actually, as she made her way through the throng, it seemed there were a lot more warriors present than she’d ever seen before. It should have been a blessing and made it easier for her to blend into the crowd. Unfortunately, the influx of burly Viking types made her feel like there were about fifteen pairs of eyes glued to her ass and other parts of her body. She hated being stared at. Then again, she’d seen herself in the mirror. Get over it and let them look, Darcy told herself.

It was easier said than done. Forcing herself to ignore them, she spotted Loki at the far end of the room, and he was in deep conversation with Fandral and Volstagg. Did this mean mischief managed or forgotten?

“If it isn’t the Midgard whore.”

Darcy did not consider herself violent, but she longed to hit the next person who used those two words in a sentence. She spun to find herself facing Sigyn. “Really? That’s the best you can do? The insult’s not original, I heard it yesterday, and if I didn’t know better, Lady Sigyn, I’d say you’d like nothing better than to be the Midgard whore.”

“You are mistaken,” the other woman replied coldly. “I would never lower myself to parade naked through the halls of Hlidskjalf.”

Darcy’s cheeks grew hot. It was no surprise that the guards talked about what they’d seen the night before, and the reason for all the stares. Then she caught Loki’s eye. He didn’t stop his
conversation, but there was a sexy little smile on his lips that was definitely meant for her. “Then I’m sorry for you,” Darcy said to Sigyn. “Your definition of a whore and mine are very different. Sometimes, there are things worth doing to give a guy a thrill.”

“What is a thrill?”

“To turn him on. Get him excited.” The other woman continued to look blank, and Darcy sighed. “Never mind. You have no clue what I’m talking about.”

It was Sigyn’s turn to flush, but whatever she had been about to say was lost forever as Frigga came up to them. “I see you found her, Sigyn. Excellent.” The queen cast Darcy a warm smile. “Did you sleep well, my dear?”

Fortunately, Darcy never had to answer. Sigyn swayed, and her face turned a peculiar shade of green. “Excuse me, Your Majesty…” she said, and bolted for the exit, hand over her mouth.

“How unusual,” said Frigga. “We Æsir rarely fall sick. I wonder if she’s pregnant. I didn’t think she was overeager to marry Tyr, but I could be wrong.”

Sigyn’s face reminded Darcy of slugs and her dare and why she’d rushed here in the first place, but the lady had not been out in the hallway the day before. Maybe Frigga was right. “Were they supposed to get married soon?”

“They should have been married already, but Sigyn insisted she could not leave my service while Odin was in the Odinsleep. She has been with me many centuries, and mayhap it is time she had a family of her own to enjoy. Come, let us break our fast,” added Frigga, taking Darcy’s arm in her own and leading her toward the head table. “If we sit, the men will join us. I suspect they are doing what men usually do and planning war, and they can do that while they eat.”

The guys did just as the queen predicted. Volstagg led the way, sitting down across from Darcy. “I thought the morn could not get any lovelier until I beheld the most beautiful ladies in the realm. My day will be brighter for the sight.”

He was smiling hopefully at Darcy, and she took this to mean he wished to get back on her good side. Meanwhile, Fandral tried to outdo his best bud by bowing extravagantly to both women. “My queen, you are as radiant as ever, the bright center of Asgard. Lady Darcy, your beauty and charm are a welcome addition to the court.”

“Thank you,” said Darcy. “I appreciate the compliments, but why should I speak to either of you guys?”

Frigga looked amused. “What is it they have done?”

“I was ambushed,” Darcy explained. “They wanted to know if Thor was okay, and they could have just asked nicely.”

“It was Sif’s idea,” Volstagg rumbled as a platter that could hold a Thanksgiving turkey was set in front of him, overflowing with roasted birds of some kind and steaming vegetables and bread. With a happy sigh, he dug in.

It was then that Loki put his two cents in. “If it was Sif’s idea, then it was handled with all the grace of a charging bilgesnipe.” He leaned over to plant a kiss on Frigga’s cheek. “Good morning, Mother.” Then he turned to Darcy, bringing her hand to his lips. “Do not let them win your forgiveness easily, milady. Make them grovel.”
Loki’s eyes said he’d have her right there on the table if he could get away with it, and Darcy couldn’t repress a pleasurable little shudder. Damn, wasn’t there a broom closet or something they could sneak off to? They must have been staring at each other for longer than was necessary, for Fandral cleared his throat as he took a place at the table. “Perhaps milady will allow me to give you a proper tour of our fair city.”

“The lady is already promised to me today,” Loki said firmly, releasing her hand to go sit down at the head of the table. “We go to the Collegium of Magic.”

Fandral wrinkled his nose. “Do not be fooled into thinking it will be interesting, Lady Darcy. The place is full of dusty tomes and dustier wizards.”

“I like wizards. They’re great heroes on my world,” Darcy added with a smile in Loki’s direction. “There’s Gandalf the Grey and Dumbledore and Obi-Wan Kenobi and the Doctor—”

Before a lively discussion could ensue over how cool or not cool mages were, servants converged from all sides, delivering laden plates. Frigga spoke. “The collegium? Is this about what happened to Darcy?”

What happened to Darcy. That almost made it sound like Thanos had rummaged through someone else’s brain space. She’d tried so hard to fight back against Thanos and his worms and she wasn’t sure if they had seen everything (like the tesseract or that embarrassing incident with the frat boy in the computer lab freshman year). Were they really gone? Over the last day, she’d been able to not think about it, but in spite of Eir’s assurances, she felt off somehow.

Maybe the best word to describe how she felt was violated.

“Darcy?”

Loki’s query brought her back to the present. Of everyone at the table, he knew what she had gone through, had gone through it himself. Bad Space Dude had helped himself to a piece of Loki’s life without asking and now he had a piece of hers, too. The others were staring, and she realized she must have missed the explanation of what happened to Darcy. Frigga’s arm was around her shoulders, and Darcy took comfort in it. “I’m okay.” She looked to Loki with determination in her heart. “What do we have to do to fight back?”

“We’ll consult with Hoenir at the collegium,” Loki said. “He’ll know best how to magically hide you from Thanos.” Though there was breakfast in front of Loki, he ignored it. He cast his gaze over the crowd instead. “You’ve done well, Fandral. It appears you’ve assembled an army, right under the nose of our enemy.”

“We’ll not be short of fighting men,” Fandral replied, sounding pleased. “I’ve pulled every man I could from the garrisons in the mountains, and brought them into the city in ones and twos.”

“The territorial jarls have also been alerted, and sent men,” Volstagg added. “I just hope you’re right that this Titan will strike here.”

“I am not wrong,” Loki said. “What he wants is here in Hlidskjalf. How do we fare with food and medical supplies?”

“They’ll be hard pressed to starve us out,” Frigga said confidently. “We have everything we need for a long siege. I’ve also put out word in the city that the people must go about their business as usual, but be prepared to pull back to the palace at a moment’s notice.”

Wow. These people actually knew how to prepare for a siege. Darcy’s favorite part in The
Lord of the Rings was the Battle of Helm’s Deep, though such things had long gone out of style on Earth. Would she get to experience one? She probably should worry about living through it. Nobody around her seemed to be at all bothered by the thought of war.

“Thanos surely has spies in Asgard,” Frigga said, “and the Harvest Festival is coming. If we don’t have it, he’ll know we are up to something.”

“He won’t wait that long,” Loki said, standing. “We are fortunate he’s given us this much time to prepare. Shall we go, milady?”

Darcy spared her breakfast a mournful glance, as she’d hardly gotten to pick at it. It was her destiny to be surrounded by all this yummy food and never have a chance to eat it. As far as she could tell, Loki had eaten nothing. “But——”

Her objections were lost when a noblewoman in pale gold came up to Loki. It was Porcelain Doll Lady, and she curtseyed so gracefully to him that Darcy was jealous. She would have to get her maids to give her lessons, since she always felt like she was going to fall on her face. The noblewoman also curtseyed to Frigga and ignored everyone else. “Sire,” she said sweetly to Loki, “I should very much desire a word in private with you. ‘Tis a beautiful day, perhaps you would care to join me for a turn around the gardens?”

Darcy had no doubt the woman desired a private something with Loki that had very little to do with conversation, and she surged to her feet. Loki bowed over the lady’s hand, a mysterious smirk hovering around his lips. “Lady Gudrun, my deepest apologies, but I have already promised Lady Darcy——”

Gudrun turned in her direction with an ill-concealed look of disbelief mixed with disdain. Then the noblewoman turned that same peculiar shade of green that Sigyn had.

“My dear, you don’t look at all well,” Frigga said.

Everyone sitting at the table took that as their cue to jump back, Volstagg wisely picking up his breakfast and clutching the platter to his chest. He wasn’t a minute too soon, for Lady Gudrun heaved, and a family of slimy slugs landed on the table. They were surprisingly large and quick, for as Fandral tried to sweep them aside, they screeched and dodged him, heading down the table toward other diners. Those nobles shrieked while all the warriors in the room came running, adding to the chaos. Lady Gudrun screamed, then belched up more of the critters.

Loki showed up at Darcy’s side. “Time to go.”

It was probably a good idea, since Darcy seemed to bring on slug attacks. “One sec.” She emptied an enormous bowl of grapes onto Volstagg’s platter (half of them went rolling away anyway) and gave the empty bowl to Gudrun. “Better out than in,” she assured the noblewoman cheerfully, patting her on the shoulder. “I hope you feel better soon.”

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“Oh, sire,” Darcy cooed in a breathy, put-on voice complete with noble accent. “What may I do for you, sire? May I kneel for you, sire? I’m sure to be better than the Midgard whore!”

“Doubtful,” Loki purred in her ear as he pulled her close, making sure no one around them had
any doubt that she belonged to him. Darcy flushed even as she giggled. After all that they had done the night before, he was beguiled that she would still blush like a maiden. He had suggested walking to the collegium, for it wasn’t far and their path took them through an open air market. He wasn’t entirely sure why he’d brought her here. “Your imitation of Lady Gudrun is spot on, though that’s not what she said.”

“That’s what she meant. If she was any more transparent, I’d be able to see her kidneys. And her spleen. Yuck.”

His gaze swept over the market. It was a lively, busy place as men and women, dressed more simply than those in the palace, haggled over everything from fruits and vegetables and farm animals to jewelry, furniture and weapons. Children played among the crowd, the same games he and Thor and their friends had played in this very market. Hadn’t he always been the little brother, the tagalong, the one who had to be watched over and coddled and never quite wanted? All those memories, and at the very least it should make him furious or sad or something.

He felt, as usual… nothing.

Like he’d been wiped clean, to start over again.

“It won’t take your mom long to figure out you’re behind the slugs,” Darcy said.

“I’m sure she already knows, and the expression on Lady Gudrun’s face was worth any price. Mother will have choice words for me later, unless she discovers what triggers the spell. Then she’ll have words for the ladies who are not so noble after all. Here, try this.” Loki had dragged her from breakfast for several reasons. Firstly, knowing when to make your escape from a caper was an art he knew well, and secondly, if he had to spend one more morning watching Volstagg put away a double portion of auk, he’d be the one spitting up slugs. Thirdly, he hadn’t wanted to share Darcy with anyone, not Fandral or Volstagg or any of the other warriors that stared at her with covetous eyes. They were fortunate not one of them had the balls to approach her. Loki bought every sweet confection the market had to offer, and the one he was passing her at the moment was flat bread drenched in butter and sugar. “It’s called lefse. Mother used to forbid us to eat it, she said it made us overactive.”

“Who’s us?”

“Thor and I. Sif was never one for girlish pursuits, so she would often slip from her mother’s watchful gaze to run free in the market. Magnus too.” Stars above, he hadn’t thought about Magnus in a century. He’d been a friend to Loki more than anyone else, but they’d had their differences. Loki was not destined to have friends, only allies and enemies.

Darcy seemed caught between asking more questions and the lefse in her hand. The sweet won out. She took a bite, and sighed in bliss. “It’s delicious. So, thanks? I’ve never had anybody make my enemies spit slugs before.”

“I should hope not. Otherwise, I will have to wonder what sort of company you keep.” It was a well-deserved bit of sport. Darcy had done nothing to earn the sobriquet the ladies of the court had given her but be seen in his company. Last night’s misbehavior had only sealed her reputation, and he bore the responsibility for it. Hence, the slugs. The noblewomen could go on using the epithet, but they’d pay dearly for it.

“They all know. About us, I mean,” Darcy said quietly, leaning into his side as a herd of goats meandered through the market, bleating loudly. She patted some of them on the heads before a shepherd boy came to move them along. Being goats, they made off with the remains of her lefse.
She didn’t seem to mind.

“Of course they do,” Loki returned. Several jealous noble ladies knew she’d gone into his quarters and had been seen much later without a stitch of clothing. He hadn’t wasted his time ordering the guards to silence, for that would only add fuel to the fire. “They are Æsir and have all the time in the universe and fill it with gossip and stupidities because there is always tomorrow to do something useful with their lives.”

“Cynical, much?” She sighed. “I just hate how they stare, especially the men. They really do think I’m a whore.”

Loki pulled her to a stop in the middle of the market, and the crowd eddied around them. How was it she could look in a mirror and still not understand? “You mistake them. The warriors of Asgard would have a use for a whore, but they desire you, milady, and that is something quite different. They remember the fierce, primitive people of Midgard. They see you and recall that the women were also fierce and beautiful and sensual in a way our women cannot hope to equal, for they are cold in their superiority.”

Darcy’s eyes widened and her lips formed an o, but no sound came out. He’d finally struck her speechless, but it didn’t last long. “There were a lot of compliments wrapped up in there, Silver Tongue. Is that what you think?”

A gentleman would shower her with praises. In spite of his mother’s best efforts, Loki was no gentleman and couldn’t resist a bit of raillery at her expense. “Rubbish. I know you for what you are: a rude, stubborn wench with very little idea of how to behave and no interest in her mortal place in the universe—”

“Oh, that’ll teach me to go fishing for compliments. If you’re hoping for more of what this rude wench gave you last night, you’re going about it all wrong.”

There was a sparkle in her eye, and Loki realized the accursed bracelet had given him away, or she knew him too well. “Foolish girl,” he said in her ear. “I know what the men are thinking, for I see it too. You are fearless and clever and breathtaking and they burn because they know they cannot have you.”

“Really?”

She did not quite believe him, and Loki was not surprised. He knew almost nothing of her past, but he could make an intelligent guess or two. “Who was he?” Loki asked. “Who was it that schooled you in pleasure yet left you with the idea you were nothing?”

Darcy’s eyes took on a startled cast, like prey in the sight of a hunter. So he was right. Then she blinked and scowled and the fire he admired in her was back. “I am not nothing, and that’s rich coming from you, by the way. You thought I was nothing when I first arrived.”

“Really?”

Less than nothing might be more accurate, as she’d been something to be used then tossed aside, just like the rest of her race. If he were honest, though, he’d have to admit he’d been intrigued by her from the moment he’d laid eyes on her on Midgard. He’d thought Thor had chosen the wrong woman (leave it to the muttonhead to choose the waif-like female over the one with all the delectable curves), and this notion had been confirmed when Darcy had swallowed her fear and offered him the kindness of coffee. He hated coffee, actually, and the human obsession with it (Erik Selvig didn’t function without the stuff). Kindness, however, was not to be overlooked, especially when offered freely and in spite of who he was and what he’d done. “Am I allowed to change my mind? You did not answer my question. Who was he?”
She looked away, and when her gaze returned to him, it was full of appeal. “Look, I’ve worked really hard to put it behind me, and he was a douchebag and I wasn’t smart enough to see it and he doesn’t get to ruin my time with you. Are we going to the collegium or what?”

It was part of an answer, and Loki decided to let it be. He had no way of getting to this past lover at the moment anyway, but he would not forget. “This way.” He veered to the left, pulling her into an alleyway. It was empty, with no beggars or trash and the walls on both sides were blank, with no doors or windows. The only real feature it had was an ornate golden gate surrounded by ivy and climbing flowers. The greenery grew overhead, making the passage into a tunnel. Æsir passed by at both ends, but no one noticed the alleyway.

Darcy stood in front of the gates and looked up at them, hands on her hips. “So this is it? The mighty Collegium of Magic?”

“You are not impressed, I see. What were you expecting? Hogwarts?” Loki fought to hide a smile. Of course she had been expecting Hogwarts, a great dark castle in the mountains with a lake and a giant squid and a whomping willow.


Nothing happened, especially with that last one. “Remind me again, foulmouthed wench, why I put up with you?”

“Because you like what I do with my mouth.”

Loki could not argue with this logic, and he considered putting her up against the wall and taking her right there. The wanton wench would go along with it, too. The alley was magically protected and no one would see them, unless another mage happened along. Perhaps, though, he’d gotten her into enough trouble in the last few hours. He moved closer to the entrance and said, “Try Thor is a dolt.”

The gates swung wide.

“You’re awful. There was no password. You just wiggled your nose or whatever.”

“I did not.” Loki tucked Darcy’s arm into his and drew her inside. He didn’t bother to explain that the gates only opened for recognized members of the collegium. Walking inside was like stepping into a different world. They were suddenly out of the city and in a lush and wild garden full of secluded paths. Beyond it was the collegium, a golden castle with a massive dome and a riotous collection of mismatched towers and spires. To Loki’s eye, it always looked mismatched, as Hoenir kept expanding it as the centuries passed with little regard for previous architecture. The master mage had only cared about creating a haven for wizards.

Loki had come here looking for peace more times than he cared to remember.

“Oh,” Darcy said with a happy sigh. “It’s like the TARDIS and bigger on the inside.”

“What is a TARDIS?” Loki asked, then thought better of his question. “Never mind, I smell mortal nonsense and do not wish to know. Let’s find Hoenir.”

The Master of the Collegium of Magic was to be found under the great golden dome. The room beneath was vast and used for ceremonies and large projects. Though the dome appeared solid from the outside, it was actually windows, and the late morning sun shone down on Hoenir’s latest
project: within a scaffolding sat a smaller golden dome with a pointed top. Loki came to a halt.

Darcy stopped next to him. “What is that?”

“It’s the Bifröst.”

She seemed as dumbstruck as he. His mother had told him what Hoenir was working on, yet it had never occurred to him that it would be here at the collegium and not under construction on the rainbow bridge. In a flash, Loki was back on the bridge, taunting Thor as the old Bifröst tore Jotenheim apart. “Look at you. The mighty Thor! With all your strength and what good does it do you now, eh? Did you hear me, brother? There’s nothing you can do!”

Thor, alas, had found a way to stop him by breaking the bridge and sending the Bifröst into the abyss. Then he’d dropped Loki into that same void, to fall and fall and fall and crash into the arms of the Mad Titan—

That wasn’t quite the truth, though, was it? Even then, after they had fought, Thor would have hung on to him forever. It was Loki who had let go, because whatever was out there in the abyss had to be better than what life had become in Asgard.

By the Norns, how wrong he’d been.

Darcy reached out and seized his hand, squeezing tight. “Are you okay?”

“All right, Loki snapped. Did he have a choice to be other than tolerable? He didn’t need her sympathy or her touch, for she was naught but a passing fancy and would be gone from his life soon enough. That didn’t explain, though, why he was returning her clasp, hanging on to her like she was a lifeline.

“Hey,” Darcy said gently. “I’m not one of those girls who run at the first sign of trouble. I’m not letting go of you until I know you’re alright, because you’re obviously not.”

It was his turn to be silenced. This was an extraordinarily bad idea, to get attached to Darcy. By the Nine, she was mortal. He needed to release her, and put a stop to what was happening between them.

He couldn’t make himself let go.

“Is it that?” Darcy prodded, glancing at the Bifröst.

Hoenir chose that moment to walk out of it and lean on the scaffolding. The blond wizard was dressed for work in an old brown tunic and trousers and he was wiping his hands on a cloth. “Ah, Loki. I knew you’d show up sooner or later. You might keep your distance, as you’re the reason I’m rebuilding this infernal machine.”

The older mage’s tone was light, and Loki tried for an innocent expression. He wasn’t sure he came anywhere near succeeding. “Technically, it was Thor’s fault.”

“I want none of your technicalities, for your mother told me what happened.” Hoenir jumped down off the scaffolding and walked over to bow over Darcy’s free hand. “Lady Darcy, how lovely to see you again. When we last met, it was over Loki’s unconscious carcass.”

She cast Hoenir a smile, though she didn’t release Loki’s hand. “How nice you remember how good I am with a taser.”
“How could I forget? The befuddled expression on his face before his eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped like a felled tree was exquisite.”

Loki snorted. He’d expected nothing less from Hoenir, and in truth, had hoped for it. He hadn’t had time to speak to the master mage since he’d returned, and he needed Hoenir, as an ally if nothing else. “He was my magic teacher after Mother,” Loki explained to Darcy. “For that reason alone, he is allowed to abuse me at will. Master, we have need of your counsel. Milady has caught the eye of my enemy, and I cannot keep us both hidden magically.”

Hoenir nodded briskly. “Using the unobserving spell on two people is draining. I can help.” He noticed Darcy staring at the Bifröst. “You are welcome to look. I’d trust you not to lay waste to it while my back is turned. Then I could have a word with Loki, if you wouldn’t mind.”

She cast Loki a questioning look, and he nodded slightly. She squeezed his hand before letting go and walking away. He didn’t need to be protected by a mortal slip of a girl, but he had to press his hands together behind his back to keep himself from snatching her back to his side.

Taken leave of his senses, that’s what he’d done.

Hoenir studied him with eyes narrowed, the same way he always did when he’d known Loki was up to something as a boy. Loki refused to squirm. Then the older mage stepped forward and enveloped him in a bear hug. “You young fool,” Hoenir growled, “I am damn glad you’re still alive.”

“You are one of the few.” This man had always been like a father to him, and until that moment, Loki hadn’t realized Hoenir’s forgiveness meant as much as Frigga’s.

“I’d ask what you were thinking, but I already know: you were going to get out from Thor’s shadow no matter the cost.” Hoenir shook his head. “Let us hope your father doesn’t wake from his sleep for a very long time.”

*He’s not my father* was on the tip of his tongue, but Loki bit down on it. Hoenir knew him better than any but his mother, yet that was one secret he doubted even the other sorcerer knew. “Pray we live that long, instead.”

“This threat is serious?”

“Aye.” This was the other reason he had come to the collegium, to speak to Hoenir where there would be no listening ears. “I will need you before this is over, you and any war wizard you have.”

“You have fighting men aplenty, and they won’t want us around.”

“Then they are fools and worry overmuch about their honor. We will need warriors, but we will also need every scrap of magic and every dirty trick we can come up with to stop the Titan, for he will not hesitate to use everything he has against us. This is about survival.”

Hoenir’s expression became serious, and finally, he nodded. “I shall see what I can do. There aren’t many mages here to start with, and some are useless in battle. I’ll send them off to protect their homes and villages and trust that they will be far from the fighting.”

Loki put his hand on the other man’s shoulder. “Thank you, Hoenir. Mayhap when this is over, Asgard will appreciate magic more.”

“Bah,” he said. “I’ll believe it when I see it. Come then. If you promise to keep your hands in your pockets, I’ll show you my masterpiece.”
Inside the dome, the Bifröst was much the same as the old one, with its thousands of wheels and gears to harness the power of the universe. In the center stood the pedestal that controlled it, thankfully without the eternal watcher Heimdall. Darcy was lying on the floor, staring up at the pointed dome. Hoenir leaned over her in concern. “Milady?”

Loki knew why she’d been dumbstruck earlier. “’Tis not what you expected, is it?”

She didn’t take her eyes off the ceiling. “When Jane talked about Einstein-Rosen Bridges, I always thought of Star Trek. You know, you stand on your little circle and the transporter rearranges your molecules and shoots them through space.” Darcy blinked, and laughed. “You guys have no idea what I’m talking about. It’s okay. You’re right, it isn’t what I expected. If I understand what I’m looking at, your Bifröst is a feat of engineering that drills a wormhole in the universe and at the same time it’s a work of art.”

“Thank you?” Hoenir said, as if unsure.

“Come and see,” Darcy said, holding out her hand to Loki.

He gave in to her charm and got down on the floor beside her, lying on his back. Was it a work of art? It was a thing, a machine that got them from place to place. He did have to admit that Hoenir had outdone himself. All the golden components sparkled, and were arranged in clusters to represent the different sections of the universe. Loki could feel the power running through it, and as he studied the layout, he realized that it would be far more efficient that its predecessor.

“Don’t analyze it,” Darcy whispered. “Just look. It’s amazing. It’s like the most intricate mosaic tilework you’ve ever seen, and yet it’s like a steampunk dream, wheels and gears all working together to get you where you want to be.”

Mayhap she was right, and Loki found her hand in his again. “It’s Yggdrasil, milady, and it’s laid out at your feet. Where would you like to go?”

Her smile was radiant. “ Everywhere.”

Hoenir stared down at the two of them. Then he sighed gustily and joined them on the floor. “Why are we lying on the floor like this? When we’re done here, you two are going to have to help these old bones get back up.”

“Back on Earth, I work for a scientist,” Darcy explained to Hoenir. “Since I’ve been with Jane, she’s been trying to build a Bifröst from cobbled together parts found at Radio Shack or picked from Tony Stark’s junk pile because SHIELD gave us a lousy budget. We couldn’t have dreamed of something like this.”

“You were trying to build a Bifröst?” asked the master mage, sounding shocked.

“Midgard is a wild combination of the primitive and the progressive,” Loki said. “They have no ability with magic, so they try to harness the power of the universe through technology, yet without the understanding that science and magic are one and the same.”

“Thor tried to explain and I didn’t understand until now.” She reached out and took Hoenir’s hand as well. “You guys call yourselves sorcerers, but you’re also engineers and astrophysicists. You’re the freaking Master Builders of the universe.”

Loki had no idea what a Master Builder was, but the awe in her tone was not to be missed. “I’ll take that for a compliment.”
“Aye,” said Hoenir. “Now help me up.”
An Amulet for a Lady

Chapter Summary

Darcy gets more jewelry, Loki gets jealous and old friends come to visit.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! So happy to be back! Summer is my busy time of year, and though I had a good time, I'm glad to be back at my desk. So let's get back to Darcy and Loki...

Just as a side note, anyone have any guesses where Simmons is on Agents of SHIELD? I haven't got a clue, but would love to speculate. Gallifrey, it's not. Oops, sorry, wrong fandom. Is it the Kree homeworld in the sky, I wonder?

As usual, I am making no money from this and there is no copyright infringement intended to anybody. Writing keeps me out of trouble.

She took my arm, I don’t know how it happened

We took the floor and she said,

Oh, don’t you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me

I said you’re holding back

She said shut up and dance with me

WALK THE MOON, Shut up and Dance

Hoenir’s office and workshop would have made a good episode of Hoarders.

There didn’t appear to be any trash (Darcy shuddered at the thought of Asgardian rats or cockroaches), but she’d never seen such a big space so jammed with clutter. Then again, no human had the time Hoenir did to collect stuff. The main room had a skylight and clerestory windows and most of the wall space was covered with overloaded shelves. The corners contained mysterious piles, some of which had bowled over into mini avalanches. Just at a glance, she could see several
skulls (only one appeared to be Æsir; the rest were alien), all sorts of odd artifacts in both stone and metal and shelf upon shelf of bottles and books. All it needed was a cauldron bubbling and stirring itself in a corner. “Um, wow,” she said.

“Don’t mind the mess,” Hoenir said without a trace of apology, following a path through the chaos like he was on an expedition. “Wait here, I have just the thing we need.”

Darcy followed another path. The center of the room was occupied by more piles of books, papers and half-finished projects that either floated in midair or sat on top of a vast worktable. She peeped underneath and was disappointed to find table legs, along with heaps of dusty, cobwebby crates. Was that a set of eyes glowing among the tangle? She retreated in a hurry. It could be Gollum for all she knew, or Dobby. Really, she needed to take pictures of all this, but pulling out her Starkphone did her no good at all. There was no charge left. Darcy turned to see Loki stopped in the doorway, wearing the classic expression of someone who knows they have to turn their favorite hoarding uncle into the authorities.

Maybe, though, he was staring beyond the mess, because the sight of the Bifröst had shaken him. He’d told her once that he’d used it to try to destroy Jotenheim and Thor had stopped him. Did he regret his actions or simply regret his failure? Even now, she had little idea of what went on in his head, and she never knew what she was going to get when she reached out to him. Sometimes she got the razor-tongued asshat, and sometimes she got someone so brittle she was afraid he would shatter on her completely.

Darcy suspected he’d come terribly close to shattering that morning.

She leaned against the shelves, right next to the humanoid skull. Though it was free of any sort of flesh, it was real, not like the plaster copies she’d seen in school. Cautiously, she put out one finger.

“Do not touch that.”

At the sound of Loki’s voice, Darcy jumped. “Is it cursed?”

“It is somebody’s head.”

“Whose?”

“No idea. Hoenir has had that hideous thing forever. He has much more interesting artifacts.” Finally leaving the doorway, Loki drew her to a tall glass jar. The red sand inside seemed to glow from within. “He picked it up on Muspelheim centuries ago. It’s still hot.”

Darcy could feel the heat long before she touched the urn, and how awesome would a picture of that be? She held up her phone, then she shook it. “I don’t suppose there’s a plug here. Or anywhere in Asgard.”

“Milady requires energy?”

His tone was so innocent that she was immediately suspicious. “I don’t suppose you can help me out?”

“Of course.” Loki passed his hand over the phone, and immediately, the Stark Industries logo popped up. “That won’t do,” he added, and the logo changed to a golden rendering of his own horned helm.

She was back to full charge, and she flipped through a couple of screens, glad to see his
magical tampering hadn’t messed with the operating system. Still no 4G though. Even so, Darcy breathed a sigh of relief and snapped a photo of the red sand. “You might have mentioned you could do that. I guess you don’t like Tony Stark much. I heard you threw him out of his own penthouse.”

“If you knew him even a little, you would too.”

Darcy couldn’t argue with that. She took several more pictures, including a selfie with the grinning skull. “Does Hoenir have anything that’s really cursed?”

Loki directed her attention to a stone box on another shelf and lifted the lid. On a red cushion lay a necklace of jet and gray stones set in silver. Darcy recoiled, backing into Loki, for evil seemed to creep from it in waves. “Yes, exactly,” he murmured, catching her around the waist and pulling her closer. “Women sense its malevolence immediately, while men fall under its spell. The necklace once belonged to an elvish queen who had a heart of ice. She was rejected by her king for her coldness, put aside in favor of a young Vanir princess. The queen used the necklace to exact revenge on her husband and his lover and every man who crossed her path thereafter.”

“How come you’re not under its spell?”

“Once you understand what it is, the spell is undone. For me, I can hear its seductive song, but it is a broken sound, like a rusty hunting horn.”

He wasn’t lying, not exactly, but Darcy was learning to spot when he left something out. Was it a certain twitch of his eye or the cadence of his words? “Is there more to the story?”

Loki shrugged, with that same look he’d had when Porcelain Doll Lady opened her mouth and produced slugs. *Mischief managed.* To Darcy’s disappointment, he released her and walked away, stepping carefully. The least he could have done was whisper something dirty in her ear, maybe how he’d like to sweep everything off that worktable and bend her over it. He was still not himself. She put her phone away and followed him. When he stopped, she put her arms around him from behind, resting her cheek on his back.

He stiffened. “What is this?”

“Dude, it’s called a hug. I’m trying to comfort you. That’s what we do on my planet, especially between two people who have had as much sex as we have.”

“I am fine.”

“Seriously? And they call you Silver Tongue. Sometimes even your lies suck.” Darcy tightened her grip as Loki slumped in her arms, but he was saved from answering by Hoenir’s return, and she had to let him go.

The master mage held a tray, and as he walked around the workshop and office, he found no place to put it down. “Where does all this damned clutter come from?”

Loki clicked his tongue, made his way through the mess and scooped up a pile of clutter from the worktable. He hauled it to the desk and dumped it there. “Have you no apprentice right now, you old curmudgeon? At least when I was here, there was some method to this madness and you could find the table.”

“The Bifröst leaves me little time to teach or clean.” Hoenir took advantage of the clear space on the worktable to put the tray down. On it lay a necklace, which he held out to Darcy. “For you, milady.”
From the area of the desk, Loki bolted back to her side. “Hold a moment—”

“I mean nothing by it,” Hoenir said as if to a balky student. “This is what you requested, is it not?”

Loki was displeased, and in fact looked downright thunderous. Darcy had no idea why, but she decided to keep the obvious comparisons to his brother the thunder god to herself. The necklace was a fine emerald on a gold chain, with smaller emerald and diamonds worked into the setting. She’d never seen the likes of it outside a museum. “I couldn’t possibly accept this.”

“Indeed,” growled Loki.

“Of course you can,” Hoenir said with warmth in his tone. “The lady who owned this would have wanted you to have it.” He spared his former student a meaningful glance, but Loki only glared back. Then Hoenir pressed the stone into her hand and closed her fingers around it. “Her name was Arnora, and she was a great sorceress. She died… long ago.”

“You loved her,” Darcy blurted out, then cringed inwardly. Personal, much? She barely knew the guy.

His smile was both gentle and bittersweet. “You are perceptive for one so young.”

“If I may interrupt,” Loki put in with a definite edge to his tone, “the amulet is too delicate. If that’s to be the anchor for the unobserving spell, it needs to be strong enough to stay around her neck no matter what. Why can we not use the bracelet and just add to the spellwork already in place?”

Hoenir snorted. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? If I tamper with the bracelets that tie the two of you together, it might be easier for you to find a loophole and unravel everything. I am surprised you haven’t yet broken the spells.” His gaze went to Darcy. “Then again, mayhap I am not.”

“I am sure I do not know of what you speak,” said Loki with a haughty sniff.

Hoenir grinned and Darcy frowned. Ouch. Really, she wasn’t even sure why she was annoyed. She wasn’t stupid enough to think Loki still had the bracelet on because of the way he felt about her. Sure, the sex was great, but it didn’t change the word mortal stamped on her forehead. More likely it suited Loki to remain bound to her and let everyone think he was contained.

As if. He was a force of nature and she stood no chance of keeping him in Asgard if he wanted to go elsewhere.

“The amulet is dwarven made and cannot be broken. It can only be removed by the wearer willingly,” Hoenir was saying to Loki as Darcy put the necklace back on the tray. “The spell of unobservation should be the top level of spellweaving, though we may want to layer other protective charms underneath. This isn’t my area of expertise, nor yours, so I’ve asked another mage to assist.”

Loki looked daggers at him. “I hope you did not ask—”

The doors flew open as if on cue, and another sorcerer strode into the room. Darcy guessed he must have been about Loki’s age, with a wild mop of curly blond hair. He was dressed in an ocean blue that matched his eyes. The rest of him was tall and elegant and good looking, and Darcy couldn’t help but smile. Really, there were no ugly Æsir. Lucky her.

This newcomer took one look at Loki and stopped, arms crossed at his chest. “No wonder you
were so mysterious about this, Hoenir. I will not do him any favors.”

“Nor do I wish to be in his debt,” Loki returned.

“For shame, my two brightest students, and they will not speak to each other,” Hoenir said lightly, waggling his eyebrows in Darcy’s direction. “What do you think, milady? Unbecoming behavior in a pair of grown men, I should think. Lady Darcy, this is Master Magnus, one of my finest mages and an expert with inert objects. Magnus, it is the lady who requires an amulet of protection.”

If Darcy was not mistaken, Loki had mentioned the name Magnus when listing childhood friends in the marketplace. Clearly, something had gotten between them in the intervening centuries. Magnus gave Loki one last glower before he stepped forward to clasp her hand and bow. “It is an honor to serve, milady. Who do you need protection from? If ‘tis the lout standing next to you—”

If this was her opportunity for a little harmless revenge for Loki’s earlier, rather thoughtless comment, Darcy was going to take it. She didn’t get there fast enough. “A Titan,” was Loki’s snarly answer. “I have something he wants, and only Darcy and I know where it is.”

“What is it that he wants?” Hoenir asked. “You never said.”

“An Infinity Stone.”

There was a sudden silence in the room, and Hoenir and Magnus exchanged a significant glance before they both turned to Loki. Darcy wondered what she’d missed and spoke up. “Wait, what? Are we still talking about the tesseract?”

“Yes,” said Magnus with some reverence. “‘Tis one of six stones of power from the foundations of the universe. By the Norns, Loki, how did you lay hands on one of those?”

Loki studied the mess, purposefully blank, then said, “Actually, I had two.”

“Loki!” Hoenir exclaimed. “You know Infinity Stones should never be brought together, and for good reason.”

He didn’t look particularly contrite. “The Allfather left one on Midgard after the war with the Frost Giants. The other was in the hands of the Titan I mentioned. I still have the tesseract in my possession, and Thanos knows it. He’ll be coming for it.”

“If they are all brought together, they are power beyond imagining,” Magnus said. “Is that what this Titan plans?”

“Of a certainty,” was Loki’s answer.

“Then we need to get to work,” said Hoenir.

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Magnus was staring at Darcy again.

Loki could easily have reached across the table and punched him in the head, but the other
mage was doing him a favor. As they were both former apprentices of Hoenir, neither Loki nor Magnus had any compunction about cleaning off the entire end of the worktable by dumping everything in a corner. They sat across from one another, Magnus weaving magic into the amulet while Loki played assistant. It was not a role that suited him, but it seemed there was nothing he would not stoop to for Darcy’s sake.

Speaking of Darcy, she was across the room with Hoenir, and he was showing her more of his artifacts. The old man rarely got an appreciative audience, and her face glowed with fascinated delight. Was she the reason he hadn’t bothered to tear apart the spells on the bracelets? What sentimental rubbish, and as it came from a hopeless old romantic like Hoenir, he shouldn’t be surprised. She was mortal and he would be parted from her one way or another, whether he willed it or no.

Mortal.

Loki swallowed and ignored the weight suddenly sitting on his chest. While waiting for the spells on the amulet to integrate, Magnus continued to stare at Darcy. Loki decided he’d had enough. “Do not even think about it. The lady is mine.”

The other mage turned back to him with a raised eyebrow. “It would be fair recompense for the lady you stole from me, but that was not what I was thinking. How does the rogue prince of Asgard, a mortal woman and an Infinity Stone get tangled up together?”

“That story would take more time than we have and a keg of ale, which we also do not have.”

“Anything may be found among Hoenir’s mess and if there is ale here, it should be nicely aged. But the tesseract—you’ve used it?”

Loki shrugged. “More oft I used the mind stone.”

Magnus sat up on his stool and threw a glance back at Darcy.

“Not on her, you idiot,” Loki snapped in a low voice. “You think I need mind control to get a woman?”

The other mage leaned forward, looking grim. “Where is the mind stone, Loki?”

“On Midgard.”

That did not please Magnus. “’Tis not meant for mortal men.”

“Nor for us.” Loki wished he’d never brought up the mind stone. He couldn’t deny that having others do his bidding, no questions asked, was intoxicating. Yet, as more memories surfaced of his time with Thanos, he began to wonder if he’d truly been in charge of the stone, or whether it had been the other way around.

Magnus studied him for a long moment, then he bent over the amulet again. “It has always been my experience that you would not hesitate to experiment with an artifact and go where Fire Giants fear to tread. Can it be,” he said idly, “that Loki Odinson has found maturity at last?”

This time, there was really no reason Loki could think of to hold back a good, solid and very satisfying punch to the other sorcerer’s head.
“Should we do something?” This was the second time Darcy had been faced with brawling Æsir, and she scrambled to get out of the way of Loki and Magnus as they rolled around on the floor, pummeling each other like a pair of twelve-year-olds. There was no room for a scuffle, and soon there were stray papers in the air and stuff falling over on top of them. It didn’t slow them down.

“Nay,” said Hoenir. “Let them have at it. I’ve been trying to get them to settle their differences for two centuries.” He patted her hand with a sly look. “Five marks on Magnus.”

She decided that Frigga’s don’t-bat-an-eyelash attitude was the only way to go and smiled back at Hoenir. “I’ll take that bet.”

Darcy and Loki slipped out of the collegium by a different door, and she wondered who he thought was watching closely enough to care. They crossed a busy street and headed into a public park. It had trees, wide open spaces and a lot of Æsir on horseback. Though Asgard had flying vehicles (they reminded her of Viking longboats), they still seemed to love their horses. She was reminded of Regency romance and London’s Rotten Row. Was there a certain time of day for the nobility to see and be seen on horseback? “So, there’s still something left of the day. Is there anybody else you’d like to pick a fight with?”

“My list is endless,” Loki replied, moving his jaw back and forth while rubbing it. Magnus was a southpaw and had a mean left hook. Still, Loki had more fighting experience and pinned the other mage in the end. Good thing too, because Darcy had no money. Now she did.

“Hoenir is fortunate I did not hit him,” Loki said as they avoided the horse trails to take a footbridge across a lake.

“Yeah, about that,” Darcy started. She ran her fingers over the amulet as they walked, the fifth time in as many minutes. It rested at the hollow of her throat and had a hint of warmth. There were no other signs that it was magical.

“In Asgard, if a lady accepts jewelry from a man, it signifies that she returns his regard.”

So he didn’t like the idea of another man giving her jewelry. Maybe Hoenir wasn’t so far off after all? No, she just couldn’t go there, because he didn't have any feelings for her beyond a serious need to do her on any available surface. In that direction lay a broken heart. He had gone to a lot of trouble to get her the amulet, but he was covering his own ass by covering hers. “Don’t be a dork,” Darcy said irritably. “It was Hoenir. I’ve met him once before today and he’s like a million years older than I am.”

“I am a thousand years older than you.”

“You’ve still got your stamina though.”

Loki’s mouth quirked into something that might have been a smile. “Wench.”
Her hand brushed the amulet again. “He was weird about it, though. Like he wanted you to recognize it.”

“Aye, I noticed.” He pulled her to a stop in the middle of the bridge as a boat passed beneath them. “It doesn’t look familiar. I wish Hoenir would speak his mind, for I’ve no time for mysteries.”

“Did you know his lost love? Arnora?”

“No.” Loki’s answer was firm, yet there was something far away in his tone, as if he was trying to remember something. He leaned against the railing, staring out over the water. It was a huge lake, and the far end opened to the bay that edged Asgard. “She must have died around the time I was born,” Loki said, turning his full attention back to her. “There’s a mystery for you. He has a portrait of her in his study, but even as his apprentice, I never saw it. It’s always covered, as if he can’t bear to look at her, but he can’t let go either.”

“It’s like a gothic romance,” Darcy said, a little wistful. No one would mourn her for a thousand years. She pulled out her phone again, taking pictures of the park and the lake (and a couple of Loki when he wasn’t looking).

“The amulet is quite becoming,” Loki said. “It will keep you well hidden from Thanos and safe from any further spell casting, be it from him or anyone else. It will, however, make your life at court more difficult.”

The shade of the emerald screamed Property of Loki. She wasn’t his mistress, but she wasn’t sure what they were to each other. None of the usual dating rules applied here. Then again, the ladies that lined up at his door were going to be pissed, and she was more than okay with that. “I can take care of myself.”

Loki’s nostrils flared and he scowled at her.

“You’ve given me the magical equivalent of bubble wrap. If you would teach me how to defend myself, then you wouldn’t have to worry about me at all.”

“I do not worry,” he snapped. “No, I will not teach you to fight.”

Well, this was a fine time for him to go all medieval on her. “Why not? Your mom thought it was a good idea. Come on, when was the last time Frigga had a bad idea?” His wrinkled nose indicated that he could indeed name Frigga’s bad ideas, and Darcy rushed on. “If there’s going to be war, Sif will be on the front lines. Your mom won’t be far behind. There must be others.”

“Both Mother and Sif have had centuries to hone their skills,” Loki growled back. “You have days at best, and ‘tis far more likely you only have hours to learn. It cannot be done. When Thanos attacks, you will stay safely with my mother’s ladies.”

“Oooh, going to be safe there. Wasn’t it Sigyn who almost broke my wrist? What do they do while the men fight anyway? Flutter around like pretty little birds in a cage?” Darcy flapped her hands, then stopped. He’d probably just come from a cage when she’d first met him and he knew well enough that there might be another waiting for him when the Godfather, er, Allfather woke up. “I didn’t think you liked cages, Loki.”

She sure as hell knew she didn’t.

His expression was grim. “I do not, but what would you have me do? I am trying to protect you. Sometimes the cage protects the bird, especially when the bird is delicate and mortal and easily
broken!

“Thanks for reminding me!”

“You have this incredible ability to forget!”

Why was Darcy even surprised or disappointed? In spite of his outsider perspective on Asgard’s manly culture, he was still a product of it. “You know what? You’re right. I am mortal. That means I don’t have all the time in the world to live in a cage. I lived in one once and I’m not going back. I live now, or I die without ever having really lived. Don’t you see?”

His expression reflected both fury and confusion, and clearly, he didn’t see. “You truly wish to fight?”

“No. I—” Darcy hesitated and gathered her thoughts. “I don’t want to fight, but you said it yourself: we have to fight back, and I’m tired of being helpless here.”

“I will protect you.”

“You won’t always be there, will you?”

Immediately, Darcy could see she’d hurt him somehow. There was the poker face again, the one that gave nothing away, but she’d pulled popsicles out of the freezer that were warmer than Loki’s eyes.

“Indeed,” he spat, “milady is quite right. Who is to say who will get me first? Will it be the Titan, my brother and his precious Avengers or my own so-called father? Go, then, and do as you will. Lady Sif can always be found on the training grounds before sundown.”

He may have told her to take a hike, but as usual, he was the one to run away. “Loki!” Darcy called after him, but it was no use. He whirled, and within five steps, he had disappeared.

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When teleporting from one place to another, in those seconds between points of reality, Loki became incorporeal, with no feeling or will. The moment he became himself again, though, pain exploded in his wrist and shot straight up his arm, driving into his shoulder. He dropped to his knees in his library, gritting his teeth over a moan as agony swallowed him. He clutched his arm to his stomach, curling up around it.

Hoenir’s bracelet packed quite a wallop. It felt as though someone was trying to saw off his wrist with a dull table knife.

If he’d been wiser, he would have taken himself to somewhere else in the park and not so far from Darcy. At least here, though, on the cool tile floor in his private sanctuary, he could suffer in peace. He was a fool, and he deserved to suffer.

Mortal.

It should not matter. She should not matter. He was Loki of Asgard and he had no use for mortals beyond ruling over them. What did it matter if she died? That was what mortals did and
there were plenty more where she came from.

Then why could he not stand the thought of Darcy with sword in hand? Was it the certain knowledge that with such skills, she would stand at his side and cover his back with no thought to her own safety? That she would lay down her life to protect his?

He had tried to conquer her world, crush it beneath his boot. How did she not understand who and what he was?

The pain redoubled, and Loki bit down on a wail. All Darcy had to do was walk back to Hlíðskjálf, an easy task considering how the palace dominated the skyline. Had she taken a wrong turn in the opposite direction, or had she stumbled into trouble?

The library darkened around him and he struggled to hang on to consciousness. Out of the blackness, a voice whispered to him. “How is the little princeling feeling today? Defiant? Rebellious?” There was an evil chuckle, and Loki knew it to be Thanos. “Let us see, boy, what I can do to make your mood more reasonable.”

***

Loki had left the building. Or the park. Whatever.

Darcy kicked the railing of the bridge, called Loki every bad name she could think of and glared out at the water. Okay, he wasn’t actually dead, but damn him, he was going to be when she found him. Her bracelet was tingling in a way it never had before, and she wondered just how far he’d gone. He was nowhere in sight. How could she get him to stop running away? And how could she get him to stop seeing her as some delicate little mortal flower?

The bracelet would lead her to him, and she wouldn’t purposely let him chew his own arm off. Darcy started off at a brisk walk toward the far end of the bridge. If she had to guess, she’d say that Loki had gone back to the palace—

Something behind her went kaboom.

Darcy spun around. There was a cloud of smoke rising into the sky from a building on the edge of the park. For a moment, she couldn’t see a reason for the explosion as people started screaming in the distance. Then several flying vehicles flew by overhead and she ducked. She’d seen them on CNN: Chitauri skiffs. Darcy ran, her boots pounding the surface of the bridge. So Loki was right, in a way, because she hadn’t had days to learn to fight, or even hours. She’d had minutes and the shoreline and a place to hide still seemed very far away.

Another explosion, and this one happened right in front of her. A hole opened up in the bridge, and she jumped over it. She didn’t dare stop, just ran on. From across the water, a Chitauri skiff headed straight for her, and she knew the pilot had picked her as his next target. She’d never make it to shore, and she only had one choice left.

Darcy held her breath and jumped from the bridge.
The Edge of Night

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Loki try to find their way back to each other, while Jane suspects sabotage and Frigga guesses who is to blame for the sudden epidemic of slugs.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Happy belated Halloween! Who dressed up?

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody. Just having fun!

Home is behind, the world ahead
And there are many paths to tread
Through shadow, to the edge of night
Until the stars are all alight

Billy Boyd, The Steward of Gondor

The first time her notes disappeared, Jane didn’t think anything of it. Considering how many people were working in her lab, things were bound to get lost. She missed Darcy’s organizational and people skills more than ever. Hell, she just missed Darcy.

“Have you seen my notes?” Jane asked Tony Stark.

“What kind of paper were they written on?” Tony glanced up from his own sheets, which were white, unlined and appeared to have been stolen from the printer. He ran fingers through his wild hair and looked like he hadn’t slept in a week. Jane knew he had a room in the local motel, but she’d never seen him leave the lab long enough to use it.

“Notebook paper,” Jane said.

“I didn’t see any, but Thor emptied all the trash cans and used the paper as kindling in the firepit,” Tony offered.
Thor would never throw anything away that was on someone’s desk, but if her papers had been knocked to the floor or accidentally thrown out, it was fair game to feed the firepit. The Asgardian seemed to take keeping the fire burning seriously, and Jane put it down as a cultural thing. She gave the papers up for lost, rewrote the equations from memory as best she could on index cards and got on with her life.

When her index cards vanished two days later, she began to get concerned. She knew she’d put them under her keyboard; now there was nothing there but dust bunnies. “Have you seen my index cards?” Jane asked the science twins.

The science twins did have real names and they weren’t actually twins. Leo Fitz and Gemma Simmons were brilliant, painfully young and, as far as she could tell, inseparable. She’d borrowed them from SHIELD.

“Index cards, did y’say?” repeated Fitz in his warm Scottish brogue. “I haven’t seen any layin’ about. Gemma?”

“I haven’t either,” Simmons chimed in. Both of them went paperless, using high tech tablets with an enormous SHIELD logo on the back. Jane didn’t quite understand how a secret organization could be so big on advertising.

“The only person I saw near your desk was Thor, and he just brought you coffee. Isn’t that sweet?” Simmons added.

“He’d be sweeter if he was more helpful,” Fitz grumbled, bending over his own tablet, then looked at Jane. “Sorry, Dr. Foster.”

He was preaching to the choir, and Jane waved him off. They were getting nowhere fast. When she’d asked Thor to help her build an Einstein-Rosen Bridge, she’d expected him to take one look at her equations, laugh indulgently and rewrite them. Instead, they’d spent a fair amount of time arguing back and forth because science and magic seemed to be two wildly different ways of looking at the same thing. His equations meant nothing to her, and vice versa. “I am neither scientist nor sorcerer, Jane,” he’d said. “Loki would understand.”

Ugh, Loki. If she ever got her hands on him, she was going to slap the bastard so hard he’d see cartoon stars for a week. It seemed he was at the center of her every problem. He sent fire-breathing robots and aliens to her world and made off with innocent assistants. Perhaps innocent and Darcy didn’t belong in the same sentence (Jane had not forgotten that she had jumped on Loki), but she still had not been returned to her own planet.

The index cards never returned either. Finally, Jane gave in and wrote her equations out yet again on big, bright pink sticky notes that Darcy had found at the dollar store. These were too garish to disappear. Jane stuck them to her monitor, called it a night and asked Thor if he wanted to join her.

The sticky notes were gone in the morning.

So this was not just Jane being stupid. Somebody was sabotaging her work and she’d never be able to reach Darcy at this rate. Jane studied those in the lab: Tony Stark, FitzSimmons and Agent Natasha Romanoff, who’d come back with the science twins and never left. Why would any of them do it? Why would they want to stop the building of the bridge?

She didn’t have an answer. She knew who she trusted, though.
Jane rushed back out to her RV, which was still serving as a temporary apartment. Thor was nowhere to be seen, but he didn’t much care for the confining space of the travel trailer. Yesterday’s clothes were still on the floor, and Jane sighed. She wasn’t playing servant, not with a saboteur in their midst. She kicked the clothes into a corner and turned to go.

Something pink caught her eye, and it was sticking out of Thor’s jeans pocket.

So much for trust.

Jane found him at the firepit on the roof with Natasha, enjoying the morning sun and a cup of coffee. “We need to talk,” Jane said, holding up her squashed notes.

“I told you to burn them,” said Natasha to Thor before rising and sauntering away. Jane ignored her and the bloom of jealousy in her chest. He’d shared his secrets with the famed Black Widow. The woman was an Avenger in her own right and he probably had a lot in common with her. How could Jane hope to compete? “Why steal my notes? Tony and FitzSimmons and I have been working so hard and all this time, you’ve been dragging your feet, trying to hold us up. Have you forgotten that this is about Darcy’s life?”

“I have not forgotten,” said Thor quietly. “It is also my brother’s life at stake.”

Jane threw her hands up in the air, and her notes scattered. “Loki, Loki, always Loki. What’s he got to do with this? He’s probably already strangled my assistant.”

“Do not fear for Darcy,” Thor said, more forcefully. “Mother will take care of her, and there is no one in all of Yggdrasil that I trust more.”

That was a ringing endorsement, but most guys said that about their mom. How did Jane feel about trusting him? Ten minutes ago, she’d believed in him implicitly, and she was still willing to hear him out. She flopped down in a flowered lawn chair across from him. Once there had been a dumpy old firepit that Darcy had trashpicked at her apartment complex and two creaky loungers. Now, someone had reinforced the firepit with stone and there were a lot more chairs, though most looked pretty disreputable. She hoped no one had taught Thor to trashpick. “Fine. If I trust you about Darcy, you need to trust me with what you’re up to. Last time I looked, you were all fired up to get Darcy and your brother back.”

“I am,” he said. He rose from his chair to stare out across the desert. His hands were clenched at his sides. “I just cannot do it yet.”

“You’ve lost me.”

Thor frowned, and clouds formed on the horizon. “Loki once said he had always lived in my shadow, and mayhap that is true. He is and will always be my brother and he deserves one last chance at his own glory. He deserves one last chance to do the right thing.”

None of this sounded like a good idea. From what little she knew of Loki, he was more apt to blow up the universe because it might be fun than do the right thing. Even worse, Darcy was right in the middle of it. Jane sat up in her lawn chair and leaned forward. “Thor, what’s going on in Asgard?”

“Mother was certain the Titan who truly commands the Chitauri would come looking for Loki. She expected battle.”

Oh, poor Darcy. Actually, Darcy thrived on adrenaline and would probably enjoy it. That scared Jane. “I’m not okay with this!”
He came to her side and drew her into his arms. “Nor am I. It is not in my nature to stand aside and let others defend my home. On the other hand, I have faith in Mother’s plan to bring Loki back from the dark. I also know Asgard will stand no matter what. Now do you understand, my Jane? I want you to succeed at building a Bifrost, but it cannot be too soon.”

She did understand, only too well. Thor’s unwavering loyalty to Asgard, his mother and even his brother was admirable and just might get Darcy killed. “How can you be sure she’ll be alright?”

“Mother already knew Darcy was coming to Asgard.” Before Jane could question, he added, “Ask me no more, for that is all she told me. Mother sees the future, but rarely speaks of it. Jane, mayhap Darcy is where she needs to be.”

She needed to be in the middle of a space battle with a madman? Then again, Thor’s mother had known of Darcy, and who was Jane to argue with the Queen of the Universe? Even more importantly, didn’t she trust Thor? Jane sighed and put her head on his chest. “You better be right about this.”

“I am. Trust me.”

Yes, she did, in spite of everything. “I do, but we do this my way. We tell everyone the truth and let them walk away from the project if they choose. Then we work our asses off with whoever’s left and get a working Bifrost. Once it’s working, then we find out if it’s time to get Darcy back.”

Thor’s smile was grateful, and the clouds on the horizon blew away. “Jane, I am honored by your faith in me. It will be as you say.”

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Loki didn’t remember how he’d escaped the tiny cell he’d suffered in for so long. He only knew that at long last, he was free.

Barefoot, he slipped among the stones, barely noticing that the sharp rocks cut his feet or that he had to gasp for air in the thin atmosphere. The edge of Thanos’ domain was close and he could jump and fall and fall and die before the Titan caught up to him. Looking down at his hands, he distantly noted that they were battered and his skin was blue. Scabs and seeping wounds ringed his wrists, but the manacles were gone. Had he finally swallowed his pride and frozen them off?

The edge was nearer now. Loki could feel the wintry bite of the abyss and he welcomed it. He might as well admit he was a creature of the cold and throw himself back into it. Then he was tackled to the ground.

“No!” he croaked, his voice raspy and unrecognizable to his own ears. Loki struggled against his attacker, scrambling for purchase on the rough ground. He was too weak. Someone dragged him back into a stony alcove and refused to let go.

“You fool, what are you doing?”

It was one of the Titan’s many daughters, and this one was more sympathetic than the others. “I cannot go on here. I would rather die,” Loki whispered through dry, cracked lips.
“You won’t escape him that way,” she said, still holding on to him long after he ran out of fight. Her hands, he noted, were a lovely shade of green. “He’ll catch you,” she murmured, “and make your life even more miserable, because that’s what he does. He won’t let you die. You know what you have to do.”

She was right, of course, and he shut his eyes, as if that would make it all go away. “I must agree to what he wants.” Loki’s tone was heavy with bitterness. “The only way out of here is by his leave.”

Conquering Midgard using the mind stone and stealing the tesseract for Thanos sounded appealing, a delightful piece of revenge against both Odin and Thor, who fancied themselves the caretakers of the universe. Yet Loki was not such a fool. There had to be a reason the Titan would not touch the mind stone himself. Then again, what choice had he?

“My Lord?”

Loki cracked his eyes open to find himself sprawled out on the floor of his library, his wrist throbbing. His majordomo Finglorfin bent over him with an expression of concern, and Loki wondered which was real, Fin or the Titan’s daughter? He grabbed the elf’s collar and it felt tangible enough. “How long have I been here?”

Finglorfin shook his head. “I know not, for I just found you. Where is Lady Darcy?”

Loki always thought he ought to take the elf to task for not speaking like a servant, but he wasn’t really one. Loki had saved his life once, and Finglorfin had yet to judge the debt fulfilled. “I left her by the Lake of Andvaranaut, and she’s perfectly capable of walking back by herself.”

In the distance, there was an explosion, and Finglorfin’s face grew grim. “Are you certain of that?”

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Frigga knew she should not be pleased.

No queen should ever wish suffering on her subjects, especially those close to her. There were nine ladies in Eir’s healing wards, four of whom were her own ladies-in-waiting, including Sigyn. There were also four men, minor nobles known for little else but gossipmongering and pursuit of the ladies. They were all throwing up slugs and showed no signs of stopping any time soon. The slugs themselves, in buckets around the room, were singing (in perfect four part harmony) a bawdy tune about picking up whores.

If that didn’t give Loki away, she wasn’t sure what would.

Eir walked over to her. “I cannot break the spell. You and I both know this is Loki’s handiwork, though I cannot fathom why. He barely knows these noblemen exist, and they only dream of being in his inner circle. As for the ladies, well, he’s only got eyes for his pretty mortal. He’s got no use for them.”

“Precisely,” said Frigga. “I think this was wrought in defense of Lady Darcy. When was the last time he did something for someone other than himself?” She had seen Darcy in the scrying pool centuries before her arrival, indeed centuries before her birth. There were many times when
Frigga had prayed for her to come into Loki’s life, in situations where he’d needed her, but the Norns knew what they were doing. After all the terrible truths he’d uncovered and all the dreadful things it had driven him to do, he had never needed her more than right now.

“Ah.” Eir contemplated her patients before adding, “This is an appalling idea, Darcy and Loki together. She’s mortal. When the course of her life is through, she’ll die and break his heart all over again.”

“Mortality can be changed.”

“Idunn’s apples? She’ll never give one without the Allfather’s consent.”

What Eir did not have to say was that Odin would never give his consent for such a thing. Mortals were for cavorting with on Midgard and they certainly were not invited to Asgard. He had saved them from the Frost Giants millennia ago, but that had been out of a sense of noblesse oblige and a desire to beat the stuffing out of King Laufey. Frigga knew all this and would find a way around it. Somehow.

Why did the men in her life have to make things so complicated?

The palace floor shook beneath Frigga’s feet, a slight shudder. Then there was a larger quake, followed by a distant rumble. Alarms began shrieking, and she spun toward the door. “We are under attack.”

“Go,” said Eir. “We’ll be ready here.”

Gathering her skirts, Frigga dashed up several levels, to a balcony outside the throne room. At last, Loki’s dire predictions were coming true. Three massive starships hung out over the end of the bridge and the unfinished Bifröst. Two seemed to blur as a swarm of smaller ships launched and headed for the city. The third ship came in low to hover over the bridge, and if her vision was to be trusted, troops were disembarking to begin marching into Asgard. Looking down, she could see her people preparing for battle while sending their families to the palace. Above and out in the city, weapons platforms were rising, their great guns shooting at the incoming fighters.

Loki stumbled out onto the balcony. Fandral was not far behind him. “We need Einherjar stationed at the bottom of the bridge,” Loki said. “The longer they can hold off the Chitauri, the longer we have to evacuate the city.”

“Indeed,” agreed Fandral. “For Asgard!” he bellowed before dropping over the balcony rail and down to the battlements, where he began shouting orders at the troops.

Frigga reached out to touch her son’s sleeve. “So it begins.”

“Aye.”

His gaze rested on the unfolding battle below, his expression shuttered. He leaned on the railing, as white as a sheet, clutching the wrist with the golden bracelet on it close to his side.

“Loki, where is Darcy?”

He swallowed and finally said, “Out there. Somewhere.”

Frigga’s heart felt as if it had dropped to the stones at her feet, but she didn’t take the time to berate him. Swarms of fighters closed on the city and the palace. Several fired at buildings and one burst into flames. “Then do not stand here like a fool. Go and find her.” When he opened his mouth to object, she added, “We know what needs to be done to hold off the Chitauri, and you’re
no use to us as you are.” He was in pain and she longed to reach out to him, but for Darcy’s sake, she would get him moving. “Go!”

Without another word, Loki teleported away.

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“There you are,” said Smaug in his ominous voice.

Darcy tried to hide behind one of the bridge pilings, which was ridiculous. It certainly wasn’t big enough to hide her from the dragon’s sharp eyes. There wasn’t anywhere to hide on the lake bottom, for it was smooth and sandy. Why was there a dragon in the lake anyway? Wouldn’t that put out his fire? Why wasn’t he back in the Lonely Mountain sitting on his gold and the tesseract? She must be dead, or in the process of drowning. No reason to be afraid then. “What do you want? I’d like to drown in peace, if you don’t mind.”

“The opportunity to talk to you without your overprotective mage was too good to pass up,” purred Smaug, making a lazy circle around her.

Overprotective? Ha. Loki had dumped her here and left.

Smaug sent Darcy spinning in the water with a sweep of his tail. “You are mortal and nothing special. How is it that I, the mighty Smaug, the greatest cataclysm of Middle Earth, came from you?”

Either she was chewing some serious gillyweed or this was some sort of hallucination, because she wasn’t having any trouble breathing. She was also super tired of the word mortal. “We mortals are much more than we seem. Our imaginations are limitless and that’s where you came from. You were a character in a book. My favorite character. I’ve gotta be honest, I’m thinking about changing my mind here.”

The dragon snorted, releasing a cloud of bubbles into the water. “Is that all I am? A character chosen by chance to do guard duty?” He circled, closer and closer, his reptilian eyes always on her.

“What do you want to be?”

“Free.”

The dragon surged at her, mouth wide, and Darcy tried to dive beneath him. She wasn’t nearly fast enough. She screamed as his teeth brushed by her, air exploding from her nose and mouth. Above her, light flashed and pieces of the bridge began raining down—

The next thing Darcy knew, she was dragging herself up on shore. She coughed, bringing up half the lake, and lay on a tiny strip of beach until the spasms stopped. At least the water was the purest and cleanest she’d ever choked on. A Chitauri skiff whizzed by overhead, and Darcy knew she needed to get out of sight. She might resemble a dead body from above, but to be safe, she crawled up the bank and under the cover of some bushes.

Well, fuck Loki anyway. For all his talk about protecting her, he was nowhere to be seen to keep her safe from aliens and dragons who shouldn’t be swimming anyway. At least the dragon was just in her head, but the aliens were real enough. Two more skiffs flew over, engaged in a
looping dogfight with an Asgardian longboat. She curled up in a ball and acknowledged the fact that she had to save herself. Staying put wasn’t an option. If there was one thing she’d learned from years of watching television, it was that the hiding person will always be found and promptly murdered.

This was all Loki’s fault.

Maybe (just maybe) it was a teensy bit hers too, for being stubborn and not listening and now she’d driven him away and would she ever get a chance to clear the air between them? She could hear Gran’s voice ringing in her ears: *Slow down, Darcy. Use your head. Not your mouth.*

“Oh, Gran, if you could only see me now,” Darcy muttered.

There was nothing to do but get moving. She made her way to the edge of the bushes and peered out. The Chitauri skiffs took shots at the city as they flew over, but they seemed more interested in Hlidskjalf. Focusing their firepower on the great palace, they swarmed around it, and as Darcy watched, a golden sheet of energy began to drop around the castle. She guessed it was a forcefield to keep the troublemakers out. Would she be able to get in when she got there?

Close by, there were buildings in flames, and Æsir were fleeing toward the palace. Some, mostly men, were setting up barricades and getting ready for battle. When the sky was as clear as it was going to get, Darcy clambered to her feet and started to follow the crowd toward Hlidskjalf. She had crossed one street when a burly fellow who looked even bigger than Thor grabbed her arm in a crushing grip. “Can you fight?” he asked.

For a second, she was tempted to say yes, just to prove Loki wrong. Visions of Les Misérables and standing triumphant on the barricade danced in her head. Then several skiffs landed down the street, and a squad of Chitauri jumped out, weapons ready. They began blasting the hell out of anything that got in their way. Darcy shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

“So be off then, wench, and get yourself to the palace,” the burly fellow said. “I’ll find you later,” he leered, and slapped her on the ass before grabbing up an axe and rushing away.

“Like hell you will,” Darcy grumbled as she ran in the opposite direction of the oncoming Chitauri. Why was it that everybody thought she was a ho? Looking down at herself, she had to admit the dip in the lake hadn’t done anything for her outfit and her hair was a snarled mess. She didn't look like Lady Darcy, Ambassador of Midgard.

She followed two other women through several alleyways, and then to a place she recognized, the market she’d been to earlier with Loki. Many of the stalls were turned over and people hurried away with their goods. Animals bleated in distress and children wailed as people pushed and shoved their way toward the palace. Hlidskjalf loomed a few blocks ahead, still under heavy fire from the Chitauri. Even so, everyone was heading that way, and Darcy took that as a good sign. No one on the ground seemed to be concerned about getting past the forcefield.

She tried to stay on the periphery of the crowd. Any one of these people could crush her easily, and her arm hurt where the burly guy had grabbed her. Ahead of her, a boy stumbled, and she reached down to help him up. He flashed her a grateful look before sprinting away.

Behind her, someone started screaming, and the marketplace dissolved into chaos. Darcy thought she heard the sound of marching in the distance and hoped it was the Einherjar. The crowd jostled her and she tried to keep moving and stay light on her feet. If she fell, there was a hella good chance she would be trampled. The smell of smoke seemed to make the people around her more desperate, and someone gave her a hard shove between the shoulder blades. “Move! The Chitauri
are coming!”

Darcy never did see who it was. She staggered to her left and bounced hard off the nearest stone wall. She saw stars, and by the time she blinked, the area around her had miraculously cleared. She realized why a moment later as two Chitauri warriors peered out of the alleyway near her. They chattered and hissed to one another as she stared at them. She thought the closer one was going for his rifle and she stumbled backwards. His clawed hands darted out to stop her from escaping.

The amulet grew warm in the hollow of her throat and a burst of green light enveloped the Chitauri. He gurgled and dropped to the ground. The other Chitauri made a squawking noise and he snatched at her as well. Another flash, and he was down too.

Darcy poked them with her foot. They seemed to be dead, but she wasn’t getting any closer to find out. Maybe Loki knew something about protection after all. He’d sworn Thanos would never touch her again, and apparently that went for anybody who had bad intentions. “Take that, creepers,” Darcy said to them.

From another alley, more Chitauri appeared. Darcy only had time to let out a squeak before two Æsir dropped from above. It was Sif and Hogun. The warrior woman wasted no time running one alien through with her sword while Hogun took care of two others with a nasty spiked mace. Then they both turned to her. “Lady Darcy, how did you come to be here?” Sif asked. “Where is Loki?”

“Who knows?” Darcy brushed herself off as best she could and shivered. There was a sharp breeze and her clothes were still wet. “He bailed on me.” At their confused looks, she added, “Disapparated? Disappeared? Went pouf by way of magic?”

“He left you here,” Sif translated, sounding not surprised at all.

“To be fair, it was a nice sunny day when he did it, with only a small chance of alien attack,” Darcy added, unsure why she felt the need to defend Loki. “Welcome back, by the way.” She had not forgotten that the queen had sent them out on a mission the day before. She was hoping Sif had forgotten about her challenge.

“We just arrived,” Hogun said. “We will take you to the palace, milady, then go help those cornered by the Chitauri.”

“There is no time,” Sif argued. “Loki sent a large force of Einherjar to hold the bridge, but the Chitauri have been dropping their forces all over the city. If we do not get to those men quickly, they will be cut off.”

As mad as she might be at him, the last thing Darcy wanted was to go further from Loki and cause him more suffering. No one had ever said how far apart they had to be for the bracelets to kill him, and she shuddered at the thought. She leaned down and picked up a Chitauri rifle. It had a long guard, but sure enough, she found the trigger way down inside. It was slimy, though. Eww, alien sweat. The weapon was heavy and she’d only been target shooting twice in her life, but she’d played her fair share of Call of Duty with an ex-boyfriend. That experience would have to do. “It’s only a couple of blocks to Hlidskjalf. I can make it on my own.”

“No, I fear you cannot,” Hogun said quietly. “The city is swarming with Chitauri.”

“We have no time for this,” said Sif behind her.

There was a great clunk to the back of Darcy’s head, and the world went dark.
Chapter Summary

There is adventure, and then there are feels.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! This chapter has been a long time coming, and I thank you for your patience. As I said in the summary, there is some adventure, and then there are feels. I hope you all find it as satisfying to read as I did to write. Consider this my holiday gift to all you kind folks who keep coming back to read.

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anyone. There is no money involved here, only joy, and I must thank Marvel, Coldplay, J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien for it.

And I could write it down

Or spread it all around

Get lost and then get found

And you’ll come back to me

Not swallowed in the sea

Coldplay, Swallowed in the Sea

The Lake of Andvaranaut burned, and Loki could do nothing but stand and stare at it.

Actually, a crashed Chitauri skiff blazed out in the middle, the reflection turning the water a lurid orange. A few pilings, all that was left of the bridge, were smoking. The rest lay on the bottom. Darcy was not dead, for he was still alive, though his wrist ached brutally. By the Norns, why couldn’t she stay in one place and wait for him? She knew perfectly well her life was tied to his and for that reason alone (and no other), he needed to find her.

Loki wondered how long he could continue to tell himself that lie.
He turned from the lake, to let the bracelet guide his path. One way or another, he would find Darcy. Then he abruptly spun back and let loose some of the cold fury burning beneath his skin.

The lake froze before him.

***

Darcy woke up with a throbbing head and a really, really foul attitude.

“I hate every single one of you,” she muttered before she opened her eyes. She was beyond tired of being slapped, smacked and otherwise manhandled in this testosterone soaked land. So, so done. It was time for her to do some bitch slapping, starting with the oh-so-arrogant Loki, then moving on to Sif, Sigyn, the Warriors Three, Lady Gudrun, that guy who’d accosted her in the library and the one who’d just smacked her on the ass… She had quite a list. It was bigger than her Christmas list.

No one replied to her comment, so she presumed she was alone and opened her eyes a crack. She was on one of those flying longboat things, stretched out on a bench. Someone had covered her with a golden blanket, and she realized it was a cape. That was the least they could do. Darcy reached up to touch the back of her head and groaned when she felt the lump. She was now the proud owner of a concussion, and the last moments she could recall were fuzzy, to say the least. Had Sif hit her? Asgard was lousy with bitches, and Sif deserved to move to the top of her slap list. There were voices in the distance and they sounded like they were arguing. Sif and Hogun, probably. She couldn’t hear what they were saying and didn’t much care.

Darcy lifted her head just enough to see over the side of the boat. The movement made her draw in her breath in a hiss, but she ignored her pounding skull and let out a stream of curses instead. There was a whole lot of city between her and Hlidskjalf, and she was further from Loki than ever. Fighting continued in the skies above the palace, but the streets close to her were empty and quiet. Turning in the other direction, she saw she was at the edge of the city, where massive gates closed off the longest part of the rainbow bridge, the one that headed straight out to the edge of the world. There were armored Einherjar behind the gates, and they were battle ready, but all was tranquil. There were no Chitauri in sight.

She spotted Sif and Hogun, and somehow they had hooked up with their BFF’s Fandral and Volstagg. They were all standing around arguing with a big guy in the craziest golden helmet she’d ever seen, and Darcy watched them for a moment. Her best bet was to convince them to take her back to the palace, but how was that going to happen?

There was a noise behind her and Darcy ducked. When she dared to peep over the side of the longboat, she didn’t see anything. Hopefully it was just an animal, like a stray alley cat after mice. Then she saw movement among barrels stacked against the back wall of a tavern and stayed still, watching.

There was a little girl hiding among the barrels. She was alone.

“Hey!” Darcy hissed. “Little girl! It’s not safe for you. Come on up here.” The kid looked to be about eight years old (in Æsir years, it could be two hundred), and must have gotten separated from her family. She waved, trying to get the child to cross the street and climb into the longboat.
The girl stared at her, eyes wide with fright. Then she shook her head and darted into an alley, heading away toward the palace.

“No, no, no,” Darcy muttered. The streets looked quiet, but the Chitauri were out there. She couldn’t let the kid get herself killed. Darcy stumbled out of the longboat to hurry after her.

***

The marketplace was empty of all but bodies.

Had it only been that morning that Loki had wandered through the crowded square with Darcy on his arm? Now there was nothing left but remains, of crockery and fabrics, of the merchant’s stalls, and of Æsir and Chitauri.

There were no Midgardians among the dead.

Unfortunately for the Chitauri scouts creeping into the square behind him, that fortuitous circumstance didn’t ease Loki’s fury. He drew his daggers and whirled to face them.

***

The streets were quiet. Too quiet.

Darcy almost giggled aloud at the stupid cliché and took a moment to rest her throbbing head on the nearest wall. She’d gone several blocks from the bridge and seen only glimpses of the little girl. No Chitauri, and she was okay with that. She stayed low, kept to the shadows and kept moving. The alley she slipped down was long and dark and empty, and at the end, she could go either left or right but not straight. Neither way held any promise. Then, far to the left, she caught a glimpse of blue skirt and blonde pigtails. Darcy darted that way. She didn’t dare shout, as she didn’t want to bring the Chitauri down on herself. She’d just have to catch the kid.

Another intersection, another choice. This time, Darcy got a better look at the girl, with her big, scared eyes and her pigtails coming unraveled. She was hiding behind a fountain in a small square between homes. She looked almost familiar, though Darcy could not place where she’d seen the Æsir child. In the market, maybe? She had Eir to thank that she could see her quarry so well; the woman could be making millions on Earth selling an alternative to LASIK.

Darcy took a step into the square, and the paving stones at her feet exploded.

***

As soon as Loki teleported himself to the edge of the city, he knew he was getting closer to Darcy. The bracelet subsided to a dull twinge.
The great gates were closed against the Chitauri, but the Einherjar still waited for battle. Lady Sif and the Warriors Three squabbled amongst themselves, and they had managed to drag Heimdall, the gatekeeper of Asgard, into it. In the face of battle, that was all they could think of to do? “I am surrounded,” Loki muttered to himself, “by the biggest idiots in the universe.”

Heimdall was the first to notice him, and the gatekeeper folded his hands on his great sword, his expression forbidding. Considering Loki had frozen him with the Casket of Ancient Winter last time they’d met, he hadn’t expected a smile of welcome. Come to think of it, he didn’t recall Heimdall cracking a smile in millennia. “Guardian, it has been a long time. I suppose you desire an apology.”

“Loki,” muttered Sif in a warning tone. The others looked wary.

“I do not expect one,” Heimdall replied. “To be repentant is not in your nature.”

“Indeed not.” Loki had a reputation to uphold, after all. “Where is Darcy?”

“She’s over in the longboat,” Volstagg rumbled. “Strange things are afoot. Is it true that the Chitauri have blocked our retreat?”

“You sent all these men down here.” Fandral’s tone was suspicious. “Did you send them into this trap on purpose? To die?”

Loki couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised at the other man’s words. They would never trust him again, and maybe they never had. “How little you think of me,” he spat, and marched over to the gate. There were peepholes within it, and he threw one open to study the Chituari host. They had not advanced much, leaving him to suspect they were stalling while others closed off possible retreat. “The Chitauri have no strategy; they overwhelm with superior numbers. Slipping them behind our defenses speaks of the Mad Titan, and he will not fool me again. We must find a way to get all these men back to the palace. We cannot afford to lose so many to hold a gate that is already lost. Let me see to Darcy, then we will come up with a plan.”

Loki stomped away, leaving them open-mouthed in his wake. Let them think whatever they wanted, so long as they would help. He couldn’t save Asgard on his own.

Sif hurried after him. “Loki, wait!”

Once they were beyond earshot of the others, Sif pulled him to a stop. She said nothing, but stared into his eyes. It was Loki who spoke. “What is it you’re looking for, Sif? Hoping to make sense of the traitor?”

Her grip on his arm tightened. “I am trying to decide if you mean what you say. After you tried to take the throne from Thor, why should you save us? For another chance at the throne?”

He leaned closer, his voice low. “Would it interest you to know I never wanted the throne? That all I ever wanted was the respect of the Allfather and my lunk of a brother?”

“You let Frost Giants in Asgard. ‘Tis treason and nothing less, Loki!”

He stepped back, rubbing his wrist. The dull ache was not so dull anymore, but more like sharp knives. He threw a glance at the longboat and did not see Darcy. Sif followed as he started walking again. “What other choice was left for me? Nothing I have ever done has been good enough, worthy enough. Magic is for women, is it not? I was always argr and always will be.”

Sif flinched, for there was no greater insult in Asgard than to be thought of as unmanly. “You
have another chance to prove yourself, and once again it is a situation of your own making. Is that what this is about, Loki? Proving yourself?"

Loki laughed, and it wasn’t a pleasant sound. “A fine irony, that. I have another chance to prove myself, and I couldn’t care less.”

“Then why stay and fight? Why don’t you stand back and let Asgard fall? Darcy cannot hold you back if you wish to go. You could throw her over your shoulder and be gone.”

“Mayhap I simply hate Thanos more than I hate you all. I want my well-deserved piece of the Titan’s hide.” The longboat was hovering a few feet off the ground, and Loki put his hands on the side to pull himself up.

Sif placed her hand on his, her eyes intense. “What happened to you? After you fell?”

Was that a hint of concern? A note of caring in her voice? It was too little, and far too late. If she dared to offer him an olive branch now, he’d laugh in her face. “It matters not,” Loki said and ignored her look of frustration. She wanted answers, and he had given as much as he was willing to give. His gaze swept the inside of the boat. Of course it was empty, with only a discarded cape. Darcy was gone again, and the bracelet drew him toward the empty streets. “Where the hel did she go now?”

***

Darcy dove back behind a building as rocks and dirt showered over her. Who the hell was shooting at her? She got low, making herself as small a target as possible. When no more shots followed, she peered around the corner. Four Chitauri were approaching, and as far as she could tell, they were between her and the fleeing little girl. She swept the area for weapons and found nothing, not unless she counted a barrel full of fish.

Maybe it was time to go around the block. She crawled to the opposite corner to peer around it, hoping the way was clear. It was not. There were two pairs of feet in front of her nose. They were a bluish gray with three toes and they were not human or Æsir. She looked up to find two more Chitauri staring down at her, rifles pointed at her. She threw up her hands. “Hey guys, I’m a good friend of Prince Loki. You may not want to shoot me.”

Then again, they might want to shoot her faster. Would the amulet protect her at point blank range? One said something to the other in their harsh tongue, which sounded a bit like Parseltongue to her and she squeezed her eyes shut. Then they both howled. When she opened her eyes again, one was collapsing with a dagger in his throat. The other dissolved into a pile of rags and bone.

“Hide!” Loki commanded as he strode over the corpses to face the rest of the aliens.

She would have liked to praise his fabulous timing, but there was something she needed to do first. “There’s a little girl—I have to find her.” Darcy didn’t wait for his acknowledgement, but got to her feet and took the long way around between tall houses. At last, she could sneak up behind the little girl instead of playing hide and seek. The child was still crouched in the shadow of the fountain, watching Loki. He was bringing the pain to the Chitauri with magic alone, green fire flowing from his fingertips and damn, he was magnificent. If only she had more time, she would
stop to admire the show. Darcy jumped forward to grab the little girl before she could escape again.

The child dissolved into the air.

“No!” Darcy collapsed to her knees with a moan, staring at her empty hands. The little girl had been an illusion the whole time. Who would do such a thing and why? It was just another example that she was in way over her head in Asgard. Maybe it really was time to go home.

“Darcy.”

“She wasn’t real,” Darcy whispered, not looking up at Loki. Apparently he’d already kicked Chitauri ass while her lone attempt at heroism ended in disaster. “But she looked just like a little girl. She was terrified. How could she not be real?”

“She was an illusion, probably designed to lead stragglers into the arms of the Chitauri.” Loki pulled her to her feet. “You’re fortunate to be alive.”

Considering all she’d been through in the last couple of hours, Darcy didn’t feel lucky. She’d nearly drowned and been shot at, slapped and knocked out. She’d also risked her life for someone who didn’t exist, and that innocent child had been leading her somewhere, probably to her death. Now Loki was back as if he was the conquering hero, and none of this would have happened if he hadn’t bailed on her in the first place. This was the perfect moment to deliver the ultimate slap, but Darcy did something else: she buried her face in his chest and burst into tears.

Loki, to his credit, did not drop her like a hot potato. He wrapped his arms around her and said, “Be still, Darcy. You are safe now.”

“Safe?” Her fist whacked his armor. “You left me, you jackass! How is that keeping me safe? Without the bracelets, would you have bothered to come back for me?”

Silence greeted her words. Darcy didn’t look up to see his reaction. Let him tell her to her face that she was useless to him except in bed and maybe she could finally acknowledge that though she felt something for him, he was still the King of Assholes. Then it was time to go home and find a nice guy and get on with her life.

That idea made her want to puke.

“I just fought my way through the city to find you, wench,” Loki growled through clenched teeth. Then his tone softened. “Have you not yet realized I would fight my way through entire universes to find you, bracelets be damned?”

Darcy blinked. Then she shook the bracelet, for there was no hint of lying words. “This thing isn’t working.”

“That is all milady can think of to say? It’s working fine.” He grabbed her chin, to coax her to look up at him before he planted a hard kiss on her mouth.

If she was honest with herself, she already knew he wasn’t lying, and his words settled into her heart. Well, so much for going home and finding a nice guy who didn’t wipe out cities when the mood struck. Loki did care, and she had this terrible wonderful feeling that it was way too late to guard her heart against him. Darcy returned his kiss with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, and when they parted, she said, “OMG, those girls are going to hate me even more. Now what do we do?”
“Do?” Loki repeated with a snort. “Either I kill you and rid myself of this wretched weakness for you, or I never let you out of my sight again.”

She smiled into his armor. He’d already made his choice when he’d faced Smaug and chose her over the pretty blue box. “I’m still alive.”

“So you are.” His hand slipped into her hair to brush the lump on her skull. “You are injured. You need to see Eir.”

Cold seeped into the wound, and Darcy sighed. He was better than an Advil any day, and damn, did she love magic. She found it interesting that cold seemed to come to him as easily as illusion. She wondered if it was a common talent among mages. “Then what?”

“I must come back and get the Einherjar guarding the bridge back to the palace. I won’t lose so many to Thanos so early in this battle.”

“Wait, what happened to never being out of your sight? We’ll be too far from each other. You won’t be able to function. I’m going with you.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. “Eir’s sight will have to be good enough. You’ll go back to the palace and be safe.”

Darcy slipped from his embrace and started walking back the way she came. She might be on that perilous edge of falling in love with him, but he still didn’t get to be stupid and tell her what to do. She spoke to him over her shoulder. “You haven’t realized yet that I’m safer with you.”

He glared at her for what felt like a full minute. Then stomped after her. “Safe? With me? That must be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”
Chapter Summary

Loki has a close encounter with his worst nightmare.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! So sorry it's taken me so long to get this together, but life, you know? Have faith, I will finish this fic. I've got a few ideas for sequels too. :) It could take me a while, tho, so thanks in advance for your patience.

Heads up for a brief mention of torture near the end of the chapter.

Thanks to gladheonsleeps for the shoutout in Loki in Thrall. You rock!

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anyone like Marvel, JK Rowling, JRR Tolkein, Wander over Yonder, WWE and anyone else Darcy may have mentioned in the course of the chapter. I'm just here to have fun.

All his life he’s been told
He’ll be nothing when he’s old
All the kicks and all the blows
He won’t ever let it show
‘Cause he’s stronger than you know
A heart of steel starts to grow
The Script, Superheroes

In the end, when Thor told the truth about giving Loki one last chance, only Tony Stark walked out.

Jane and Thor exchanged glances, and when he twitched to go after Tony, it was Natasha Romanoff who stopped him. “Give Tony a few minutes. He has more cause than the rest of us to be angry with Loki. He used Stark Tower as ground zero for an alien attack. He gave Tony the
opportunity to try a bungee jump with no cord.”

It was Jane’s turn to twitch, and she threw Thor a dark look. She didn’t know the particulars of the Battle of New York, but Thor might have mentioned that detail.

“He does have cause. So do we all,” Thor agreed. “I am willing to give Loki an opportunity to change his path, but I understand if you have no wish to do so.”

So much hung on the Black Widow. Fitz and Simmons were both looking in her direction, ready to take their cue from the senior agent, and Jane really needed them. Natasha had known some of what was going on and had probably guessed the rest, but there was no way to gauge how she felt about it. Jane couldn’t read her expression at all. “I trust Thor,” Jane put in. “And I want my assistant back, whatever it takes.”

“Fury won’t like this,” Natasha directed her comment to Thor.

“Even when he gets a working Bifröst and the possibility of diplomatic relations with Asgard?”

The agent raised an eyebrow, and Jane wondered if she already knew Thor’s dad had expressed zero interest in talking to the puny humans. She and Thor had decided beforehand not to mention this, as it was hardly a selling point. Yet Jane had hope. Building their own Einstein-Rosen Bridge might get the old guy’s attention, at least.

“Can you really do this?” Natasha asked Jane.

Her answer came out a lot braver than she felt. “We have the technology, now it’s a matter of powering it and fine tuning it and pointing it in the right direction. With everyone’s help, it’ll get done faster, but I’ll do it myself if I have to, for Darcy’s sake. And for Loki, because it means the world to Thor.”

The Black Widow opened her mouth to speak, but Tony Stark reappeared in the doorway. “This is the moment where Natasha swings into her second chances speech.”

“We’ve all had second chances, Tony. Even you.”

“Pepper could have been in the tower the day the Chitauri came. She could be dead.” He seemed to chew that over for a second before fixing Thor with an intense glower. “You think Loki was tortured by whoever was really behind the attack on New York?”


Tony waved him to a halt. “You know what’s funny? If you count all the weapons that were made by Stark Industries in the time I was CEO, I have a lot higher body count than Loki does. Like, three times higher. I’ll do this, but not for your brother. I’ll do it because Pep lived and I’d like to see the assistant live too. What did you say her name was? Stacy?”

“Darcy,” Jane corrected even as Thor’s hand squeezed her shoulder. She gave him a warm smile. Victory.

“Then may we get back to work?” Simmons inquired after an affirming nod from Natasha. “Fitz and I have some readings you need to see, Dr. Foster.”

Jane only took a moment to glance at the ceiling before diving back into science. “We’re coming, Darcy. Hang on.”
“Did you hit Darcy, Sif?”

Darcy appreciated the fact that these were the first words out of Loki’s mouth as they walked back to the gate and its many defenders. It wasn’t as if he had nothing else to talk about with Sif and the Warriors Three, like an invading army.

_I would fight my way through entire universes to find you._

She was going to have to ponder that one for a while. It wasn’t exactly _I love you_, but it was a declaration of… something. Maybe it was an acknowledgement that whatever was between them was more than lust and weird friendship bracelets. She’d like to live long enough to figure it out.

Not that the lust wasn’t nice. Darcy also wanted to live long enough to jump his bones again.

It didn’t look good, though. The atmosphere at the gate had changed in the time she’d been gone. The Einherjar had been less vigilant before, but now they were on high alert, with formal lines of defense behind the gate and on top of the sea walls along the shoreline. She couldn’t see the approaching army, but it didn’t take a genius to guess they weren’t too far.

“I did not,” Sif replied to Loki’s query, her tone so firm that it couldn’t be anything but the truth. The warrior woman sat on a barrel, watching while Volstagg tapped an even larger barrel stacked against the outside wall of a tavern. Fandral and Hogun loitered nearby. Darcy wondered what was in the barrel, and if everybody was looking for a spot of liquid courage in the face of battle. She could use a swig or two herself. Sif pointed to a thing impaled on Hogun’s spiked mace. “That hit milady. You are well?” she asked of Darcy.

Darcy felt like crap, but there was no time to take to the nearest sofa and binge watch _Game of Thrones_ until her head stopped hurting. Come to think of it, not _Game of Thrones_. She’d been living it since arriving in Asgard, complete with a dragon. “Let’s call me functional and leave it at that. What is that thing?”

At first glance, the object on Hogun’s mace wasn’t much to see. It was shaped more or less like a starfish, with five points and a glow that reminded Darcy of the glowing sand in Hoenir’s office. Out of the corner of her eye, she happened to catch Loki’s reaction. Hogun brought the mace up for everyone to have a better look, and Loki seemed to catch himself before he recoiled from the thing.

“Heimdall thinks it is a creature of Muspelheim,” Fandral said. “Which should concern us. It may mean the Titan has an alliance with Surtur.”

“Surtur is the master of the Fire Giants,” Loki told Darcy. “There’s nothing he’d like more than the fall of Asgard.” Now that he’d gotten over his initial start, he leaned closer to have a better look. “This hit Darcy? Are you sure?”

“In the back of the head. Then there was a flash and it fell to the ground,” Hogun said.

That sounded like the amulet at work again. Darcy brushed the jewel at her throat, exchanging a look with Loki as his hand came to rest on the small of her back. Then she bent closer to the starfish thing. It started squirming crazily, as if it was going to work its way off the spear and jump at her. Everybody sprang back as Hogun drove the mace into the ground, and still it squirmed.
Darcy took another step back. “Yikes. There’s never an end to weird here, is there?”

Volstagg cast it a dark glance as he got the tap to work. “Kill it already. What foul sorcerer is casting such things at us?” About to get himself under the tap and open it wide, he paused to give Loki a sideways look. “Not you, of course.”

Loki glared at him. “Of course not me, you great lummox. When it’s my foul sorcery, I’ll make damn sure you know it.” He cast a ball of silvery light at the starfish thing, and both disappeared. “I’ve sent it to Hoenir, mayhap he’ll know what it is. Hurry up, Volstagg, I’m thirsty.” Loki glared at the warrior, who was guzzling straight from the tap. Then he remembered his manners. “Would milady care for a sip of ale?”

Actually, Darcy had heard enough about the fabled Asgardian Ale to think twice. “Will you have to carry me back to the palace over your shoulder while I belt out I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m going to need to be sober for this.”

Loki flashed a grin. “It’ll be less fun that way, but the odds of survival are better.”

“What do we do, then?” Fandral asked. “We cannot fight our way back to the palace and there’s only one longboat, so flying is out of the question.”

“If we cannot go over or across, then we must go under,” Loki said.

Darcy had been in secret passages beneath the palace, and it was a safe bet they radiated out in all directions and connected up to sewers, cellars and who knew what else. She left Loki and the warriors to drain the barrel of ale and plan an escape. She wandered over to the sea wall to peer between the feet of the Einherjar and get a better look at the army marching up the rainbow bridge.

It was a really big army, and they were getting close.

As she stood there, she understood how those inside Helm’s Deep or Hogwarts must have felt, staring down great armies of orcs or Death Eaters. There was a lump in her throat and a clawing in her stomach and the urge to run away as far and fast as she could. Tears touched her eyes, for these brutes had tried to take over her world and now wanted to destroy the beautiful, fabled land behind her.

Darcy blinked the tears away. No, she would not run. She was one small mortal with few fighting skills, but she would find a way to help. Pulling out her Starkphone, she snapped a couple of pictures of the Chitauri. If SHIELD ever confiscated her phone or recovered it from her body, hopefully this would make them pee their pants. It wasn’t a helpful thought, but it was kind of satisfying.

“Have you ever seen the like, milady?”

Darcy jumped and almost dropped her phone over the wall. Then she realized that the pair of boots on the sea wall to her left belonged to the big guy in the crazy helmet she’d seen earlier. She could almost mistake him for a statue, for he stood tall and unmoving with a massive broadsword before him. He had to be Heimdall, the Guardian of Asgard, and he was watching the approaching army with great interest. He took a moment to glance down at her with interesting cat eyes before turning back to the Chitauri. They’d never been properly introduced, but Darcy thought it wasn’t the time to stand on ceremony. “Me? No, I’ve never seen an army up close and personal before.”
She tucked the phone away to consider the approaching aliens. “Can we win?”

“Asgard has never fallen, though I would be lying if I said our prince inspires my trust.”

The dude’s tone was chilly with misgiving, and that was pretty much the reaction of everybody in Asgard. She wondered what Loki had done to deserve this guy’s suspicion. What a shame that all these people were required to obey their prince. Too bad, suckers. “You think he’s up to something?”

“I believe he means to save Asgard, but what his motives are remain to be seen.”

Darcy snorted. Of course Loki was up to something. While defending Asgard, he had a shot at getting revenge on the Mad Titan and maybe getting his fancy ass on the throne on a more permanent basis. Loki had never expressed a desire for the throne to her, but Darcy wasn’t stupid. The throne and the curse of the second son had to be part of what set him off on his Boomapalooza tour of Earth in the first place. She glanced back to see Loki organizing the Einherjar into groups while Volstagg pulled up a square stone in the street that must be the Asgardian version of a manhole cover. In different circumstances, Loki, with all his cunning and brilliance, would be a good king. The way things stood now, though, desperation was the only way the Æsir would accept him as leader, even temporarily. Darcy turned that over in her mind. There was something she needed to ask Frigga. “He’ll come through for you.”

The cat eyes were on her again. “How can you be sure?”

“Don’t you know?” Darcy shouldn’t be challenging this guy, but she was 300% done accepting Æsir bullshit. “You’re the all-seeing guardian, right? Don’t you know what happened to him at the hands of Thanos?”

“I cannot see into the Titan’s realm,” Heimdall confessed.

So there were limits to his sight. Unfortunately, there were limits to hers as well, and she could only guess at what Thanos had done to Loki. She hoped her fears were worse than reality, but it was a big universe. There were probably tortures out there she couldn’t imagine.

“I see scars,” the guardian said. “Scars others cannot or will not see.”

Then he suspected as much as she did. “That’s why he can’t lose Asgard. The price of failure is death at the hands of that creepy bastard out there and Loki won’t accept it. He wants revenge and I can’t blame him.”

Heimdall straightened up and called back, “The army has stopped!”

The Chitauri ranks had come to a halt just short of the gate. Darcy stood on tiptoe, but couldn’t see any reason for the pause. At that point, the front ranks parted, and a different sort of alien floated forward on a golden throne. Darcy had only seen him once as an outline, a magic spell cast from a distance, but she knew his identity.

Thanos.

He was big, like Hagrid or Azog the Defiler or Stone Cold Steve Austin. He was also purple, with a wide face, lipless mouth and eyes that glowed. He wore blue and gold armor that would make Tony Stark weep with jealousy. “Send out the boy prince!” Thanos shouted.

Silence followed this demand. The Einherjar remained stoic, as still as statues in their positions, though Darcy could feel the mounting tension. Loki walked over to stand next to her, his jaw was
clenched and his hands curled into fists.

“Parley?” Darcy asked.

“Aye.” Loki pulled her away from the wall, back to where Volstagg sat at the edge of a hole in the street. The warrior looked mournfully downward, as if he was unsure he was going to fit into the chasm beneath his feet. “I like this not,” he grumbled to Loki. “’Tis cowardly to run.”

“You’ll have plenty of opportunity to find Valhalla, for no matter what I say, the Titan will bring the battle to Hlidskjalf,” Loki told him. Then he turned to Darcy. “Go with Volstagg. You’ll be safe.”

They were back to this discussion again, and which one of them had been hit in the head? Clearly he’d forgotten their earlier conversation on purpose. “Safer with you, right?” Darcy repeated. “You’re going to need your wits if you’re going out to negotiate with General Grievous, Silver Tongue. Squirming on the ground in pain won’t do any of us much good.”

“Darcy,” Loki ground out, “can you not, just once, obey me?”

“Not when you’re being stupid.”

“Save me from the stubbornness of humanity. I am trying to protect you, wench!”

“It’s not just my life that’s at stake here, is it? You need to be on your game.”

“Fandral!” Volstagg bellowed. “Hogun! You must come see this. I believe the lady has talked Loki to a standstill.”

Loki stomped over behind Volstagg. With one boot firmly in the center of the big warrior’s back, he shoved him down into the tunnels below. There was an enraged yelp from Volstagg. “We shall have words over this later, sorcerer! Ow! The tunnel is low, but passable.”

Loki gazed at Darcy for a moment before saying, “Then get the men to the palace. I’ll take care of the lady.”

As Einherjar started jumping down into the tunnel after Volstagg, Sif rushed over. “What about the men on the walls? Once they step away, Thanos will know we’ve abandoned the position.”

“Leave it to me.” Loki seemed to gather himself, then he closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath. When he opened them again, his eyes were greener than normal, and he spoke to Sif. “Tell the men to step back.”

When they did, those standing on the wall left an illusion of themselves. “Get them moving,” Loki told Sif, his voice strained. The warrior woman didn’t question, only led the men into the tavern, where Fandral dropped through a trap door in the floor.

Darcy counted illusion soldiers and gave up after a hundred. “How long can you maintain this?”

“As long as is needful.” Loki dragged her back to the sea wall, where Heimdall still stood. “Go with the last group, Heimdall. If I don’t survive this, Mother will need your eyes.”

The guardian gave a grave nod and left, following Sif into the tunnel beneath the tavern. Behind Darcy, Hogun ushered the remaining Einherjar after Volstagg. They would be gone soon, and that was good. She faced forward, leaning against the wall with Loki. The big scary purple
dude sat out front of his big scary army on his floating throne. He looked patient enough from a distance, but she wondered how long he would wait.

*If I don’t survive this…*

Loki’s hand was on her back again, rubbing small, comforting circles. “I want you to stay here.”

She knew what needed to be done, and knew she wouldn’t be much help out on the bridge. Loki wouldn’t be far enough away for the bracelets to bother him, but she still didn’t think he should go alone. She also took note of the sheen of sweat at his temples; he was working hard keeping up the illusion of soldiers on the wall. “I don’t think he knows the rules of parley.”

“He wouldn’t care even if he did.” Loki studied the Titan with his poker face in full force, but his eyes were feral and full of rage. “I must be the one to confront him.”

She feared what he would do when he was face to face with his nightmares. “Loki—”

“Promise me you will stay here, out of the way,” he insisted. “No matter what. If the worst should happen, take the tunnels and get back to the palace. Mother will see to it that you get home. Promise me.”

She nodded, but she’d seen that look before, on Jotenheim, and oh hell no, he was not going out to face the villain with his death wish face on. Darcy grabbed his hand to stop him. “You know what you said earlier? About universes? Umm, yeah. I’d fight my way through universes for you too. Not that I know how to fight or travel in space, but you get what I’m saying, right? I’d figure it out to find you.” Darcy cursed herself for rambling. “Come back to me, Magic Man, and I’ll find a better way to express myself.”

Something shifted in his eyes, and he looked both touched by her concern and ineffably sad. “You don’t know everything about me.”

“I don’t care,” Darcy said. “You don’t know everything about me either. Just come back.”

He didn’t need to be reminded that she had secrets, and she’d just gone and waved the red cape in front of the bull. Maybe it would be worth it, though, for it brought a hint of a smile to Loki’s mouth. “As milady commands,” he said, bringing her hand to his lips, and then he was gone.

Darcy stood by the sea wall, blinking like an idiot, her arms crossed at her chest. Damn him, he was coming back, if she had anything to say about it. Her gaze swept the area behind her, looking for weapons, and she spotted several Chitauri rifles in a haphazard pile. That kind of weapon wasn’t of interest to the average Æsir, for they preferred swords and shields and energy spears. She went over and picked up the top one on the pile. “Hello, handsome,” she said to it.

***

The Titan awaited him.

Loki teleported himself to stand before the closed gates, facing Thanos and his army of Chitauri. A thousand urges hit him at once: he should turn tail and run (it was a big universe and he could think of several hiding places where he could spend his days in the arms of Darcy); he
should throw up over the side of the bridge, because the sight of the Titan’s face made him ill; he
should be on his knees before his master, his true father.

Loki did none of those things. He’d be damned if he’d give the creature the satisfaction.
Whatever had been done to him, whatever twisted games Thanos had played with his mind, he
would have his vengeance for it. He was Loki, trickster, sorcerer and prince of Asgard, not some
alien’s plaything.

“There you are, my son,” Thanos said in a tone that hinted at impatience. “You know what I
have come for.”

Loki swallowed the urge to please, focusing more of his energy on maintaining the illusion
behind him. “I am not your son.”

Thanos narrowed his eyes and sat back on his great throne. “Are you not? You certainly don’t
belong to the one-eyed old man who took you from a frozen battlefield like a trinket. You also do
not belong to your blood father, who threw you out like trash. No, boy, your destiny lies with me.”

*Trash.* The word jolted Loki. It would be so easy to have his revenge on all those who had
belittled his abilities and thought him unworthy of Asgard over the centuries. All he had to do was
swallow his fury at the monster in front of him and hand over the tesseract and demand the rule of
Asgard in return. He would be a king and have everything he ever wanted.

Yet neither did he want to swallow his anger, nor was he such a fool. The rest of the universe
would eventually belong to Thanos, and when the time came, he would turn his relentless gaze on
Asgard and oust Loki like so much refuse that had piled up when he wasn’t looking. “No,” Loki
muttered.

“No what?”

“My destiny is my own.” At last Loki found his voice, forced his boots to move, to stalk over
and glare up at the creature on his throne. “Not yours, not Odin’s, not Laufey’s. It is mine and I
choose. I choose to walk away from all that you’ve made of me.”

“I am to blame for your actions?” The Titan roared with laughter. “The seeds of all you have
done have always been within you: your jealousy, your greed, your ambition. I have done nothing
but show you how to harness those qualities.”

“For your own gain.” Loki glanced furtively back toward Darcy, though the last thing he
wanted to do was draw attention to her. He could not see her, but she was watching over the sea
wall. Thank the Norns she couldn’t hear the conversation. When he turned back to Thanos, he had
a flash of memory, of kneeling before the Titan’s throne with his dark siblings: Gamora, Nebula,
Korath, others whose names escaped him. “Do not speak to me of stolen children. All of us, you
called us your beloved children, yet you took us and twisted us into beasts. May I be the first to
turn on you, *Father,* but may I not be the last.”

Thanos’ grin became satisfied. “Do you take me for a fool? I know what you are, my trickster,
my shrewd little frostling. What has brought you back to the side of Asgard? Was it your beloved
mother, whose tongue is as nimble as yours and makes believe that she loves you like a son? Was it
the mighty Thor, who still harbors hope of finding the brother he lost?” He paused with a knowing
gleam. “Or was it this Midgard girl you’ve found, who gives you sweet refuge between her thighs?
What does she whisper to you while you bed her? That you could redeem yourself and save the
universe?”
“She means nothing to me.”

It should have been a beautiful lie, smooth and dismissive, spun to the best of his silvertongued ability. Instead it had an edge of rage that bespoke the truth, and by the Titan’s expression, he knew it. He already knew what Loki had ignored for so long.

Darcy was not nothing. Darcy meant everything to him.

Thanos leaned forward on his throne. “I know what you’ve been up to, boy. She’s slipped beneath your guard and warmed your frozen heart. She’s necessary to unlocking the illusion where you’ve hidden the tesseract. I know I cannot touch her without dying, but there are other forms of persuasion. What would your Midgard girl give to save your life?”

To his sick horror, Loki knew the answer. She would give all she had, remove the amulet of her own free will and submit herself to the Titan. She was always trying to save his life.

The things the sadistic creature before him would do to her.

His own screams had been terrible enough when Thanos had removed great sheets of skin or shattered bones or pulled out vital organs, only to put them back later and do it again another day. The Titan had known how much Loki could take, but Darcy was mortal.

“No more,” Loki spat out.

The shot came out of nowhere. It hit Thanos’ golden throne with a flash of blue energy, like that of a Chitauri rifle, and the chair tilted dangerously. Another shot, and the throne started spinning with Thanos still in it while the Titan swore and grabbed the armrests. Loki suspected Darcy behind the attack, and as he was not one to miss an opportunity, he leaped onto the wide armrest of the chair. He let the illusion of Einherjar fall and gathered his magic close. Putting his face into the Titan’s startled one, he said, “No more of your threats. Leave the girl out of this, or there will be no realm, no barren moon or crevasse where I cannot find you. Go from Asgard and never return. I will not give you the tesseract.”

Thanos reached out to nab his wrist in a crushing grip with a malicious smile. “Then there will be war.”

“‘Tis what you have always wanted, and I will give it to you with gladness.” Loki ignored the pain as the bracelet was ground into muscle and bone, and used the skin on skin connection to drive a curse into the alien’s hand. Thanos let out an oath as his hand seemed to turn to stone and crumble to dust. He released Loki, who jumped back off the tilting throne. “See you in Hel, monster.”

With that, Loki teleported himself back to Darcy behind the sea wall. It was as he’d suspected: she had a rifle she was using to take shots at Thanos and pick off Chitauri, who had no cover out on the bridge but each other. There were six more rifles piled up at her feet, and he wondered how she had managed to obey him and still find a way to get involved. “What are you doing?”

“I didn’t like his attitude, even from here,” Darcy said matter-of-factly, squeezing off another shot. The floating throne continued to spin drunkenly as Thanos freed himself from it. The Chitauri started returning fire in earnest, taking chunks out of the sea wall.

Loki took the rifle from her and tossed it aside before gathering her close. “Can you please stop trying to save me?”

“Like that’s going to happen,” Darcy told him even as she threw her arms around his neck and
let him teleport them away.
Loki and Darcy find some time to generate some heat and Smaug has something to say.

Hello All! I thank you for your patience, as always, and for your kind comments. It keeps me coming back to the keyboard. I hope this chapter was worth the wait. (Insert picture of snail here)

There is sex in this chapter, so consider yourself warned.

Anybody excited for Civil War? The reviews have been very positive...

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody. This brings me joy but no money.

‘Cause you are the piece of me I wish I didn’t need
Chasing relentlessly, still fight and I don’t know why
If our love is tragedy, why are you my remedy?
If our love’s insanity, why are you my clarity?
Clarity, Zedd (feat. Foxes)

When Darcy and Loki arrived back at Hlíðskjalf, they teleported into a wide, chaotic courtyard inside the force field and the main gates. Æsir crowded the area, carrying weapons, supplies and small children. Some pulled floating wagons and livestock in their wake. Several jumped back from Loki’s magic, and a whole lot of them stopped what they were doing to stare.

To be fair, there might have been something to stare at, as their miscreant second prince had materialized with a disheveled woman in his arms. Considering all she’d been through and what she must look like after her terrible day, Darcy had no doubt they all thought she was a harlot he’d rescued from the invading hordes. In the next second, though, Loki blew that theory to bits by
fisting his hand in her hair and kissing her.

“What was that for?” she asked when she got her breath back.

“For disobeying me,” Loki answered with a wild grin. “Do not do it again.”

Darcy burst out laughing. “Dream on, Magic Man.” He was alive, she was alive and they were both going to live to fight another day. Darcy tugged him in for another kiss and for once, she didn’t give a damn who was watching. Down at the edge of the city, she’d been too far to overhear the conversation between Thanos and Loki, but his body language had spoken of both fear and rage. A few well-chosen rifle volleys had reminded Loki that she had his back, and she’d made the happy discovery that she was a decent shot. To think she’d hesitated when Eir offered to fix her eyes.

The ground shook beneath Darcy’s feet, and she wished it was just a romance cliché. Something exploded in the distance, and a fireball rose into the sky. “What was that?”

“The gate we just left.” Loki took her hand and towed her into the palace. The corridors were no less crowded than outside, and families seemed to be setting up camp wherever they could find a spot. Loki did not have to weave through the crowd, as most were quick enough to get out of his way, but Darcy had to hustle to keep up with his long-legged stride. He led her up several sets of stairs and across hallways to come out on top of the thick walls of Hlidskjalf. From where they stood, Darcy could see the massive main gates of the palace, now closed, and a growing column of smoke and flames across the city.

“Sire!”

For a second, Loki didn’t respond, almost as if he didn’t realize he was being addressed. Then he turned sharply to the man on his left. Tyr wore armor and was dressed for war. Darcy ducked back a little and waited for the inevitable blow up between the two men. It never came.

“Tyr,” Loki said. “My mother relieved you of duty, if I am not mistaken.”

“Asgard needs me,” the warrior returned fiercely, as if daring Loki to argue.

“Are you willing to take my orders?”

After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded. “Aye.”

Loki turned back to the city. “There will be stragglers, trapped by the Chitauri. See if you can find a few volunteers to sneak out and bring anyone they can find to the safety of the palace. Tell them to show the Chitauri no mercy while they are about it, for they will give us none. Have Sif and the Warriors Three come back yet?”

“Lady Sif is here. She says the others can’t be far behind.”

“Have them all report to me as they arrive. Also see to it that every able man is equipped to fight and assigned to a post on the wall.”

Tyr inclined his head and hurried off.

“That was weird,” Darcy declared after he was gone. “I saw that guy try to take your head off. Now he’s taking orders from you? That’s a big change of heart.”

Loki’s expression was sour. “Under better circumstances, I’d have demanded his head and he
knew it. Then again, what choice have I?"

She knew he didn’t expect an answer. He finally had the battle on his hands that he’d known was coming for so long, and he couldn’t afford to pass on Tyr’s service. Darcy put her head against his armored chest and looked out over the city. His arm slipped around her waist. They couldn’t see the Chitauri, only their massive ugly ship hanging over the end of the rainbow bridge, but more and more plumes of smoke rose over the rooftops, marking the advance of the army.

“How long will it take them to get here?” Darcy asked.

“There’s very little to stop Thanos until he reaches the walls of Hlidskjalf. He’ll be here by nightfall.”

“What did he say?”

“Promises. Threats. Lies. It matters not. His words mean nothing.”

As answers went, it managed to be loaded with wrath and super vague at the same time. Darcy got more from his arm tightening around her until she could hardly breathe. She suspected she’d come up in his conversation with Thanos, and not in a good way. Loki’s next words confirmed it.

“I have no wish to send you from my side, but I would see you home if I could. You would be safe there.”

Another explosion, another fireball rose in the sky. “I don’t think there’s anywhere safe, and I’m not leaving you.”

“Foolish girl,” was all Loki said, though there was something in his tone she couldn’t quite identify. Was he pleased?

“Now what do we do?” she asked.

“We wait.”

***

What Loki had actually meant was that he should wait and Darcy should go see Eir. In the end, she agreed to this idea and let the healer work her magic on Darcy’s aching head. An hour later and in much better shape, Eir sent her on her way in the company of her maids. Jofrid and Brunhilde bundled her into a concealing white cloak with the hood up and escorted her back to her suite.

“You guys didn’t have to come get me,” Darcy said as they walked.

“Prince Loki insisted, and rightly so. There are many more rough men in the palace than there were yesterday, ” said Brunhilde. “They might not understand you are from Midgard.”

She wasn’t sure whether to be flattered that she meant something to him or pissed that he thought she couldn’t handle herself after being loose in a city under attack for most of the day. She was so damn tired, though, that maybe she should let him arrange her life this once. He wasn’t wrong, either. Even on the upper floors of the palace where the nobility had their quarters, there were people camping in the halls. Then again, an entire city had taken refuge in Hlidskjalf. Children ran freely with pets at their heels while their mothers tried to lure them back to the family
floor space with food. Warriors stalked the same corridors, battle ready, and held impromptu
training sessions wherever they could find a spot. At Darcy’s door, a harassed-looking mother
with three small children was trying to keep them out of range of two young warriors practicing
with wooden staffs in the middle of the hallway. The men paused as she passed and Darcy could
feel their eyes on her. She kept the cloak’s concealing hood in place.

“Be off with you,” Jofrid said, though her tone was gentle and a shade flirtatious. “Milady is
already spoken for.”

They must be looking for a sugar mama, and Darcy couldn’t say that she blamed them. A
noblewoman’s bed was a lot more comfortable than the palace floor. They were fresh-faced and
handsome in the Thor style, blond and beefy. She knew a few ladies who probably needed some
comfort.

“Whore!”

Darcy turned, right at the wrong moment. She threw her arms up and squeezed her eyes shut as
something foul and sticky splattered across her face and her white cloak. She had a glimpse of
slime and startled slugs before it all vaporized in a flash of green magic.

“Are you happy now?” Lady Sigyn shrieked, her eyes wild, chest heaving. Her perfect cheeks
still had a tinge of green, and in her hands she held an empty bucket. “Now I have lost Tyr and ‘tis
all your fault!”

Darcy’s mouth opened, then snapped shut. She’d never come that close to speechless before.
Well, maybe once. “How is it my fault?” This explained Tyr’s change of heart. Trouble in
paradise, apparently. “I’ve never exchanged three words with the guy, though I did try to taze him
once.”

“He claims I am still in love with Loki and he has used this as an excuse to end our
engagement. I have nothing.” Sigyn yanked Darcy closer even as the maids tried to pull them
apart. “Mayhap Tyr is right and you, senseless little mortal strumpet, are standing in my way.
Enjoy your moment with Loki, for it will not last. I will not wait for you to die. I will destroy you.”

With that, she stalked away, but Darcy wasn’t about to let her have the last word. “If you do,
he’ll never forgive you.”

The noblewoman didn’t look back, and disappeared into the crowd. Darcy whirled and
stomped into her suite. It was only then, as she tried to put a lid on her fury, that she realized what
she’d seen. The little girl illusion that led her on a merry chase through the city looked familiar
because it had resembled Lady Sigyn.

“Milady, I’m so sorry,” Brunhilde was saying. “Awful woman.”

“The word you’re looking for is bitch,” Darcy returned bitterly. Sigyn had already taken a shot
at her, using the illusion to try to lead her to the Chitauri. Jofrid closed the doors to her suite,
shutting out the noise of the hallway, and the sudden silence was deafening. After all the cramped,
loud corridors, the huge space seemed too luxurious for one person. Darcy thought of the mother
and children outside.

“You’re right, of course,” Jofrid murmured as she took Darcy’s cloak from her shoulders.
“Prince Loki would never forgive, even if she waited a thousand years. Anyone with eyes in their
heads can tell by the way he looks at you.”
Have you not yet realized I would fight my way through entire universes to find you, bracelets be damned?

If anything good had happened to her today, it was that, and Darcy took comfort in her prince’s words. Then she had to laugh at herself, for when had the Dark Lord of the Sith become her prince? It brought her to a sudden decision. “Sigyn wants a piece of me? Let her work for it. Brunhilde, how many families can we put in this space?”

The maid blinked. “Why, at least two or three. But milady, where will you go?”

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Though Loki was nowhere to be found, Finglorfin took Darcy moving in with elfin grace. She didn’t have much stuff, except for the wardrobe from Frigga. The servants worked it out among themselves, for which Darcy was grateful. At long last, she could have something to eat and indulge herself in a long, hot soak.

Loki’s tub was more the size of a swimming pool, and she luxuriated in the perpetually steaming water. She felt slimy from head to toe, even though her amulet of protection had vaporized the slugs and their mess. A vigorous scrub helped, then she relaxed and tried to let her cares drift away.

Not working.

She could almost sympathize with Sigyn. Almost. How hurt she must be, to think for so long that Loki was dead, only to have him return with another (much younger) woman in tow. Darcy had been replaced like that herself once, with no warning, and it had been devastating. She hadn’t blamed the wide-eyed innocent who followed in her footsteps, though; she’d taken her revenge on her ex. It hadn’t been good revenge, though, and it ended up exploding in her face. Sigyn, however, blamed Darcy, and she had no idea what to do about an immortal being who hated her guts. She couldn’t go to Loki, for he had enough on his plate. Frigga would be heartbroken, as Sigyn had been her handmaiden for, like, centuries. There didn’t seem to be anyone she could talk to.

She didn’t need this crap anyway. The light coming through the high windows of the bathing room told her the sun was setting and Thanos might already be at the main gates. He was here for the tesseract, but it was Loki who could grant him access to the artifact, Loki who wallowed in chaos and loved to be at the center of a firestorm. One of two things would happen to her prince: he’d get himself killed by the scary space dude or he’d survive, only to face punishment for his misbehavior on Earth. Without Loki, there’d be no reason to stay. She’d always known there wasn’t a forever with him, and now time was slipping away, faster and faster.

Darcy didn’t want to waste what time she had left.

That was the moment Loki blew into the bathing room like a tornado. He was fully dressed, much to her disappointment. He snatched up a towel and held it out to her. “Get dressed.”

Darcy had no intention of moving or taking orders. “Why? Not what I was hoping for from you, by the way. How about Darcy, you are magnificent and naked and I will ravish you now. Or at least, I see you’ve moved in, this pleases me and I will ravish you now.”
“I appreciate your interest in ravishment, and having you stay here is convenient for such activities.” Loki prowled along the edge of the pool toward her, and she realized if he could breathe fire like Smaug, he’d be doing it. “There is, however, something that must be dealt with first, isn’t there?”

Darcy had to tilt her head way back to look up at him as he came to a stop behind her. He was stunning from any angle, and her eyes traced his powerful, black leather clad thighs. “Who told you about Sigyn?”

“Brunhilde and Jofrid came to Finglorfin with the story and he wisely informed me before I heard it from some other source, for by now, it is all over the palace.”

Darcy groaned. Of course it was. With the entire city crammed into the palace because of Thanos and his army, what could be more delicious and diverting than their prince’s rumored lover and his ex-girlfriend having a public spat?

“They feared, if left to your own devices, that you would not tell me.”

Damn right she wasn’t going to tell him. There was an edge to his voice, but he was not the boss of her, not unless she let him. “Don’t you have enough to worry about? What’s going on outside?”

“Nothing,” he said, still pacing. “The Chitauri show every sign of making camp and settling in for a long siege. I don’t like any of this. What is the Titan waiting for? They could have hurt us when they arrived, yet they made such a show of their arrival, we were able to pull back to the palace with a minimum of casualties. It appears I must now be patient and wait for the Titan to reveal himself.”

“So you’re not busy.”

“That’s what you got out of all I just said? What of Sigyn?”

“She’s done sucking the joy out of my day. There’s something I want and nobody’s getting in my way tonight.”

Loki stared at her, his head tilted, and then his mouth twitched at the corners. He pulled a chair over and sat. “I am intrigued. Do tell me what it is you want.”

What a whopper. He sat with his legs spread wide, and despite all that leather, Darcy knew she had his attention. She swam across the pool to press herself against the wall below him, and it gave her incredible cleavage. “I did speak of ravishment before.”


For once, Darcy did as he commanded, though she took her sweet time about it. She swam to the stairs and took them slowly, letting the water slide off as she rose from the depths. After the warm water, the cool air brought her entire body to attention, her nipples hard, her skin taut with anticipation. She didn’t have to turn to know he was watching intensely. She reached down for the discarded towel to dry herself.

“Leave it.”

Loki held out his hand to her. Darcy took it, letting him draw her down into his lap so she was straddling his thigh, and she couldn’t help a soft gasp. “Oh. I think I see how this is going to go. Your Highness.”
“Do you?” His hands roamed over her, stroking, caressing. There was something incredibly erotic about her bare, wet skin against his supple leather and cool armor. He cupped her breasts, made a slow circle of her nipples with his thumbs as she pressed into his touch. “This can go any way you wish it, Darcy.” Then he bent to tease her nipples with his mischievous tongue.

Darcy moaned and began to grind herself against his thigh. His words and his hands and his mouth aroused her, flooded her with heat and moisture. She’d never had a lover whose touch she enjoyed more. What did she want? That was an easy one, if she dared to express it. “I really do want to be ravished. I’d trust you to do it. I’d like to forget mostly everything about my day, because it stank, except for me and you.”

“You trust me,” he repeated, his gaze rising to meet hers. “You always forget who I am.” He ran his tongue between her breasts before skimming upward to trace the chain of her amulet and suck on his favorite spot, where her shoulder met her neck. It made her both giddy and dizzy at the same time.

“I know what you’d like everyone around you to think.” Darcy found a grip on his surcoat as the slide of leather between her legs sent jolts of pleasure through her. “God of Mischief and Lies and Chaos. I know better. I know how much more you are.” When his eyes widened, she placed one finger across his lips. “I won’t tell if you don’t want me to.”

“Milady is most kind,” he said and nipped at her finger. Then, without warning, Loki scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom, where he dropped her onto his bed. Darcy stretched out, throwing her hands up over her head, letting her legs fall open in invitation. He didn’t hesitate to take her up on it, his hands pressing her thighs open further. It was so delicious to be so exposed to him.

Then he dropped to his knees and took one long, slow lick of her pussy. “Loki…” she gasped out, hearing the need in her own voice. Her hips rose off the bed, to meet his swirling, probing tongue. Silver Tongue, indeed. No wonder the ladies lined up at his door. Darcy whimpered and moaned, sinking her fingers into his raven-dark hair, tugging hard. He kept up a slow, erotic assault on her pussy, teasing and biting and refusing to be rushed. His tongue swirled around her clit, and Darcy couldn’t help but cry out, both in pleasure and protest. Damn, he was good, but a terrible tease. “I’m so close.”

Loki chuckled, low and dark, and that sound alone brought her teetering closer to the edge. “Are you now? What makes you think I will give you release? Mayhap I will just continue to torture you for the absolute pleasure of hearing you scream my name.”

“You’ll bring me off because I am awesome and I saved your life today.” Then she added, “I bet the orgasm version of your name is the best ever.” She sounded hopelessly breathy, but she liked to think her logic was sound, even in the midst of the best oral sex of her life.

It must have been. “Brazen wench,” Loki said before his hot mouth descended on her again, this time devoting his entire attention to her clit.

Darcy writhed against him, muscles tightening. The rough wetness of his tongue felt heavenly, her desire spiraling out of control. When Loki sucked hard on her swollen pearl, she came apart beneath him. “Loki,” she gasped, drawing out his name in a shriek.

“Not bad,” he said with a predatory grin. “But I’m not done with you yet.”

In the midst of her climactic haze, Darcy realized he still had all his clothes on. She was about to object, but then she was being flipped over and drawn up to her knees and elbows. “Wha–?”
“You said you trusted me.”

“I do.” Darcy panted as he caressed her ass and spread her thighs a little further apart. Aftershocks still fluttered through her body and her legs shook, but she held the position. She thought it was going to be worth it.

“You may be the only woman I have ever believed that of.”

Darcy twisted her head to look as Loki’s clothes seem to melt away in a cloud of green magic. To her, it was by far the best trick he had in his repertoire and revealed that his leather had been working overtime to contain him. His cock was hard and flushed with eagerness and he didn’t make her wait. He plunged into her. She wailed (in the most epic way ever) and clawed at the sheets.

Loki stilled. “Too much?”

“No,” popped out of her mouth after a moment. “I want more.” He felt so big, so thick from this angle, and with his hands on her hips, he was in control. He could take her as hard and deep as he wanted, and as he started to move again, Darcy moaned. This was what she’d asked for, to be thoroughly fucked and to forget. She couldn’t think of anything but the feel of his cock deep inside, the sound of his breathing heavy as he set a brutal pace.

She rocked against him, meeting his every thrust, keening and squirming and tangling her hands in the sheets. She lost track of time, of everything but Loki. Nothing else mattered. He plundered her ruthlessly, and she enjoyed every minute of it. “More,” she gasped. “Don’t you dare take it easy on me because I’m human—ah, Loki!” Pleasure soared, and as much as she wanted him to go on forever, she couldn’t ignore her body’s inexorable climb to the heavens.

His thrusts grew harder and bolder. “No other man will please you thus, Darcy. You are mine.”

She was in no position to argue. Darcy came with his name on her lips, her pussy fluttering around him, drawing Loki to his own climax. His hips bucked wildly and he spilled himself deep inside her.

They both collapsed on top of the sheets. “You are exquisite,” Loki murmured, pulling her into his arms. “Glorious. Should I ever cross paths with the man who tossed you aside like you were nothing, I’ll personally rip his balls off and feed them to him.”

That totally shouldn’t have been sexy, and yet it was. She was important enough to him to threaten bodily harm to her ex. Her golden bracelet remained inert, so every word he’d spoken was the truth. Darcy snuggled deeper into his embrace and decided to admit, if only to herself, that she was in love with this smokin’ hot lunatic.

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The next time Loki opened his eyes, it was to find an enormous reptilian eyeball peering down at him.

“Norns!” He sat up with a start and cast a spell to conjure himself some clothes. The last thing he remembered was holding Darcy in the privacy of his own bedchamber. Somehow he had
returned to the great caverns of Erebor through no actions of his own. Was he awake or sleeping? Either way, he no longer had control over the illusion.

The dragon snorted, a smoldering, sulfurous wind. While Loki sat upon one of the many stone walkways that crisscrossed over the dragon’s hoard, Smaug crouched behind so his enormous head rested on the causeway. “Did I startle you?” he asked Loki, not sounding like he cared particularly. “I was kind enough to wait until you were done cavorting with the lady before I summoned you. Does your species do aught else?”

No dragon was going to lecture him on his sex life, especially when Darcy had been flawless. Why had he found her now? She trusted him in a way no one had ever trusted him. It shook him, for it was not an innocent, blind faith. Darcy knew what he was, but she still found something trustworthy in him, and he suspected she did not give her confidence easily.

Ah, but that wrecked him. Why could she not have come into his life sooner, before he’d laid waste to everything? He had nothing to offer her.

Smaug made a chuffing sound, as if he was stoking the fire in his belly, forcing Loki to turn his attention back to the beast. “Dare I ask how often dragons procreate? Every two hundred years or so? Considering how miserable you are, you should seek companionship a bit more often. What do you want, worm?”

“You spoke of others wanting my cube. Is that who you meant?”

Loki crawled to the edge and looked down into the treasure hoard below. Thanos walked among the heaps of gold and jewels. How had the Mad Titan invaded this secret space without Loki knowing about it? The only curse that came to mind was the one mortals seemed so fond of. “Fuck. How long has he been here?”

“He never stays long. Only when you sleep.”

That wasn’t surprising, since Thanos has invaded his dreams before. Loki had yet to guess how it was done. There was no sound from the Mad Titan as he climbed among the treasure hoard, not even the tinkle of shifting coins. He was only a projection, then, an illusion inside an illusion, but he had no doubt Thanos was seeing what the projection saw. “Only when I sleep,” Loki repeated. “It makes little sense. How does he get into my head, and from there, into Erebor?”

Below, Thanos suddenly turned and looked up, straight at Loki. A poisonous grin spread over his face.

“For a godling, you’re not very bright,” Smaug sneered. “He’s always in your head. Don’t you know that there’s something in you that doesn’t belong? I can see it, a seething star-thing, a creature of fire like me. Your enemy sees everything you see. When you sleep, he has free run of your mind. That’s how he gets here.”

“It cannot be,” Loki said, even as he knew with sick certainty Smaug told the truth.

“This world is mine now,” Smaug continued, rearing up on his back legs. His great tail slithered by, and tried to sweep Loki off his feet, but he scrambled out of its way. The tesseract was still clutched by the beast’s tail. His chest began to glow, and what should have been red fire had the distinctive blue glow of the tesseract. “You’ve given me the power to control it and become more. This is my world, and I’ve no use for spies.”

His great maw opened wide.
The Bizarre Side of the Bed

Chapter Summary

Things get awkward with Frigga and weird with Loki.

Chapter Notes

Hello All!

Thanks, as usual, for your patience and your comments and for so many of you bookmarking me. Summer is my busy time of year, so it's taken me until now to whip the next chapter into shape. Just call me the George RR Martin of the fandom. God bless him, he'll get his book done eventually and so will I!

Loved Civil War. Salivating for Dr. Strange.

No copyright infringement intended. I just love these characters.

Turn your face towards the sun

Let the shadows fall behind you

Don’t look back, just carry on

And the shadows will never find you

Rihanna, Towards the Sun

Darcy had a great sleep.

Considering how much weird shit was going on around her, slumber should have been impossible, but Loki putting her through the mattress had knocked her out (not knocked her up, or so she hoped. Darcy wasn’t sure her birth control method was up to space prince sperm, but it was far too late to worry about it now.) She felt shamelessly decadent and would have stayed in bed, but Loki was nowhere to be seen. Darcy stretched and sighed. He did have a war to fight, though all seemed quiet and the sun was high in the sky. There didn’t seem to be anyone around, not even her maids, and maybe that worked to her advantage. She wanted to slip out to see Frigga. Darcy attempted to bolt out of bed, then groaned. “Ugh, head rush,” she muttered, putting her head between her knees. Once she had her equilibrium back, she took a quick dip in the tub and threw clothes on, trousers and tunic and boots. She took a moment to mourn the gowns she hadn’t worn
yet. The way things were going, she might never get the chance.

Darcy tiptoed out of the bedroom and across the large, empty entertaining room. The doors to Loki’s library were closed, and when she put her ear against them, she heard nothing. Then she hurried to the main doors, opening them just enough to slip through. She bumped into Frigga.

“Here you are,” said the Queen of the Universe.

As Darcy stepped back, she couldn’t will away the heat rising in her cheeks. This was the definition of awkward, being caught sneaking out of your guy’s room by his mom. Frigga surely knew what was going on, but it would have been nice to broach the subject in some less in-your-face way. The Einherjar guard to the left of the door looked like he was trying to imitate a statue, but the one on the right wasn’t even trying to hide his grin.

Frigga sailed regally inside. She wore a gown, and Darcy took that to mean things were calm. The queen motioned to someone out in the hall, and a small army of servants entered, some carrying steaming plates. Others picked up a table and placed it in front of the windows before setting it. Once they were done, Frigga sent them on their way. “Imagine my surprise to discover this morning you had given your suite to a pair of families with small children. A lovely gesture, my dear, and it does you credit. It will, however, increase the talk. Everyone will want to know where you are staying.”

Darcy could see she wasn’t angry. If anything, the queen seemed concerned, and she relaxed. “Nothing’s going to stop the talk. I was coming to see you, by the way. I thought I should be honest and tell you I’m shacking up with your son.”

“Shacking?” Frigga’s expression became shrewd. “Is that anything like courtship?”

“Courtship makes it sound so much nicer.” She didn’t have any illusions about that. Loki wasn’t going to ask her to marry him any time soon. Or ever.

“Normally, such arrangements would be unacceptable, but these are far from ordinary circumstances.” The queen took Darcy’s arm through hers and drew her to the table. “I thought you might enjoy breakfast away from prying eyes and ears in the Feasting Hall. Mayhap even my wayward son will join us.”

“Thanks,” Darcy murmured as she sat down across from Frigga. She’d been willing to face the court, but she couldn’t ignore a twinge of relief. She could take the morning off from Sigyn and Gudrun and Basket Lady and everybody else who liked to refer to her as the Midgard whore. She wondered if Frigga knew of the nickname.

“Eat,” said the queen firmly, pushing a plate in Darcy’s direction. Then she poured two cups of Asgard’s strong, sweet tea, taking one for herself. “I am sorry for Sigyn.”

Why did she ever doubt that Frigga knew? Lady Sigyn was the last thing Darcy wanted to think about, and she studied her tea like it was as fascinating as *Quidditch Through the Ages*. “It’s not your fault.”

“In a way, it is. I favored and encouraged you, and she has behaved badly. I would have reprimanded her, but she has not been seen.” Frigga took a thoughtful sip of her tea. “I’ll find her eventually, as she cannot go far. No one can.”

That was for sure. Darcy looked out the window, but all she could see was distant, snowcapped mountains and blue skies. She’d love to explore those rugged mountains and see what
lay beyond. From the map she’d seen, it would be vast grasslands and bustling towns, then more mountains with tiny villages nestled on great blue fjords. From here, high up in the palace, all seemed possible, for there was no sign of an alien army camped on the doorstep. She abruptly put down her fork. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Can the Allfather go into the Odinsleep willingly, or does it kind of jump him?”

“’Tis better if he goes willingly.”

“Is the sleep he’s in now a willing one?”

Over the rim of her teacup, Frigga’s expression was unreadable. “Why do you ask?”

“If I ruled this place, I totally wouldn’t be sleeping, what with Loki’s bad behavior and Thanos and the Chitauri. Unless I had a really compelling reason.” When the queen continued to look purposefully blank, Darcy knew she was right. “Giving Loki one last chance seems pretty compelling to me, but I might be biased.”

Frigga’s expression became guileless, in the same way Darcy had seen Loki do sometimes. “Considering what my younger son has done lately, that would be an extraordinary risk, placing Asgard in his hands.”

“A crazy stupid risk,” agreed Darcy. “Did you talk the Allfather into this? You must have thought Loki was worth it.”

The queen looked out at her kingdom. “Long has he lived in the great shadows of his father and brother, and if he is to shine in his own right and change the path of his life, he needs the chance to do so without Odin and Thor about.” When she turned back to Darcy, there was a hint of a smile and more than a hint of steel beneath it. “There is a saying on your world, is there not? Mother knows best?”

Darcy burst out laughing. “I don’t know how Thor or Loki got away with anything when they were kids. He suspects, you know.”

“Aye, he knows I am manipulating him, but he does not know to what end. One day, he will understand.”

Someone pounded on the front doors, and both women looked up. A harried Finglorfin appeared from somewhere and flung them wide. Then he jumped aside as Hoenir strode in, followed by Magnus. Several guards came after, carrying crates.

“Your Majesty.” Hoenir bowed first to his queen, then to Darcy. “Lady Darcy, how nice to see you again.” He turned and bellowed to the guards. “Put those crates down and go get the rest. We’ll be staying here.”

Finglorfin scowled. “My Lords—”

“Don’t waste your breath arguing, Fin,” Hoenir returned. “There isn’t a quiet place left in the entire palace and we need peace to work. Tell your master we’re staying.”

“Is Loki here?” Darcy asked.

Finglorfin’s face grew tense. “He has been working in the library.”
“Fin’s expression means he disapproves of whatever my son is doing,” Frigga informed Darcy. When the elf opened his mouth to argue, the queen waved him off. “Never mind, I’m sure to hear about it soon enough. For now, I am content to leave Loki in the capable hands of Lady Darcy. If you will excuse me, I must check on our defenses.”

With a nod to all, Frigga rose and glided out. All the others—Finglorfin, Hoenir, and Magnus—stared at Darcy. “I want to be Frigga when I grow up,” she observed. That was a ringing endorsement from the Queen of Absolutely Everything, and a damn fine exit.

“An excellent ambition,” Hoenir agreed, taking the queen’s place at the table and helping himself to some breakfast. “We brought everything that we thought we might need, like the library and our workshops and the Bifröst project.”

Hoenir didn’t appear to be carrying anything. Magnus had a small messenger-type bag slung across his chest, and it certainly couldn’t carry a library. Then again, this was Asgard, where anything was possible. “You’re carrying entire rooms?” Darcy asked.

“Of course.” Magnus pulled a smooth, perfectly round stone about the size of his fist from his bag. It glowed with a warm, comforting yellow, and it reminded Darcy of a crystal ball or palantir. Then he revealed four other stones in varying shades of blue, red, purple and gold. He rolled the yellow one onto the floor like he was bowling. An entirely different room sprang to life around them, with books as far as the eye could see.

“Time Lord technology,” Darcy declared, springing up. “It’s bigger on the inside.” Sunshine flooded the library from massive skylights, and she touched the nearest dark wood bookcase. It sure felt real, and dusty. She pulled out a book entitled *Advanced Psionic Techniques of the Kree Empire*. She had no idea who the Kree were, but they were very good at their psionics or very full of themselves, because the book weighed a ton. She put it back. “Maybe this is more like the Weasley’s portable swamp.”

“I have never heard of either of those,” Hoenir said. “Though I should much like to learn. This is a difficult spell to master, but useful in times of great need.”

In other circumstances, she would be happy to explain Harry Potter or the Doctor, but the firmly shut doors to the library called to her. There was far more food than she and Frigga (and even Loki) could have eaten on their own, so she presumed the queen had known company was coming. Once Magnus collected the library globe and the room went back to normal, Darcy pushed the sorcerer into her seat. “Have something to eat. You too, Fin. I’ll go see to Loki.”

No one argued or tried to stop her, and she couldn’t blame them. No one wanted to face the bear in his den. She knocked on the library doors, but didn’t wait for an answer, just slipped inside. Loki glanced up from where he was bent over his work table. There was no color in his cheeks at all, and his eyes were bright, almost feverish. She presumed he hadn’t slept. There were books, papers and several mysterious bottles on the table, one of which was open and smelled of dead skunk. “Hey,” she said, wrinkling her nose, “you okay?”

“Lady Darcy,” he said, as if he’d never seen her before.

Okay, so somebody got up on the bizarre side of the bed. Why was he formal all of a sudden? He certainly couldn’t have forgotten last night, because she never would. “Yep, it’s me. Just thought you might want to know that the Ministry of Magic has moved in.”

Loki prowled over to her and circled her. He said nothing.
Now he was beginning to creep her out. “This is the moment when you tell me how hot I am and how awesome last night was.”

He stopped in front of her and reached out to touch her cheek. “I understand now,” he said, almost dreamily. “You are quite beautiful for your species.”

“Umm, thanks? What’s up with you?” Then she caught sight of the golden bracelet on his wrist. The color had changed, darkened into a reddish black. “Were you trying to get out of the bracelets?”

She shouldn’t be hurt by this revelation. The bracelets tying them together had never been anything but temporary, something to keep His Royal Mischievousness close to home. Even so, she would have thought escape at the bottom of his list. When the bracelets were at last discarded, would Darcy be put aside as well?

“I have merely made an alteration to it,” Loki returned. “You said there were other mages here? I wish to speak to them.”

Darcy opened her mouth to ask just what the hell an alteration meant, but he sauntered out to his wizarding buddies as if he didn’t have a care. The godawful skunk stench still hung in the air, but even that was not enough to cover a whiff of brimstone, or hide the fact that his hair was singed. He’d been to Erebor. A quick glance at his worktable didn’t provide any answers, for though she could read the runes on his scribbled notes, they still made no sense to her. It was all equations. She needed an expert in magic, and she knew just where to find two of them. She darted after Loki.

Hoenir was shoveling food like he hadn’t eaten in a month. “Ah, Loki,” he said around a mouthful, “there you are. I hope you don’t mind if we make ourselves at home.”

Loki cocked his head. “There are only two of you?”

“For the moment.” The master sorcerer exchanged a look with Magnus. “I sent off those who cannot fight. I sent messages to those who can be trusted in battle, but I do not know if they will arrive in time.”

Standing behind Loki, Darcy shifted from foot to foot, wondering how to get either of the two wizards into the library without Loki knowing. Maybe the object of the game was to get Loki out of the room, and inspiration struck. “Frigga was looking for you,” she said. It wasn’t an outright lie, because it didn’t pay to fib to the Master of Mischief.

“Frigga?”

She doubted he’d forgotten his own mother and wondered again what game he was playing.

Then the doors crashed open, and one of the senior Einherjar stood in the doorway. “Sire,” he gasped, “the Chitauri are advancing.”

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Full-on battle, Darcy discovered in short order, was ugly, chaotic and loud.
She’d been entangled in smaller fights, but they were nothing compared to this. The Chitauri surged to the walls of Hlidskjalf, forced to climb like insects, for the palace shield held back their flying surf boards. The Æsir were smarting from having to retreat from battle the day before and met the Chitauri assault with a joyful roar.

Darcy put her hands over her ears and hung back in a hallway leading to the battlements. She’d been in quieter nightclubs. Maybe Loki was right and she should take her chances with Frigga’s handmaidens. He had waded into battle without a backward glance, wielding magic, daggers and the Allfather’s staff to deadly effect. Something weird was going on with him, but now wasn’t the time to figure it out.

Hoenir and Magnus and even Finglorfin followed him into the melee. The elf produced two magnificently decorated short blades from somewhere to make short work of the Chitauri around him before jumping up onto the wall to beat back more of the aliens. The two sorcerers used magic exclusively to fight, and she spotted Magnus diving into the midst of a knot of Einherjar. The Chitauri brought out enormous ladders, presumably to make the climbing easier, though they kept coming straight up the wall too. The ladders had nasty claws that dug into the top of the wall, and once secured, even the might of the Æsir could not lift them. Magnus cast a spell and the ladder dissolved beneath the Chitauri, tumbling them back to the ground. He shouted to Hoenir, who headed for the nearest ladder.

Unfortunately, there were only two mages, and the ladders kept coming. Some Chitauri made it over the wall, to be met by the defenders with swords, spears and maces. One alien slipped through the line and spotted Darcy. She knew she should go, but she froze, staring at the creature. Life returned to her limbs when he grabbed her, but it was too late to run. For him, of course. Darcy screamed anyway as the Chitauri shrieked and died, setting her free. The aliens smelled heinous, like a cross between cat litter and burning tires. Sif stood by, pulling her sword from another dead creature. “What are you doing here?” she demanded of Darcy. “Go hide with the queen’s ladies.”

“I want to help,” stumbled out of Darcy’s mouth. Having seen the first few minutes of the battle, she didn’t think she could sit and wonder what was happening and hope she would see Loki again. She snatched up the dead alien’s rifle. “I can shoot. I just need a high place.”

Sif didn’t argue. “This way.”

The warrior woman led Darcy up a few floors and flung open a door. It was somebody’s private suite, and she realized it belonged to Basket Lady, for the noblewoman huddled in the corner with her maids. “Get to the queen’s quarters,” Sif snapped at them, and they swarmed out the door. Then she cracked open a window. “Will this do?”

Darcy peered out. She was well above the action, but not so far that she couldn’t pick out targets. In fact, she had an impressive view of this entire section of the wall. ‘Perfect. Now get out of here. He needs you down there.”

Sif gave her a wry look and didn’t argue that either. She just took the fast way down into the battle by jumping out the window. Darcy took a deep breath and rested the rifle on the sill. Her hands shook, but she was determined. “Thanks, Eir,” she murmured. Even with her glasses, she’d never seen as well as she did now. She settled in and chose a target: a Chitauri almost to the top of a ladder. She hit his chest plate, and though he fell back, he didn’t let go. “Damn it,” Darcy muttered and waited until he was at the top again. As he forced his way over the wall, he exposed the space between his helmet and chest plate and Darcy fired again. With a howl, he fell.

After that, she stopped quaking so badly. She selected her shots carefully, because she didn’t
want to hit an Æsir by accident. The roar of battle lessened up above, and she could hear herself think. She could see Loki below, fighting with everything he had, Fandral and Sif nearby. Hoenir was well down the wall, struggling to get to a ladder. Of Magnus there was no sign, and she hoped he was okay.

The Chitauri kept coming.

Darcy lost track of time. All she knew was the sweat running down her back, the heat of the rifle in her hands, and the next target. They weren’t hard to spot, and if she dared to look beyond the palace walls, she could see thousands more Chitauri awaiting their turn. She tried not to look often.

Sometimes a Chitauri would realize where she was shooting from and pepper her window with return fire. Darcy would duck back and find another window. The suites to either side had been evacuated by their tenants, and as she took up a new vantage point, she caught her breath and let the rifle cool. The rooms must have belonged to another lady of the court, for the décor was flowery. Below, Loki swept Chitauri off the wall with his father’s staff by threes and fives while Fandral swung his sword like a madman, but the tide of battle had forced Sif away. She didn’t see the other members of the Warriors Three, or the two mages.

A Chitauri approached Loki from behind, and Darcy took care of the alien. Loki glanced around with a frown, but she hid behind the curtain. If he saw her, he’d be pissed, but it was his own fault anyway, not saying a word before diving head first into battle. If he wanted her with the handmaidens, he should have dragged her there himself.

Then a rumble went through Hlidskjalf. Darcy felt it in her boots, and many of the Æsir below stopped fighting to stare around in shock. Several fell to their adversaries.

The palace shield began to fail, dissolving slowly upward from the ground, sheets of golden energy exposing more and more of the Æsir defenses. Darcy watched it in horror even as the Chitauri roared with glee and pushed forward, getting over the wall at several points. The warriors of Asgard thundered in answer and began forcing the aliens back. Chitauri skiffs flew overhead, shooting down at the Æsir, but their own skiffs were quick enough to meet their enemies in the sky. Darcy didn’t take any more time to wonder about what had happened to the shield and started firing her rifle again.

The weapon was yanked out of her hand.

She jumped back from the window, too late. A Chitauri had climbed up the wall, and he flipped her out of the window, catching her. He wore thick body armor and he had the audacity not to die as he scuttled down to the battle below, heading for the wall. Was the armor protecting him from the effects of her amulet? She scratched and bit and pounded on him with her fists to get free. He was strong and there was that funky smell again and his armor felt like sandpaper, making it hard for her to slip away.

“Darcy!”

At least Loki was aware of her predicament, and he could come to her rescue, like, right now. With two bounds, the Chitauri crawled down the face of the wall with her tucked under his arm, dragging her away to the enemy camp. She fought harder, to no avail.

“NO!”

That shriek rose above the sound of battle, and even though she was occupied, it sent a shiver
through her. It was Loki’s voice, but there was a sound underneath it that she ought to recognize. She looked up to find him standing on the top of the wall as if he was coming down after her. Then his hands moved, and she knew there was big magic coming. With eyes fierce and cape flowing, who said he wasn’t heroic?

The spell swept out in all directions from Loki like a nuclear blue cloud, engulfing everything in its path, spilling down the walls of Hlidskjalf. Usually his magic was green, but this reminded her of the tesseract, though it moved like dragon fire. Æsir were unharmed, but the Chitauri in reach of the cloud liquified in it.

Darcy shut her eyes as her captor screamed and melted. Then she was falling, and it was Darcy’s turn to scream.
Think Furnace... With Wings

Chapter Summary

Everybody sees fire (dragonfire, that is).

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends, it has been too long!

I'm glad to be back and have a new chapter for you. Thanks for your patience and your willingness to stick with this story, no matter how long it takes me to update. I will finish this, pinky promise.

Looking forward to Guardians Vol. 2 and Ragnarok! Will Dr. Strange and Loki share the screen? Please Marvel?

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody. No money here, just joy.

If this is to end in fire

Then we should all burn together

Watch the flames climb high into the night

Ed Sheeran, I See Fire (The Desolation of Smaug)

Darcy fell.

She shrieked like one of those chicks in horror movies she always made fun of, but the ground headed her way like an express train late to Penn Station. She wasn’t close enough to a ladder to stop her descent and she didn’t trust the dead piled beneath her to act like a cushion. If she survived, it was going to be like the opening scene of Bones, where the unlucky sap who found the dead body often went for a roll in the messy remains.

That thought made her want to scream more.

Then Loki was there. He materialized beneath her, not bothered by the effluvia he stood in, and caught her as if she weighed nothing. Her mouth shut abruptly, cutting off her cry.
“I would not have thought you could make such a racket,” he said, as calm now as he had been furious seconds before. “Where do you think you are going? You belong to me.”

“I was being kidnapped and taken to the enemy camp! You think I wanted to go?” Darcy shouted. He was achieving new levels of cray-cray, and this was so not cool. “I don’t belong to you, Captain Magic Pants.”

“You are my treasure,” Loki purred.

There was a growl to his left, and he turned sharply with her still in his arms. Shambling toward them was a Chitauri-shaped thing, though it was so bloody and had so many arrows sticking out that it was hard to tell what it had been. It didn’t have a weapon, but the nightmarish creature’s outstretched hands brought another yelp from Darcy. “We need to go!”

“What have you to fear, milady?” Loki questioned as he spun in the opposite direction. “I am —”

Whatever humblebrag (actually, probably more brag than humble) he’d been about to come out with ended quick as he turned right into the glowing staffs of two Chitauri warriors. They both hit Loki in the side, avoiding touching her. They were learning fast. Loki dropped Darcy, and she crawled out of the way, trying not to put her hands in anything that might have been somebody’s innards. His eyes glowed an orange-red as he absorbed the power of the staffs and turned it back on the two warriors. Wow, she’d never seen him do that before. They screamed and the smell of burning meat filled the air. It wasn’t a something-yummy-on-the-grill aroma, and Darcy gagged. “Can’t we apparate out of here?”

“Get behind me,” Loki commanded. “I will deal with this.”

She wasn’t sure how, as there were Chitauri converging on them from every direction, but besides that odd glow, there was the light of battle in his eyes. He was going to take on as many as he could, and she cursed him and the Æsir need to prove himself either worthy or dead. Darcy pawed in the muck behind him, for there had to be a dropped weapon somewhere close. Finding one, she picked it up, only to discover the Chitauri owner had a bit of life left in him and refused to let go. “You don’t need it,” Darcy hissed, tugging harder.

Abruptly, things got quiet around her so quick it made her ears ring. She turned.

The Chitauri warriors surrounding them put up their weapons and parted to reveal the Titan himself. “Ah,” Thanos said with a beastly grin directed right at Darcy. “Aren’t you the delicacy I was looking for?”

“You’re the creature wandering about my treasure hoard,” Loki said. “Another thief, then. Let me show you what I do to your kind.”

That confirmed her suspicions. Loki wasn’t alone in his own skull, and he didn’t seem to be in charge at the moment. Smaug was the one obsessed with treasure, and that damned dragon’s arrogance was going to get them both killed.
Thanos looked at him askance, as if he suspected something was off. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, boy, but the game is over.” He had a red-gold ball about the size of a Golden Snitch in his hand, though it had no wings. He showed it to Darcy, as if she was supposed to know what it was, and brushed his thumb across the front of it. Loki made a choking noise, and she turned to see him clawing at his own chest. Then he collapsed.

Darcy scrambled forward to find him inexplicably unconscious. His breathing was quick and shallow and there was a sheen of sweat across his forehead, as if he was using a lot of magic, or a lot of magic was being contained. Whatever off button Thanos had used, she suspected it wasn’t going to last long.

“Bring him,” the Titan commanded his Chitauri.

She tried to hang on to Loki, but the alien warriors wrestled him away from her. “You’re not going to like what happens when he wakes up,” Darcy said to Thanos, though he had already turned away and did not acknowledge her words.

“What about the girl?” a Chitauri asked.

The Titan didn’t spare Darcy another glance. “She’ll come of her own free will if she wants Loki to live.”

***

Jotenheim was just as cold as Darcy remembered.

Grey clouds hung low over the snowy landscape, spitting ice pellets into her face. She crossed her arms at her chest, holding on to what little warmth she had left. Her teeth chattered so hard it was like castanets in her mouth. Last time she’d come here she’d had that fabulous cloak that Frigga had given her, and she sure needed it now. All she wore was light clothing and some armor. At least she had boots on instead of delicate slippers; otherwise, her toes would have fallen off from frostbite already.

Thanos and his Chitauri lackeys had marched her and carried Loki to the secret tunnels beneath Hlidskjalf, the same ones they’d used on their last journey to Jotenheim. She shouldn’t have been surprised that the aliens knew of them; no doubt those nasty mind worms had ferreted out Loki’s every secret. She wondered what fascinating and naughty adventures Thanos knew about that she did not. They soon met up with another party of Chitauri who dragged several crates along with them. Some of the warriors stayed behind to hold off pursuit, probably the Einherjar, though she didn’t see any Æsir. Thanos lead them toward the laundry, and before Darcy knew it, she was back on Jotenheim.

While walking, she had plenty of time to think. The attack on the walls of the palace had been nothing but a diversion, to keep the Æsir from realizing their enemies could sneak into the heart of the castle. They’d made off with something of value, but she could only guess at the contents of the crates. Had they emptied Big Daddy Odin’s treasury? Made off with his art collection? Or that most likely of possibilities, had they taken the relics in the vault?

Darcy stumbled and fell to her knees in the snow. No one dared to touch her to help her up, not that she was expecting nice from these creatures. As she got back to her feet, she decided it might
be time to burst into song, just to keep from freezing to death.

_Let it go, let it go…_

Not funny. She scraped her brain for a song to make her think of summer.

_She put the lime in the coconut, she drank them both up…_

Finally, they reached the ice fortress where she’d met warring Frost Giant brothers Byelister and Helblindi. Darcy was thankful they didn’t climb the open tower, but entered the heart of the castle. It felt warmer inside, out of the wind and weather. There were torches burning in the corridors, and in an immense hall, a bonfire. She bolted toward it and no one tried to stop her. They knew she wasn’t going anywhere, as Chitauri stood at attention around the room, rifles ready. Byelister and Helblindi paced by the fire, looking pissed off, and Darcy couldn’t blame them. She wasn’t having any fun either. When she caught their gazes, they glared at her, and she cursed under her breath. They’d parted on pretty good terms, and she’d been hoping they would help a girl out of a hot mess.

The Chitauri dropped Loki into an inglorious heap next to her and marched away. He didn’t move, and Darcy got down beside him. He was still unresponsive, and she drew his head into her lap.

“Guard the crates,” Thanos told his soldiers as they set the boxes down on the floor. He turned as if to leave the hall, but changed direction to loom over Darcy and Loki, staring down at them. Darcy tried to guess what he was thinking, because damn, even his resting face was scary. Was he trying to figure out what she’d do for Loki? What Loki would do for her? What sort of tortures did he have planned?

Thanos didn’t speak, and the silence finally got awkward for Darcy. “So, who talks first? You talk first, I talk first?”

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you? I enjoy breaking little girls like you.” He grinned malevolently down at her. “I have a veritable army of daughters, the brightest and most beautiful women in the universe. I train them, make them into living, obedient weapons. I wonder if you are worthy to join them.”

It didn’t sound like a joyride. “Fuck off.”

Byelister circled the fire until he was at her back. “You have what you want,” he said to Thanos in a cold growl. “Leave our world.”

“Not quite. We’ll talk when he wakes up.” With that, Thanos left the hall.

As soon as he was gone, both brothers came over to Darcy, and the Chitauri guards made no move to stop them. Byelister knelt down on the other side of Loki’s prone form, while Helblindi whipped off his coat and threw it around her shoulders. Darcy gave him a smile. “Thanks. You rock, Hel.”

The giant glared at her, as if no one had ever dared to call him that, while Byelister snorted. “Lady Darcy, unusual as always. This is hardly how I expected to see you again. We attempted to hold up our end of our bargain, but without the Casket of Ancient Winter, we could not hold off the Chitauri.”

“Mayhap the lady forgot about us, Brother,” said Helblindi.
Darcy gave him a wry look. “Like I could. You guys are my favorite aliens so far. Look, I didn’t see anyone who looked anything like you in Asgard, so I don’t know where your missing brother is. As for the casket, well, I think it’s here.” She watched their faces transform into surprise and hope and prayed she was right. She had no way of knowing what was in those crates, but scary space dude didn’t seem like he’d be interested in money or art. Big Daddy Odin had taken the casket away from the Frost Giants for some good reason, but at the moment, handing Thanos an ass-kicking seemed hella more important.

Byleister leaned closer. “The casket is in one of those crates?”

“If it is, it’s too well guarded at the moment. I have reinforcements coming,” Helblindi put in. “The Titan only bothered with this keep, so my men will be here within the hour.”

“Do you really think he’ll be here that long?” Darcy hoped she didn’t sound sarcastic and hurried into speech again. “I mean, he’s got an army back on Asgard that he might want to oversee.”

“She’s right. We are not the Titan’s first priority,” Byleister whispered. “Whatever we do, we must do it now.”

Darcy took a considering look around the hall, but there was no inspiration to be found. There were no other Frost Giants in the room but the brothers, and they were way outnumbered by the Chitauri. There were even more alien warriors around the crates. She didn’t see anything she could use as a weapon, not even as décor on the ice walls. Looking up, she discovered that the ceiling, too, was made of ice, and it was so clear she could see right through it to the gray sky. Intricate carvings covered the walls, pictographs that told the history of the Frost Giants, and she would have read them if she’d had the time. A few of those pictographs looked like a dragon.

“What can we do?” Helblindi demanded. “It is you and me, Brother, and one human woman against all these Chitauri. The thrall does not look to be of much use.”

She’d forgotten Loki was supposed to be her slave. Well, whatever. He wasn’t showing any signs of life, so she took matters in hand by shaking him. “Wake up, Magic Man!”

Nothing. She slapped him, as hard as she could, and the brothers watched in amusement. “I thought nothing good could come of this day,” Helblindi remarked.

She was winding up for another smack when Loki’s eyes popped open. He studied both Byleister and Helblindi with no recognition, but smirked when his gaze landed on her. “Milady Darcy.”

She couldn’t miss the orange-red hint of dragonfire in his green eyes. “Hello, Smaug.”

His grin became bigger, more pleased. “I knew I could not fool you for long. You’re quite clever and you’ve been so intimate with the godling.”

Both Frost Giants were staring at her, and Darcy did her best not to look at them, though she couldn’t do anything about her flaming cheeks. She didn’t really want to know if they were shocked or disapproving or just laughing at her. Focusing on the dragon, she said, “You actually suck at being Loki. We’ve got a huge problem here—”

“You expect me to deal with it for you? What do I get in return?”

“Your thrall sounds different,” Byleister said.
She didn’t know where to begin to explain the unholy crossover that was Loki, Smaug and the tesseract and ignored the giant. “What do you want?”

“You.”

“Dude. We’re two different species.”

“You are a different species from your godling prince. More different than you know.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

The huge problem chose that moment to stride back through the door. “He’s awake. Excellent,” Thanos rumbled. He motioned to the Chitauri posted around the crates. “Open them.”

They did so, removing lids and throwing them aside. Thanos looked them all over and reached into one. It was a crystal about the size of the Titan’s fist, glowing from within with a soft, white light. He held it up and smiled, and Darcy didn’t remember seeing that piece in the vault. Maybe he’d had his Chitauri knock over the Bank of Allfather after all.

Then he threw the crystal on the floor and smashed it, grinding it under the heel of his boot. Even as Darcy wondered what the significance of the crystal had been, he dug into the crates again and pulled out a golden glove with holes on the back of it. She had thought it an odd piece when she’d seen it in the vault, since it seemed to be missing jewels, but that was the one he wanted. The Titan slid it onto his hand, admiring it. Then he turned to Loki. “Come, my son, and kneel before me. Give me the tesseract and it shall be the first Infinity Stone in the gauntlet. All shall be forgiven.”

Loki rose to his feet, unsteadily, and pulled Darcy to his side. “Do we have an agreement?” he hissed in her ear.

How did she get herself into this mess? Giving herself to the dragon didn’t seem like a very good idea. At the very least he’d keep her in his treasure hoard for the rest of her life, and at the very worst he’d have her for a snack. Roasted Darcy. She shivered. “What about Loki?”

He growled under his breath. “It’s always about your prince, isn’t it? He doesn’t deserve you, milady. He’s done too much evil in his life, carries around too many lies and secrets and pain. If it pleases you, though, I will release him when this is over. Swear to me!”

Like she had much of a choice? “I swear,” Darcy whispered.

“You are mine,” Loki/Smaug murmured, pleased. Then he released her and strode forward to Thanos. He did not kneel. Behind them, Darcy shuddered and tried to convince herself it was the cold.

“I trust you’ve remembered the lessons learned at my knee,” the Titan said.

“Most diverting,” Loki/Smaug acknowledged. “I have seen the godling’s memories of you, and it amuses me that he didn’t know such inventive cruelty existed in the universe. He was a spoilt child before he fell into your clutches, a pampered prince used to getting his own way. You train your protégés well, Titan, but not well enough. Anger festers in their hearts, a bitterness that can only lead to betrayal.”

“You’ve lost your mind, boy.” The alien’s gauntleted hand reached out, grabbed Loki/Smaug by the throat and dragged him closer. “You think I will be fooled by this display? That I will show mercy to a madman? You know better. Give me the tesseract or I will see your atoms spread
all over the quadrant.”

The only reply he got was a dry, wheezing chuckle.

The Titan had the Golden Snitch thing in his other hand, and he held it so Loki/Smaug could see it. “Have you forgotten this? Your life is in my hands.”

The chuckle became a full laugh. “You won’t fool me with that again.” As if shaking off a child, Loki/Smaug freed himself from Thanos. He stepped back, straightening his clothing and armor in refined gestures. “Surely the mighty Thanos, the Titan whom the godling fears so much, can do better.”

Darcy watched with both her hands and her stomach in a knot. The dragon better be as confident in his ability to take on Thanos as he sounded, for if something happened to Loki, she’d never forgive herself or Smaug. The Lonely Mountain had been her idea, after all. Beside her, both Byleister and Helblindi watched the exchange raptly, ready to move if the opportunity arose to escape.

Loki/Smaug threw back his head and closed his eyes. His throat moved, and Darcy hugged herself. Was he going to breathe fire? “What fresh hell is this? I’m not sure I can take much more weird.”

“Your idea to wake him up,” Helblindi pointed out.

She needed to never have any ideas ever again.

Thanos brushed his thumb across the Golden Snitch, as he had done earlier, but it had no effect on Loki/Smaug. “Have you forgotten, my little frostling, all the lessons I taught you? You would scream for hours, soaked in your own blood. I dislike repeating myself, so I shall make it twice as painful this time. Or perhaps,” he added, twisting to look at Darcy with an evil glint in his eye, “I should try a different approach.”

Loki/Smaug abruptly bent over, retching, as if he had seriously thrown it down at one of Tony Stark’s parties and needed to worship the porcelain god for a while. Not what she had in mind when she’d slapped him awake. He actually brought something up, and it landed on the floor with a wet smack. It was a glowing starfish creature, just like the one the Chitauri had tried to stick to her. How had it gotten into Smaug? Of course, it had not been in Smaug at all, for he had not truly existed outside of fifteen minutes ago. It had been inside Loki and had at least some control over his nervous system. She thought she could do with a therapeutic puke herself. As she stared at the creature, its glow died until it was a gray husk on the icy floor.

Loki/Smaug straightened and wiped his mouth, somehow making even that gesture elegant. “You will not touch her.”

The Titan should have been shocked, but it was hard to tell. “I can see your fascination. Mortal beauty is so much more arresting because of its fleeting nature.”

“He can’t touch me,” Darcy reminded Loki/Smaug, her voice steadier than she felt.

“Ah, yes, the amulet,” Thanos said to Darcy, still facing Loki/Smaug. “An impressive work of magic, wrought because he refuses to share you with anyone. I understand it can be removed only by your own free will. What will it take?”

Darcy stared at him, blank for a moment even though she’d expected this question. He was so monstrous, so alien. What could she do against such strength and such evil? She glanced at Loki,
and the dragonfire in his eyes grew brighter. Maybe she'd already done what she could do against Thanos. She'd awoken the dragon.

“You will not touch her!” Loki/Smaug reached for Thanos, and Darcy could feel the air practically crackling with magic.

Then the icy roof was falling on her.

Darcy screamed (it certainly was her day for screaming) and threw herself to the floor in a fetal position, arms over her head. Great chunks of ice and snow fell all around her, and the rumbling sounded as though the entire castle had come down around her ears. Above the rumbling was the distinctive shriek of a dragon.

When she dared to open her eyes, she discovered she was in a pocket of space between two icy boulders. She was buried, with only a few inches of space to wiggle. Was it the amulet’s protection or sheer dumb luck? She’d probably never know. Darcy squirmed onto her back and clawed at the ice and snow above her. She needed to get out before she ran out of air. Quickly, she discovered that her fingers made little dent in the ice and she had to wonder how much debris was on top of her. She searched for the edges of the ice chunks, trying to work her way into space between them. She was rewarded with a shower of ice in the face. “Shit! Let me out of here!”

She probably shouldn’t use up air by cursing or screaming. By the time Loki/Smaug remembered her, though, she might be dead, so she kept scratching at the ice. Was her air getting thin already? Why were her lungs burning? Oh, Gran, if you could see me now. Pretty sure I’ve pledged myself to a dragon two minutes before suffocating in a building collapse. Go me.

A great blue hand broke through and grabbed her arm. With a firm pull, Darcy came free of her prison, sputtering. The hand belonged to Byleister, and a layer of ice formed on her sleeve where he’d hauled her out of her prison. “What madness have you let loose on my world?” he demanded.

She wiped the snow and wet hair out of her eyes. The castle had indeed collapsed, and a great reddish brown dragon crouched in the ruins, digging with both claws and snout. She’d been thinking of that awesome dragonfire magic Loki had used on the wall of Hlidskjalf, not a complete shape shift. Now that she had Smaug in all his glory, she wondered how she was ever going to get her prince back. The dragon came up with a Chitauri in his jaws, shook the creature a few times, then chewed and swallowed. “Hello Jurassic World! That, my friend, is going to save your pretty blue ass and kick Thanos off your planet.”

“You make no sense, as usual,” the Frost Giant said. “We need to move. Later, you can have your thrall to build me a new castle.”

They scrambled over the ruins, in the opposite direction from the dragon, Helblindi already ahead of them. Some Chitauri had managed to struggle out of the debris, but they were focused on shooting at Smaug. It didn’t seem to bother him, the bolts bouncing off his scales. He blew a great blast of fire across the ice, melting some of it. More Chitauri and the crates were revealed. Darcy paused at an archway that still stood. “Look!”

The mighty Titan struggled to free himself from the ruins. Smaug spotted him and pounced just as Thanos ducked back down again. The dragon dug a new hole and put his whole snout into the ice. While he was occupied, Thanos climbed out in a different spot and bolted for open ground. Smaug caught the movement and shot after him with a quick flap of his wings.

“You go, Smaug!” Darcy whipped out her phone to video the whole thing, because if Loki
didn’t remember this, he might not believe her and she was just going to go on believing she’d see
him again. Thanos pounded through the snow, moving fast for such a big guy, but Smaug was
right behind him, snapping at his ass. She couldn’t help but laugh. “If there’s a way to post it to
the entire universe, I’m going to find it. Look, Scary Space Dude’s not so scary after all! Run,
creeper!”

The Chitauri streamed after their master, leaving the crates behind. Byleister poked at his
brother, and they both hopped nimbly over the castle ruins to fish around in the boxes. Helblindi
let out a cry of triumph a moment later and pulled out the blue and gold box she’d seen in the vault,
the one that seemed to contain a snow storm. “I have the casket! Let us remove the pestilence
from our world!”

He charged off in the direction of Smaug and Thanos, with Byleister right behind him. Darcy
kept up as best she could, for it was darker now, as if the never-seen sun of Jotenheim had set. The
ice falling from the sky began to mix with snow, making visibility even worse. She was still
wearing Helblindi’s coat, though it wasn’t helping much against the cold. She ran faster, trying to
keep the brothers in sight. Byleister jogged alongside Helblindi and made a strange, guttural call
that carried on the wind. Frost Giants began gathering around him, and Darcy had no idea where
they’d come from. Maybe they’d been lying hidden in the snow, waiting for some sort of signal.
“I see a ship!” Byleister shouted as they crested a hill. “To me, my brothers!”

A spaceship sat at the base of the hill on a flat ice sheet. With a communal cry, the Frost
Giants charged down the hill, more joining at every moment, and the Chitauri turned to engage
them. Shots were fired and there was a lot of shouting; in trying to avoid the battle, Darcy
stumbled and landed face first in the snow. When she looked up, she saw Smaug descending from
the clouds onto the ship, teeth and claws ripping open its black metal hull, sparks flying.

Helblindi ran ahead of his fellow giants, not stopping to engage the Chitauri. He had a mad
grin on his face as he reached the ship and held up the Casket of Ancient Winter. “Begone, filthy
creature!”

She hoped he meant Thanos. “Don’t you dare use that on my dragon!” Darcy shouted.

He might have done just that, but those on the ship finally got their weapons working. Several
cannons popped up in what was left of the hull and started firing at Smaug. These were far more
powerful blasts than individual Chitauri guns, and he roared and fell off the ship. Helblindi opened
the casket and a blue light burst out, ice building up on the hull. The cannons froze, one after
another, and stopped firing. Smaug snorted, shook his head as if to clear it and launched himself at
the ship again. The frozen hull cracked like an egg when the dragon applied both heat and claw to
it. He put his whole snout down inside, snapping at fleeing Chitauri. Then he bathed the inside of
ship in dragonfire.

There was a rumble from the opposite side of the ship, and a smaller vehicle took off, climbing
hard for the stars. Knowing that his prey was trying to escape, Smaug followed, great wings
carrying him in pursuit of the Titan. Darcy watched, holding her breath as he flew higher and
higher. Then he vanished into the cloudcover.

Well. This was a new way to lose a boyfriend.

She watched the clouds, but he didn’t return. Could the dragon survive in space? Then he
broke through the clouds again. He was falling, his wings making no effort to stave off a terrible
collision with the ground. “No!” Darcy shouted, jumping to her feet. She skirted the edges of the
battle, trying to guess where he would land. The action was winding down, those Chitauri left
alive surrendering now that their master was gone.
Beyond the remains of the ship was a series of low, snowy hills. Darcy ran, up one and down the next as the dragon fell faster than she thought possible. He crashed behind one of the hills, causing a snow tsunami that stopped her in her tracks.

Once she could see again, Darcy climbed up another hill, throat burning. There was nothing to be seen past it, certainly no enormous dragon lying broken in the snow. She squinted into the wind and the ice and spotted something half-buried at the bottom of the hill to her left. Was there a glint of green and gold? “Loki?” Throwing herself forward, she ran, stumbling down the incline. She found him face down in the snow. Turning him over, she wanted to assure herself he was still breathing, but when she got a good look at him, she almost dropped him back into the snow.

He was blue. Not cold-in-the-snow blue, but a freaking Frost Giant sort of blue, complete with the raised lines they all had in their skin.

Darcy wasn’t sure how long she sat there, trying to make sense of it.

At some point, she realized Byleister and Helblindi were standing behind her. “ Truly, Lady Darcy, you are a woman of your word.” Byleister said. “You have given us back the casket and our brother. How can we ever thank you?”
A Hint of Frost

Chapter Summary

Loki makes an escape from the dragon, but not from Darcy.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! I appreciate your patience, so without further ado, another chapter...

No copyright infringement intended. Marvel, this is my favorite way of expressing my love for you.

What if there was no time
And no reason, or rhyme
What if you should decide
That you don’t want me there by your side?

What If, Coldplay

And so the great dragon Smaug slept, dreaming of fire, of death, and of heaping piles of gold.

His captive, suddenly freed, sat up in his own bed. The change in position set off pain all over Loki’s body and he groaned. He felt like one giant bruise and his stomach was sour, as if he’d eaten something off. Taking a breath made his chest rattle and his lungs burn.

Did he taste brimstone?

Curst dragon. He’d find a way to destroy it, but first, he needed to use it. His memories of the last day were sketchy at best, but he did know Smaug had given Thanos a scare. The morning sun was peeping through the drawn drapes at his balcony, and all seemed quiet outside. Had the Titan withdrawn his forces in the wake of dragon attack?

Wishful thinking, that. Darcy lay next to him, still asleep, and he had no desire to wake her.
Without waiting for Finglorfin or one of his body servants to appear with a robe, he forced himself out of bed and stumbled toward his dressing room. The world tilted crazily and he fetched up against the door frame with a grunt.

It was only then, after he regained his equilibrium, that he realized his hand was blue. Unfortunately, so was the rest of him.

Loki put his forehead against the cool door frame. There was nothing of Jotenheim in his rooms, but there was one other possibility: he’d been drained of magic. There wasn’t even enough to maintain his Æsir shape, and he knew enough of yesterday’s events to point a finger at the dragon. Smaug had used every scrap of magic Loki had to manifest his own physical form. With rest, he could rebuild his reserves, but it would take time. “I hope your scales fall off, stinking wyrm,” Loki muttered as he dragged clothes on. He made sure to include gloves and an all-concealing black cloak. He tried not to think about Darcy.

Had she seen him like this? How could she not have done so, lying next to him? If she had seen his true form, why was she still here?

A door opened and Finglorfin entered the dressing room. He had a tray loaded with covered dishes, and he came to a graceful stop with nary a rattle of cutlery and a frown. “My Lord, you are in no shape to go anywhere.”

“I’ve no time to be an invalid.” Loki held himself regally, as if that would hide how wretched he felt from the elf’s sharp gaze. He tried to brush past Finglorfin, but the elf latched on to his arm.

“What of Lady Darcy?”

He had lost her already, for what woman would accept his true form? He didn’t think he could bear her frightened or disgusted expression when he faced her. “I’ve work to do. Keep her out of my sight.”

***

Darcy couldn’t say she was surprised to wake up alone.

Disappointed or hurt or maybe even a little scared (if the dragon was still in charge, there was no telling what he would do next), but not surprised. She sighed and stared at the ceiling until it became a watery blur. Then she angrily dashed the tears away and sat up. Nothing was going to be solved by sobbing into her pillow.

Now things made so much sense to her.

No wonder Loki had gone off on Thor in Puente Antiguo and the entire city of New York. He had lashed out in fury and despair, because he wasn’t an Æsir prince or Thor’s younger brother, not really, and her heart broke for him. Darcy knew what it was like to have her entire identity come crashing down around her ears, and Loki was far older, far more sure of who he thought he was. He must have been devastated to find out he was a Frost Giant, and she’d bet everything she owned he’d found out only recently. She knew what the aftermath of being unmade looked like.

And in other news, she’d sworn herself to the dragon.
Not one of her best moves. She wondered if Loki knew (or cared), since he seemed to be sharing his body with Smaug. What possible use did the dragon have for her anyway? He’d never struck her as caring about anyone but himself, but he might have done it just to spite Loki.

Either way, she’d much rather face Loki than Smaug this morning. He (they?) had somehow dragged his sorry ass out of bed, even after all that had happened yesterday. Maybe it was the dragon, off on some sneaky task, but Darcy thought she smelled an escape. Loki had run away from her again rather than face the 800 pound gorilla in the room.

Well, there was nothing to be gained by ignoring the gorilla, and she twirled her gold bracelet around her wrist. If he thought he could hide from her, he’d better think again.

***

The Library was uncommonly quiet, and Loki was glad of it. He needed a bit of peace. Most of the scholars had fled the city or taken refuge with their families. This was not a time for intellectual pursuits, unless one happened to have an Infinity Stone and a powerful illusion with a mind of its own tangled up in one’s own head. He pulled several books and carried them to his favorite reading nook, hoping to find some illumination on the problem of Smaug. As he turned the corner, he pulled up short.

"May we speak, Loki?" A woman sat on the cushions of the window seat, and she had her blue gaze fixed on him. In a butter yellow gown and with her golden hair pulled back in a loose braid, she looked as innocent as a maid. He knew better.

"Sigyn." His eyes narrowed, but if he was honest, he was pleased to see her. Now he didn’t have to go looking for her. "Indeed, I have a few things to say to you as well."

***

Darcy dressed for war again, but not without another longing glance at her unused gowns. Once presentable, she went foraging for breakfast, and she didn’t have to go far. Hoenir and Magnus were still occupying part of Loki’s rooms, and they were both shoveling down a meal at the table. Magnus jumped up as soon as he saw her, a book in one hand and a biscuit in the other. "Lady Darcy! I hope we did not disturb you."

She waved him off and caught Hoenir by the shoulder before he, too, could stand. “Sit and eat. Have you seen Loki?” If there was anyone who could tell if it was Loki or the dragon, it would be these two.

Unfortunately, both shook their heads. “We just returned from working on the palace shield,” Hoenir said. “We’ve made some progress on building a new power source, but we lack certain materials. I’ve servants scouring the palace for what we need.”

“It seemed a good time to have a meal.” Magnus pointed to the starfish creature under glass in the middle of the table. “We have discovered what that is.”
Darcy scowled at it. This was the one that was meant for her, and it was quite enough to put her off her feed. It was still alive, for it would wiggle occasionally, but its bright orange color had faded. She picked up the glass jar and moved it to a side table, ignoring the fit it had when she got near it. “Eww, guys, not among the food. So what is it?” she added, not because she really wanted to know, but the two wizards seemed eager to share.

“It is of Muspelheim, as I suspected,” Hoenir replied impressively. “A parasite. It embeds itself in the central nervous system of its host. The most interesting part about it is that as it absorbs nutrients from the host, it also absorbs neural activity. It has no use for such things, so it gives them off as waste.”

When Darcy continued to look confused, Magnus chimed in. “It’s the perfect spy, if you know how to listen to it.” He picked up the starfish in its jar and flipped it over. Near the creature’s center was a tiny silver sphere. “It gives off your thoughts, and this transmitter passes it on to anyone eavesdropping.”

Darcy contemplated that ugly fact for a moment. Up until yesterday, Loki had one. “Does it control its host?”

Hoenir shook his head. “No, but there is some evidence that it convulses to high pitched sound and could kill the host.”

That explained the silver sphere Thanos had the day before, and Loki’s collapse when he’d used it. A dog whistle, more or less. She had no doubt Thanos had put the starfish into Loki and tried to give her one too. Darcy rubbed her arms, to get rid of sudden goose bumps. Then she took the jar from Magnus. “We need to see the queen.”

***

“Sire, the queen has called a council of war.”

The Einherjar commander saluted with his fist to his chest and left the library without awaiting a reply. Loki frowned after him, but rose and headed for the war room. He’d come to a dead end on his research anyway. There were few recorded episodes of the tesseract interacting with other forms of magic, and those had not ended well. He would not find an answer to the dilemma of Smaug here.

For he needed that damn dragon.

Asgard would give a good fight, but Loki feared the might of Thanos would overwhelm them in the end. He needed some kind of superweapon, and Smaug was about as close as he could come on short notice. Unfortunately, the dragon had a mind of his own and didn’t seem much inclined to help Loki out. If only he still had the mind stone, but it was beyond his reach in the hands of SHIELD.

Loki shoved the massive doors open and strode into the war room. He stopped, as it was empty but for one person: Darcy. Even as he thought of turning and leaving, the doors slammed shut behind him. He sensed his mother’s magic.

“We need to talk.” Darcy stood at the head of the map table, arms crossed at her chest. “Is it really you?”
Loki’s first, unfortunate thought was how magnificent she was with fire in her eyes, glaring daggers at him. Interestingly, she didn’t look scared or disgusted. His gaze was drawn to the quick, angry rise and fall of her breasts, and his next unfortunate thought revolved around getting her out of her clothes and sprawled on the council table for his pleasure. How was he to shake his desire for this woman if she was always underfoot? He had given orders that she was supposed to be out of his sight, but Finglorfin obviously had other ideas about the meaning of his words. “Of course it’s me, wench. What have you to say to me?”

“You could take your hood off, for starters.”

“No.”

Darcy huffed and marched toward him. Loki knew her intent, but could not bring himself to stop her. It never failed to amaze him how this mortal girl disarmed him so completely. She yanked the hood of his cloak back and scowled up at him. “Back to your usual self, I see.”

A few hours in the library, reading, had gained him at least that much. “Mayhap you dreamed seeing aught else.”

“Nice try. Byleister and Helblindi were thrilled to find their long lost brother. They kept the casket, but I convinced them they couldn’t keep you. They want to talk though.”

He’d speak to them when the entire length and breadth of Yggdrasil was frozen over. In the grand scheme of things, the loss of the casket was not so great, though Loki was certain it would be added to his list of misdeeds by his own not-father.

“I also know what I saw because I’m the one who got to strip you out of all that leather and armor.”

Ah. So she had seen his true form. She’d had her hands on his skin and he’d missed it. Loki might never feel her touch again, and the depth of his disappointment surprised him. “Then you know I am the monster I have always professed to be.”

“Bullshit,” she shot back. “There’s no monsters here, just you and I, and I don’t care if you’re blue, green, yellow or rainbow with sprinkles. I mean, I get that the Frost Giants have been the enemies of Asgard since time began and I can see how the Æsir girls might run for the hills. I’m hella offended, though, that you think I would too. Am I no better than Asgard’s finest bitches?”

“You’re quite mad,” Loki returned in a low voice. “How is it you do not understand? I am a Frost Giant. I have killed, both for my king and for my own gain. I attempted to conquer your world. I attempted to overthrow my king and my brother. What woman would accept me as I am?”

“I would,” Darcy snapped. “I’ve known all of that stuff, all along, well, except for the Frost Giant thing. And you know what? I’m still here and I’d still do you. I’d even do you blue.”

The vision of her dropping to her knees, her red lips — he squelched that thought before it went further, but the idea was so arresting that Loki could not find his voice at first. “You lie.”

She reached out, grabbing the edge of his cloak and pulling him closer. “I’m not the liar here,” Darcy hissed in a whisper. “One day, when we have the time, we’ll have an enormous fight about this. Then maybe you’ll take me at my word and you’ll enjoy it, I promise you. Right now, though, we have other problems.” She glanced significantly at the door, which remained shut, then at a glass jar with one of those mysterious star creatures on the table. “Remember that thing?”
“Only too well.” The sudden change of subject gave him whiplash, but that was often life with Darcy.

“Hoenir says it’s a parasite that sucks up your thoughts like a vacuum cleaner and rebroadcasts them. Yesterday, you or Smaug coughed up one of those on Thanos’s boots.”

With that unpalatable thought, she released him as the doors opened and his mother walked in, followed by Hoenir, Magnus, Sif and Fandral. Darcy went to stand by Frigga. “Loki,” his mother said in a soft voice, “it seems we have a problem.”

A problem? Understatement of the millennium. Though he had no memory of the creature being implanted into him, he had no doubt it had been done. All this time, Thanos had been listening to his innermost thoughts. He knew Loki’s deepest secrets. He knew how the dragon had been created and how it was no longer under his control. The size and sheer bad attitude of Smaug must have come as a surprise, along with its ability to manifest, but by now the Titan had some idea of how to fight it. There went his only advantage, up in flames, so to speak.

He had been inside Loki’s head since before he’d come to Midgard. He’d been there for the battle of New York. He’d been there while Loki returned to Asgard and made his plans to fight. He’d been there when he’d made love to Darcy.

“Did you agree to be his spy? What did he offer you?”

Sif spoke first, and her anger was palpable, but Loki’s own rage boiled up and cracked the façade of numbness he’d lived with for so long. His fist hit the table with a resounding crack. “Do you think the Titan asked for my agreement when he ripped me apart to make me his spy? What if I had said no to the tortures he subjected me to, trying to make me his creature? Do you think he cared?” Loki’s voice had risen to a shout, and he stepped back from the table to catch his breath.

Fandral, Sif and Magnus looked aghast, but Hoenir and Frigga didn’t look surprised at all, only saddened. Darcy’s knuckles were white as she gripped the edge of the table, as if her hold on it was the only thing keeping her in place. Did she want to come to his side? “He offered me the rule of Midgard for the tesseract, to draw me in, and I fell for it, fool that I am. You knew,” he said to Frigga.

“From the moment you arrived here,” his mother said, her face pinched. “There are dark things lurking in the corners of the universe, and I knew your soul had been shredded.”

How poetically put and how true. He’d been a pampered prince when he’d fallen from the Bifrost, an idiot caught up in his own desperate struggle to get his identity back, behaving as if the universe revolved around him. If only he had truly understood what was out there.

Frigga reached across the table for his hand. “Loki,” she began.

“No,” he interrupted hoarsely. He couldn’t bear her pity, and revealing his soul to her in front of everyone was more than he could abide. “We have no time for sentiment. We must take action, before it’s too late.” He turned to Hoenir. “Is there aught else within me that might be of Thanos?”

Hoenir waved two fingers in the air, and a silver cloud enveloped Loki. In moments, it was gone, and the older wizard shook his head. “You are clear of foreign entities, but there is the matter of a dragon.”

The others looked at each other and at him (except for Darcy), but he shook his head. “The dragon would take far too long to explain, and it sleeps for now. As for Thanos, he can no longer
“access my thoughts, but every order I gave before yesterday is known.” Loki looked to Sif and Fandral. “Both of you, look to our army. Rearrange our defenses as best you may, see if you can arrange a few surprises for our Chitauri friends.”

“Aye, we’ll do so,” Fandral said, and dragged Sif out of the room with him. The warrior woman let herself be pulled away, though she kept looking back at Loki. He had no time to deal with her.

“How goes restoring the palace shield?” Loki asked the two sorcerers.

“We are having trouble finding enough uru to encase a crystal powerful enough to run the shield,” Hoenir replied. “The few weapons made of it are needed to fight the Titan.”

“Did you find the crystal Thanos stole? I heard that was why you went to Jotenheim yesterday,” Magnus said.

Jotenheim? Yes, Loki supposed he had gone to that cursed frozen hell, but he remembered little of it. Darcy answered for him. “Thanos destroyed the crystal,” she said and nothing more. She just watched him, her face inscrutable. What could she possibly be thinking?

“Then we must do without the shield,” Frigga said. “We’ve done it before.”

“We need every advantage,” Loki insisted. “Can we borrow a power crystal from the Bifrost project?”

“Nay, I’m still in test phase. The crystal wouldn’t be powerful enough to hold the shield for long,” Hoenir replied.

By the Norns, his options shrank every time he took a breath. Loki stared at Darcy and she stared back at him. He should send her back to Midgard, where she would be safe from the Titan, at least for a little while. Then another thought crossed his mind. “Hoenir, would your new Bifrost have enough power to send me to Midgard?”

“I’ve only sent things as test subjects so far, not people.”

“What are you thinking?” Darcy asked, arms at her chest again.

Loki leaned on the table as he turned his idea over in his mind. “I am about to do something Thanos would never dream of. I am going to Earth for help.”
The Rainbow Bridge to Nowhere, New Mexico

Chapter Summary

Loki and Darcy go for a ride and meet some old friends.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Summer is over and I'm finally back at the computer!

It was a very busy summer with travel, band camp and lots and lots of fun. I decluttered. I've accepted that I am an AFOL (adult fan of Lego) and have begun a large MOC of a campground with a lake and a waterfall. I organized so many, many Legos. I painted a lot of walls and sewed little felt foods with eyes and smiley faces. I binged Ghost Adventures, Cutthroat Kitchen and Storage Wars. It was good.

I've missed regular writing though, and I've missed Loki and Darcy. Can't wait for Ragnarok!

I've set some goals for myself, so I'm looking to post the next chapter by the end of October and the next one by the end of November. We're getting close to the end and I'm getting eager to start something new.

I apologize for any mistakes in advance. Microsoft Word to rich text was not cooperative.

Anyway, enjoy this chapter. As usual, no copyright infringement intended to Marvel, Maroon 5 or anybody else. I get paid here only in joy. :)

Cold enough to chill my bones

It feels like I don't know you anymore

I don't understand why you're so cold to me

With every breath you breathe

I see there's something going on
"Are you out of your freakin' gourd?"

"Possibly," Loki replied absently, not listening. Darcy was raving about vegetables and he had no time for it. He rushed through the crowded halls of Hlidskjalf with her and Magnus on his heels and tore into his rooms. "Take the Bifrost to Hoenir," he directed the other sorcerer. "Tell him I'll be along in a moment."

"Aye," Magnus said, gathering up the messenger bag that held the room orbs and digging through it. He pulled out the golden one. Then he paused, with orb in hand. "This is madness, you know."

"That's what I just said!" Darcy declared, hands on hips.

"Did you?" Loki hurried into his library, searching for a few things he might need. He had little magic, so if it came to a fight, he'd have to use his wits and whatever strength he had remaining. Where he was going, he would need it.

"I'm going with you." Darcy descended the stairs into the library, jumping when a bird with yellow plumage in an ornate cage squawked at her, wings flapping as it attacked the bars that stood between them. She scowled at it. "Where'd that come from?"

"I am keeping an eye on it." He glared at the bird, and it took the hint, retreating to the back of its cage, still chirping angrily to itself.

"I am keeping an eye on it." He glared at the bird, and it took the hint, retreating to the back of its cage, still chirping angrily to itself.

"For who? Who around here would trust you with their beloved pet? That thing has a more foul temper than Sif."

She'd know he was lying about the cursed bird if he opened his mouth, so Loki focused on finding what he needed. Extra daggers would be useful, as well as a few artifacts he'd imbued with magic long ago. He came across paper that delivered itself to other dimensions once written on. How lovely, he could write a note to Dormammu in the Dark Dimension. That wouldn't be useful while battling the Avengers and his idiot brother. He tossed it aside.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard. You are coming with me. I suppose you must, otherwise the bracelets will destroy me." In spite of his best efforts, she was impossible to ignore, though he'd rather find a way to leave her behind in Asgard. For her own safety, of course, as there was no telling how the Avengers were going to react to his sudden return. He would not acknowledge the idea that once home, she might want to stay there.

"Oooh, that's a whole lot of enthusiasm right there, Magic Man," Darcy returned. "I'm the woman who's going to stand between you and all the people who want you dead on my planet."

"I do not need a woman to fight my battles!"

"Loki, we're going to a place that considers you a war criminal!"
Indeed. He didn't have the heart to tell her they weren't the first to consider him so, nor would they be the last. Either way, all he needed was to get what was necessary and get out. He wanted to avoid complications (Thor) at all costs. "What else can I do?"

"When we get to Earth, you stay out of sight." Darcy leaned on the library's center table. "I'll get Thor."

"No." Of course she would think he was going for his brother, but that was not his intention. He brushed past her. "If you're coming, you'd best hurry."

She followed in haste and made no attempt to hold his hand or take his arm. Loki put aside a sense of loss. He found Hoenir and Magnus in a high, flat courtyard between roof peaks that connected Odin and Frigga's private rooms. His mother had turned this place into a magical garden, a space where the roses she cultivated grew in profusion and exploded out of pots and urns until it felt like a jungle. There were several stone benches from which to contemplate the mysteries of the universe, though he'd often been forced to sit and contemplate his misdeeds here as a child. Loki glanced at the shut doors to the Allfather's quarters, where the old man lay, deep in a magical sleep that would either recharge him or claim him forever. Even now, the bastard could be dead, and Loki was uncertain how he felt. Without the Allfather, punishment might go easier on him, but Loki still had things he wanted to say.

Darcy looked around the courtyard as her hair blew in the wind. "I guess we're all the way up here because you need open sky."

"Aye," said Hoenir as he took the orb from Magnus and rolled it across the open center of the garden. The golden wheels and gears of the Bifrost sprang to life around them. "Keep watch," he ordered Magnus. "It won't take our enemies long to guess what we are about. Milady, might I have a private word with Loki?"

She eyed them both, as if gauging their honesty, before shrugging. "Sure. But I'm depending on you, Hoenir, to make sure he doesn't leave without me."

Loki watched as she walked away to join Magnus. The sorcerer turned his gaze from the sky for a moment to smile at her, and Loki realized with a jolt that it would only take a few words of encouragement from Darcy and Magnus would lay his heart at her feet. Though the idea lay in his stomach like a writhing serpent, she would be far better off with Magnus than a monster like him. Then again, no matter how hard he tried to push her away, she always came back.

Mayhap he should wonder why.

He realized Hoenir was looking him up and down sharply. "How fair you, young madcap? If I had known one day one of my students would be playing dangerous games with an Infinity Stone, I would have become a hermit and never taught at all."

Loki snorted. "Hermit indeed. You've got too much of a roving eye for that. Who told you?"

"About the dragon? Your lady did, because she's far wiser than you. What were you thinking? Did you give no thought to how a powerful illusion and an ancient artifact might interact?"

"I was hiding it from a madman! What else would you have me do? I didn't get to know the dragon personally until it was too late."

Hoenir harrumphed and looked unimpressed. "No dragon I ever met would willingly give up treasure, however it came to him. We'll have to get the tesseract away in order to dismantle the
illusion. The dragon is feeding off its power and will only get stronger. How long can you keep it in check?"

"At the moment, I am in charge," Loki replied, omitting a few things. Well, more than a few things. At least the dragon was busy sleeping off an overdose of magic, but once he awoke, Loki had little power left for that fight. Smaug would once again swallow him whole, but what Hoenir didn't know wouldn't scare him.

"See that you stay that way, at least until we can separate the illusion from the tesseract."

"Master Hoenir!" Magnus shouted. "Chitauri vessels heading our way!" He gently pushed Darcy at Loki and walked toward the oncoming skiffs. "I'll hold them off."

"Wait, what?" Darcy asked as Loki pulled her to the archway where the Bifrost would form a wormhole. "What's he going to do?"

"Keep them busy. Where do you wish to be set down?" Hoenir asked, going to the console in the center of the Bifrost. He hefted a golden sword and slammed it into place and gears began turning. Darcy's eyes were wide, her gaze going from Magnus to Hoenir to him, though once again, she did not reach out to him.

"Stark Tower," Loki said.

"North American continent, East Coast, city of New York, it's one of the tallest buildings in Midtown," Darcy added at Hoenir's frown, sounding nervous. "Please don't scatter my atoms all over time and space. And please, no one tell my mother I'm in town."

"Be off with you," said Hoenir, pressing buttons madly. Behind the older sorcerer, Loki could see Magnus kneeling in the courtyard, probably writing runes on the stones. Usually such warding spells were written in ink mixed with water from the most deep, secret places of Asgard, and they were powerful indeed. Then Loki saw the flash of a dagger and knew Magnus had done the only thing he could to make the spell even more powerful: he'd added his own blood to it. This was a great sacrifice from one wizard to another, for so much of their power was bound in their blood, in their very cells. Loki was oddly touched. It had no doubt been done to protect Hoenir, Darcy, the new Bifrost, and especially Asgard. Even so, he and Magnus had been friends once. Mayhap they still were.

Darcy must have had some sense of what was going on, though he'd never used blood magic in front of her. "Is he going to be okay?"

Loki never had a chance to answer. The power of the Bifrost sucked them in, and they were gone.

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If Darcy closed her eyes, she was okay. Once the Bifrost took over, Loki pulled her into his arms (Nice of him. Ass.), and from there it was like the smoothest plane flight ever. If she dared to open her eyes, though, then she could see how fast they were going, how many wild twists and turns through star systems they were taking. They flew by massive stars in a myriad of colors, bright nebulas with fluffy clouds, and great stretches of empty blackness. She prided herself on being able to ride the best rollercoasters on planet Earth, but this was something else. Where were
the seatbelts or harnesses on this thing? Life didn't give seatbelts, did it? She hoped she didn't puke on Loki's boots.

The ride came to a complete, jarring stop and Loki stiffened beneath her cheek.

They stood among the massive roots of a tree. Some of the roots were as tall as a four story building, and when she looked up, the branches could not be seen, for the tree was wreathed in mist. She wondered how big the leaves were and did anyone ever get stuck under them when they fell? It was cool and damp and she shivered. Maybe it wasn't the weather that made her shiver, but the tension she sensed in Loki.

Maybe it was the three freaky women standing among the roots.

They were all dressed in Asgardian style, long gowns with hints of hammered gold, all in shades of shimmering blue. Two had blond braids that fell to their bare feet, and the one in the center had hair of the palest gold. All had blank, white eyes.

Uh-oh. This had all the markings of an encounter with Galadriel, or whatever her Aesir counterpart was. *The quest, Frodo Baggins, stands on the edge of a knife.*

*That's my life in a nutshell,* thought Darcy.

In a space between roots lay a still pool of water. The woman with the pale hair looked straight at Loki and waved her hand over it. "You know what you must do."

"I don't - " he started.

"To make amends. To have the life you truly want. You know what you must do."

In the water was a vision of a cave. Dark, forbidding, there was nothing to indicate what was inside or what it meant. Then it was gone and they were back riding the Bifrost, faster than before. They bounced around like they'd hit turbulence before landing in a heap on solid ground.

"Oof," said Darcy, sprawled on top of Loki with her face partially buried in his shoulder. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"You are such a liar. Those crazy ladies! For a moment I thought I was in Lorien. And what about Magnus? Will he be alright?"

"Holy shit!"

That was not Loki. Darcy looked up to realize she was in a too-familiar place. Loki lay on his back on a floor of polished concrete, and she knew that concrete all too well. She'd scrubbed it a few times, because Jane couldn't be bothered and also had a super high dirt tolerance. All around them stood mismatched equipment and desks. Not Stark Tower, but Jane's lab in Puente Antiguo, otherwise known as Nowhere, New Mexico. They were way the hell off. At least he'd gotten the planet right. "I'm getting Hoenir a GPS for Christmas."

Even as Loki groaned, Tony Stark poked his head up from behind a wall of monitors. "Thor! Foster! You've got to see this!" He circled the equipment to stand over them, one hand armored and pointed in their direction. "It looks like we've hooked ourselves a couple of fish."
Jane hugged Darcy fiercely, in spite of the inordinate number of weapons in the lab. Thor had arrived with his hammer, Tony still had one repulsor glowing and Loki had a dagger in each hand. Jane, though, ignored them all. "I thought you were dead."

Darcy smiled and let the other woman hug her for as long as she wanted. It was nice to be back, and she took a deep breath. The lab smelled of dry desert and filtered air with a dash of machine oil, a combination to be found nowhere else in the places she’d been. Desks and equipment had been moved around in her absence, so Jane had been busy. She spotted two scientific types cowering behind some computers, and they scuttled out of the room, keeping low. "Jane, you replaced me!"

"What? Oh, no, they're just on loan from SHIELD." She finally stepped back to have a better look at Darcy's warrior-like outfit. "Looks like you've gone native."

That was one way to put it. Wait until Jane found out she'd been doing the natives. "So about Asgard..."

Before she could even try to smooth things over, Loki stepped in, all looming six foot something of him. "I am Loki of Asgard. You may have heard of me."

Yes, Jane had definitely heard of him. She took one step around Darcy and slapped him across the face with all her might. Considering that Jane was petite, it was a solid whack. "That was for New York!"

Behind her, Tony Stark bent double, laughing. "Jesus, Foster, you just made my day!"

"Fuck off, Stark," Loki said pleasantly, staring at Jane. The slap hadn't bothered him at all. "I like her. Thor doesn't usually favor a woman with fire."

"Loki," Thor growled, hammer twitching.

If left to his own devices, Loki would provoke the two Avengers and steal what he wanted in the chaos, whatever that might be. His non-answers about what he was up to drove Darcy mad. She held up her hands. "Yo, everybody hang on to their shit. Can we talk?"

"What's there to talk about?" Tony did not lower his armored hand. "You're back safe and Reindeer Games can spend some quality time in a nice, magic proof jail cell. Case closed. Wait, you're the assistant? Foster, why didn't you tell me?"

"I did tell you," Jane said tiredly. "Darcy, not Tracy, Stacy or Felicity."

"Wow, thanks a lot, Tony," Darcy said. "You didn't recognize my name, did you?"

"You know Stark?" Loki asked.

There was a peculiar note in his voice and Darcy wanted to kick him. They didn't have time for the Battle of New York reunion and they certainly didn't have time for him to decide to be jealous, over Tony Stark or Magnus (she hadn't missed him giving the other sorcerer the hairy eyeball). Hadn't he just spent the last twelve hours pushing her away? "Yes, I know Tony, and I totally get how you might want to throw him out a window. My mom likes to think of herself as a big deal in New York society, and no party is complete without Tony Stark. I've known him since I was a
"Way to make me feel old, Lewis."

Darcy tried to get the conversation back on track. "Look, we do need to talk. Asgard is in trouble and we need your help."

Tony and Thor exchanged glances, and Thor spoke. "Friends, may I have a moment alone with my brother?"

"Take it outside," Jane said. "My lab can't stand up to any more damage."

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"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

"Right as rain," Darcy replied, turning from the windows. She'd been watching as Asgard's most destructive brothers wandered out into the desert, away from the lab. Her expression wasn't one of a freed captive, and Jane didn't know how to interpret the look.

Natasha Romanoff strode into the lab by the same door that FitzSimmons had left by, and her gaze swept the room, taking in Darcy's presence and the two Asgardians outside. She didn't seem to think there was an immediate threat, and she took a seat, observing. For some reason, Natasha's relaxed attitude calmed Jane. Still, she doubted Darcy was okay. She exchanged a glance with Tony, then said, "You've been gone for almost six weeks. What happened?"

"What's to tell? Look, it's kind of a long story. Short version is that I've been to two alien planets, I got upgraded to ambassador status by the Queen of the Universe, I've played Mean Girls with immortal noble ladies, and I've met a dragon who wants a piece of me. I hung out with a supervillain who might be trying to redeem himself and save the world."

"Huh," said Tony.

"Darcy-" began Jane.

"We're just here because we need something for the fight against Thanos and his Army of Darkness, which is parked on Asgard's front doorstep. I know it sounds crazy, but-"

"Darcy, you're home," Jane reminded her. "You're safe. None of that matters now."

"Safe?" There was a disbelieving splutter from Darcy. "Jane, nobody's safe. If Asgard falls, the Earth is screwed."

"Did Loki tell you that?"

"Did you say Thanos?" Tony put in, running his hands through his hair. He'd forgotten he still had on one armored glove, and half his hair stood on end from the static electricity. "Is he the guy Loki was working for during the Battle of New York?"

"Yep," Darcy said. "You'll like him, he's a total fashion victim. Looks like a professional wrestler. He messed with Loki's head pretty bad, but Loki's not an idiot and has finally figured out
"Do you know what Stockholm Syndrome is?" Jane broke in.

"Jane! Of course I know what Stockholm Syndrome is! Do I look like I'm under his control?"

Well..." she didn't quite know what to say to that. Darcy's clothes, normally oversized sweaters, were eye-catching in a Renaissance Faire kind of way, complete with armor that Jane suspected wasn't just decorative. Instead of her usual beanie hat, her hair was pulled away from her face with dramatic gold pins that allowed her hair to flow down her back. Jane had noticed the lack of glasses right away, but Darcy didn't seem to have any trouble seeing. There was also something else, something Jane couldn't quite put her finger on. A confidence she'd never had before or maybe a hint of maturity? It wasn't the look of someone who had spent six weeks under the thumb of a supervillain, but Jane was first and foremost a scientist. More data was needed.

"What does Loki want?" Natasha asked.

"He didn't tell me, though the Chitauri snuck into the palace and took down the shield, so I would guess he's looking for some kind of power source." As Darcy stopped, her eyes fixed on the arc reactor in Tony's chest.

All three followed her gaze. "He already knows how powerful this is," Tony grumbled darkly, his hand briefly covering the arc reactor.

"I know he's not here for Thor." Darcy glanced over her shoulder again, out of the windows, as if she didn't quite dare take her eyes off Loki. "Once we get what we need, then we'll be out of your hair and back to Asgard."

It was the second time she'd mentioned going back, and Jane added that to her data with a sense of foreboding. Hadn't she heard that Loki used mind control during the Battle of New York? Was that the reason for the change in Darcy? "Back? You can't go back to Asgard."

Darcy's mouth took on a mulish pout. "I've got unfinished business. So does Loki."

Tony studied her narrowly. "You seem to have gotten all cozy with the Ministry of Magic."

"Yeah, I've gotten to know him a little bit. I'm not saying he didn't royally screw the pooch and act like an asshole, because he did. I think he's finally realized he screwed himself along the way and now he's trying to fix it."

"If anyone's interested," Natasha put in, "I've dealt with people both with Stockholm Syndrome and the effects of Loki's scepter. I'm not seeing the usual signs."

"How is talking nice about Loki not seeing the usual signs? Identifying with your captor and all that," Tony said.

"She called him an asshole," Natasha pointed out.

"Thank you," Darcy returned, going over to shake the other woman's hand. "Finally, someone with a brain. I'm Darcy. You are?"

"Natasha Romanoff."

"You're the Black Widow! That's awesome! Huge fan here. Can I take you back to Asgard with me? I have several jealous noble ladies who need their asses kicked."
"Jealous ladies? Darcy!" Jane was only too familiar with professional jealousy, but the kind Darcy usually inspired often involved men. "What have you been up to in Asgard?" Her assistant had the grace to look abashed, and Jane's worst fears were confirmed. Obviously Darcy had found someone to feed her need for adrenaline.

The mortified look didn't last long. "Jane, aren't you listening? We're talking about the end of somebody's planet. The end of Thor's planet. Can we focus on what's important?"

"Pardon me if I don't jump right into my suit and fly off to Asgard," Tony said. "I don't trust Loki, with good reason. He tried to invade our planet, in case you forgot, and I'm not giving him jack shit until I have some proof this threat is real. Tell me what your boyfriend told you."

Jane knew that Tony only meant the boyfriend reference as a jibe, but Darcy's cheeks grew red, and Jane decided this was her worst fear (except for Darcy being dead). Loki's love of chaos and Darcy's love of a rush had probably brought them together. Tony must have caught on at the same moment. "Wait. Is he really your boyfriend? God, Lewis, really? Your taste is men has not improved."

"I'm not dating you, am I?" Darcy returned. "You know nothing about what I've been through, or what Loki's been through."

"I know what this planet has been through. I know people have died. He killed Coulson, Darcy!"

That drained all the color out of Darcy's cheeks, and she fell back a step. "Agent Coulson?"

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"What do you need?"

It was an innocuous way to start a conversation, Loki supposed, as he walked out into the desert with Thor. It held no belligerence or insult, it was just a question. Even so, Loki ground his teeth and resisted the urge to hit his not-brother. He swallowed an enormous lump of bile and rage that almost choked him and took a deep breath. Extreme emotions might wake the dragon. "I won't take much of your time. I need a power source, and then I'll be gone."

"A power source for what?"

The question was studiously neutral, and Loki wondered at Thor's calm. To call him a hothead was being kind, and very little got between the God of Thunder and a good fight. "Hlidskjalf's shield."

Thor stopped to face him. "Then the war Mother predicted has come. How did the Titan discover how to disable the shield? That's hardly common knowledge."

"I told him," he said, to see what the reaction would be. It wasn't what he expected.

"I am sorry, Loki."

"For what, you great lug?"
"For not being a better brother to you."

Loki balled up his fist and hit Thor square on the jaw. When the warrior stumbled back, Loki barreled in to him, knocking them both to the ground. Finding himself on top, Loki hit him again, allowing his fury off its leash just for a moment. Leave it to Thor to have an epiphany at the worst possible moment. "Really, Thor? Centuries I put up with never being good enough, being an afterthought no matter my accomplishments, and you only realize it now? Know your place, Brother. How many times did you say that to me?" With one last shove, he rose and brushed himself off. "I've no time for this."

"I wanted to go after you," Thor called after him as he stomped back toward the lab, stopping him more effectively than a hand on the shoulder would have done. "When you fell from the Bifrost. If only to bring your body home, but if I had done so, I might have been able to save you from the Titan."

"Who stopped you? The Allfather?"

"Nay. Others."

Thor looked away as he climbed to his feet, and Loki took that to mean Sif and the Warriors Three. "So that's it? All is forgiven because Thanos took hot pokers to me?" That was the least of what had been done to him, but he wasn't about to share the horrors he did remember. "What about your precious Earth and precious Jane? What about the Destroyer? The Chitauri?"

"Do you regret any of it?"

"I regret not winning," Loki replied with some asperity. What was the use of regret? He could change nothing of the past. He couldn't change the decisions he'd made in Asgard that ended with his brother more favored than ever and himself falling into the abyss. He couldn't change Thanos' brutal tactics or that he'd been broken by them. He couldn't change how he'd become a tool of the Titan, a thing to be used and discarded.

Involuntarily, he glanced back at the lab. If any of those things had not happened, he might never have found Darcy. Norns, he should scorn such a thought. She knew what he was.

She professed to not care.

He wasn't certain he could believe her.

He had no time for matters of the heart, either, and Loki turned to back to Thor. "Why is it that you wallow here on Midgard with your lady? Because Mother told you to stay here?"

"Would that be so terrible?"

"The Mighty Thor, sitting out battle because his mother told him to," Loki mocked. "That's beyond ridiculous. What is it that you and Mother hope to accomplish? What do you think will happen now that I've been given the keys to the castle again?"

"That you have a second chance to make the right choice, and that you will remember who you once were."

"Sentiment," Loki spat. "The brother you remember, he doesn't exist anymore. Mayhap he never did but for your own imaginings."

"No. He was loyal and steadfast-"
"He was a fool! Don't you understand, Thor? I spent centuries trying to please the Allfather and wanting to be your equal. What a colossal waste of time, for I never had a chance. Because of where I came from, I will never be one of you. *I am not your brother.*"

"You will always be my brother," Thor returned with a calm that was really beginning to get under Loki's skin. "It matters not to me *what* you are, for I have always known *who* you are." Finally, there was a look of intensity on Thor's face as he walked up to Loki and put a hand on his shoulder. "'Tis you who do not understand."

"I'd very much like to hit you again. I recall the Thor who insisted he would hunt down the Frost Giants and slay them all."

"We were boys, Loki. I'd like to think we've both matured since then. Think upon what I've said." Thor glanced up. "Here comes Lady Darcy. Thank you for returning her."

Darcy was indeed marching toward them with purpose, and it was all Loki could do not to reach out and pull her to his side and tell Thor to go jump in the nearest singularity. Thanks to the bracelets, her life was necessary to his, but he knew that had nothing to do with why he wanted to take her back to Asgard with him. He must have twitched or had a strange expression on his face, for Thor raised his eyebrows. "You are returning her, aren't you?"

If Thor deduced his feelings for Darcy, then he was becoming transparent indeed. Loki turned to her, right into a slap across the face. It was certainly his day for it. "What have I done to displease milady?"

"Let's talk about Agent Coulson," she said in tones of pure uru.

"Ah," said Thor to no one in particular, backing away. "I'll leave this one to you, brother."
Trust Me

Chapter Summary

Lots of angst and lots of trust issues. Loki gets what he wants... sort of.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! I'm fresh off seeing Ragnarok, and though I won't spoil anything, I will say Go See It!

I'd set a goal for myself of finishing this chapter by the end of October. Here it is only November 4th, so that's not too bad. My next chapter goal is the end of November. After seeing Loki in action again, I'm ready to dive right into the next chapter.

I apologize for any mistakes in advance. Word to rich text isn't cooperating again, and it seems I've lost all but the most basic punctuation. Meh.

Just one warning: there is a mention of suicide, if you squint.

As usual, no copyright infringement intended to anybody, especially Marvel. This keeps me out of trouble.

I'm friends with the monster that's under my bed
Get along with the voices inside of my head
You're trying to save me, stop holding your breath
And you think I'm crazy, yeah, you think I'm crazy
Well, that's not fair
Eminem, Monster

The sun set, the flaming orange orb sinking down into the desert for the night. The air cooled and Darcy shivered and it wasn't because of the weather. Tony Stark had been both furious and heartbroken that SHIELD agent Phil Coulson had died during the battle of New York at the hands of Loki. That summed up the way she felt too. She hadn't wanted to believe him, but Tony
sucked at lying.

"Darcy." Loki's tone was chilly. "I've told you a thousand times what I am, yet you would not listen."

She searched his eyes, but she wasn't sure what she was looking for. Sorrow? Regret? Acknowledgement of some kind that trying to take over her world had been a really, really bad idea? People had been hurt. People died.

"Finally, you see the monster," he said.

Slapping him again would have been satisfying, but Darcy settled for pounding her fists on his chest. The last thing she wanted to hear was his shit about villainy. What she wanted was an explanation, something she could understand. "Stop it. Stop it. You're not a monster. Why Coulson? He was no threat to you."

"It was war and mortals tend to die in it."

She wasn't going to let him blow this off. "Yes, he was mortal. Like me. He took my iPod once, but he was nice enough to give it back. Why did you kill him? Why didn't you kill me?"

"What is it you want?" Loki's poker face was back. "An apology for the fact that you are still alive? Shall I get down on my knees and beg forgiveness?"

Darcy hadn't seen the poker face lately and she hadn't missed it. He'd been so open with her over the last couple of weeks, like they really were something to each other. Now all he wanted to do was push her away. He hadn't actually said so, but she wasn't stupid. He had not been the same since the reveal of his Frost Giant heritage, even when she told him it didn't matter. "I am not the one you need to apologize to, and by the way, you can't say you're sorry to the dead. Was it you, or was it Thanos' brainwashing? Can you look me in the eye and tell me the truth?"

"Truth?" He laughed bitterly. "The truth, impertinent wench, is that I will never know. I cannot tell, looking back even now, where Loki ends and the Titan begins. Did Thanos torture me to bend my ambition and my fury to his purposes? Almost certainly. Was he commanding me directly to take the agent's life to anger my brother? He did not. That was my choice."

Tears scalded her eyes, and she wasn't even sure what she was weeping for, the loss of quiet, unassuming Agent Coulson or the suffering Loki had endured or the terrible things he had done. Maybe it was for her own naivete. She swallowed a lump the size of a baseball. "I guess I don't know you at all."

"How can you?" he asked in a quiet, vicious tone. "I am a god, foolish girl. I've done things you cannot imagine and seen every corner of the universe in all its variety and depravity. I've lived for a thousand years before you ever drew your first breath and I shall live long after you've taken your last."

Silver Tongue's words skidded to a halt, and Darcy didn't miss the peculiar note in his voice. He did care about her fate, then. Even so, it was not enough. He'd rather push her away than admit that he'd screwed up or that he'd been too weak to fight off the freaky purple Titan. Damn the Aesir and their Viking machismo. Darcy whirled away, to strike out on her own into the desert because she seriously needed some space. Then she turned back. "You know what? When you call yourself a monster, I'm never sure who you're trying to convince, me or yourself. Just as a reminder, supervillains aren't charming and funny and they don't stand up to bullies for mortal nobodies. They don't save the lives of aforementioned mortal nobodies."
"Accident, perhaps? Whim?"

How had she forgotten what an arrogant prick Loki could be? "All I've ever wanted was to get to know the real you, the good and the bad. It's a shame that even you don't know who that is." Darcy left him with that, stomping off into the scrub and the darkening desert.

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Loki meandered back to the lab, knowing he would rather face Thor and his compatriots than Darcy. He was, however, in no hurry to get there.

Of course he knew who he was. How dare she?

He was the son of a cold-blooded (literally) dictator who'd thought nothing of grinding the simple people of Midgard beneath his heel. Having taken his own stab at conquering Earth, he supposed it proved that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. He'd tried his hand at regicide, fratricide and genocide, mostly for his own selfish reasons. If that wasn't the definition of a monster, he wasn't sure what was.

So why did Darcy continually insist he was not? She kept coming back to him, even though she knew his darkest secret. He glanced behind him, but she was nowhere in sight. Mayhap, finally, he had chased her away. That gave him no comfort or sense of relief. Quite the opposite, in fact.

He didn't need her, Loki reminded himself. He didn't need anyone.

Then why had the thought of her last breath ripped his heart out?

Loki found himself standing outside the lab, staring blankly at the glass front doors, and he wondered how long he'd been standing there. Thor and Tony Stark stood on the other side of it, grinning like idiots. Obviously, they'd drawn their own conclusions from his argument with Darcy. Thor opened the door for him with courtly flourish. "Loki, won't you come in?"

If Thor thought they were going to talk over the mess that was his liaison with Darcy, he was mistaken. Loki could think of few things more unpalatable than advice on Midgardian women coming from Thor. Even so, he walked into the lab. Agent Romanoff and Jane Foster were sitting in office chairs, drinking out of bottles. They both watched him. Lady Widow scrutinized him because she knew what he was capable of; Foster probably wanted to make sure he wasn't dragging the dead body of one Darcy Lewis behind him. While Thor took a seat next to Jane, Stark went to the refrigerator and grabbed three more bottles. He kept one for himself, gave one to Thor, and tossed the last one to Loki. "I guess I owe you a drink. Have a seat and let's talk turkey, Merlin."

Loki ignored the jibe and caught the bottle. He pulled out a chair of his own, spinning it around to sit backwards on it. The bottle contained beer, and though he'd had better, it did slake his thirst. It seemed overly warm in the lab in spite of the cool desert evening. Darcy had not returned yet, and he wondered if he should be concerned. Then again, she'd lived here and knew her way around. She wouldn't appreciate his concern, and if he was trying to give her up, her safety shouldn't be significant to him.

Tony pointed his bottle at Loki. "Thor tells me you need a power source."
"Indeed."

"How big?"

"Enough to power a small city."

Foster made a choked sound, or mayhap a splutter of disbelief, and Thor jumped into the conversation. "The palace of Hlidskjalf is immense, so Loki is not exaggerating. If Asgard is under siege, thousands of my people have taken refuge within its walls."

Stark tapped the glowing circle in the middle of his chest. "Then you've got your eyes on this. No can do, hot shot."

"I'm sure he had no plan of swiping it out of your chest, Tony." Darcy appeared from outside, wrapped in a disreputable, washed out blanket. She shot Loki a savage glare.

He eyed the blanket with disfavor, for such an ugly thing should not be anywhere near Darcy, covering up the curves so admirably shown off by Aesir clothing and armor. The blanket was a muddy gray and showed signs of having reds, browns and oranges in it at one time. Unfortunately, he'd given up the right to conjure her a cloak more befitting. "Of course not. Stark would die without his reactor," Loki said smoothly, though there may have been a hint of menace in his tone. Every single person in the room heard it, and the only ones who didn't stiffen were Thor and Darcy. The rest were so easy to scare and he just couldn't help himself. In truth, he hadn't thought much beyond getting to Midgard, but his silver tongue didn't let him down. "Bringing the rest of the Avengers down on my head would hardly be to my benefit. However, if I've learned anything about Stark, he does not travel light. I expect there are several arc reactors on the premises, and as he can only use one at a time, I'm sure he could see fit to let me borrow one."

"You've got balls, I'll give you that," Stark replied. "After what happened in New York, what makes you think I'd trust you with a roll of toilet paper?"

"I did not think Earth's mightiest heroes were in the habit of letting others die when they could do something to help."

That caused them a moment of silence, and Agent Romanoff was the one to break it. Her expression challenged him over the rim of her beer. "We're also not in the habit of letting our enemies manipulate us. How do we know any of this is true?"

Romanoff's expertise in misleading an opponent was second only to him, and Loki smirked at her. A shame she was too grounded in doing good, for she would make an excellent partner in crime. "You will simply have to trust me, Lady Widow."

"That's the most messed up thing I've heard today," Stark said.

Darcy spoke up. "If you don't trust him, trust me. I'll see that the arc reactor gets to where it needs to go. There are two wizards back in Asgard that have been working on a new power crystal for the shield, but they don't have the time or materials to do it."

"I will take the reactor back to Asgard," Thor said, standing. "You may trust me on this, my friends."

"Your track record hasn't been great either, Point Break," Stark retorted. "You're the one who let Antler Boy get away in the first place. And if anybody's going, it's me. If I'm going to part with some of my tech, not that I have agreed to any of this, mind you, but I want to see this great battle for Asgard myself."
Heat crept up Loki's spine, encircling his bones, tightening his muscles. It flowed across his shoulders and around his neck, and for a moment he thought it was some bizarre reaction to the desert heat. Then the pressure moved to his chest and he struggled to draw breath. He blinked and found himself lying on his back on the stone floor of the Lonely Mountain. Smaug peered down at him, one massive claw holding him down.

"Well," Smaug said. "It seems you've been busy whilst I slept, godling. Where are we? Were you hoping to hide the lady from me here and then slip back to Asgard?"

"I am trying to save my world," Loki threw back, swallowing his shock. He'd expected some sort of warning that Smaug was beginning to stir, but he'd mistaken the signs. Was he never to get ahead of all his problems? "Not everything is about you, accursed beast."

The dragon snorted, and Loki winced at the superheated breath as Smaug leaned closer. "You are such a fine liar. You cannot hide her from me, you know. She has sworn herself to me, and she will keep her word."

Loki was so taken by surprise that he forgot he was trying to save his magic. Marshalling what power he had, he shoved the great beast's paw away, breaking his hold. Loki abruptly found himself back in the New Mexico lab of Jane Foster. Stark, Thor, Romanoff, Jane and Darcy were all staring at him, and he wondered how long he'd been in Smaug's thrall again.

"Loki?" Darcy, momentarily putting aside her fury, held his hands in her own.

Heat wrapped around his throat again and squeezed. A voice whispered in his ear with a laugh. "You are weak, my fine godling. When I am ready, you will not be able to withstand me and she will be mine."

The fire subsided, retreated. Loki gripped Darcy's hands in return. "Darcy, what have you done?" Her expression was confused, but also guarded, and he knew Smaug had spoken truly. A promise given to an illusion should be nothing, but the dragon had long since ceased to be under his control. Loki counted himself lucky that he was still himself. "Did you swear yourself to the dragon?"

"Uhh, maybe..."

"Why?" Loki knew he was squeezing her hands too hard, but he couldn't bring himself to let go. Already she was slipping away from him and he should just let it happen, but not like this. Not to Smaug, who was more his fault than hers. "Why would you swear yourself to such a creature?"

"Because it was the only way to save your life," she said.

***

"Answer me, Heimdall, you great ass!" Loki shouted at the sky. "Tell Hoenir we need to come back!"

From the lab door, Darcy watched him. He and Thor had been yelling up at the stars for the past five minutes, with no luck. He'd also been wiping the sweat off his forehead, even though it was about forty degrees outside.
She wished she could hate Loki and get on with her life.

"He'll never answer if you swear at him," Thor said, also studying the night sky. "He may be focused on the armies of Thanos. Mayhap we are missing the battle."

He sounded sad at this, and Darcy sighed. Thor would get his chance to fight, and she knew Loki was concerned about Hoenir. If the old wizard had gotten himself and his new Bifrost blown up by the Chitauri, they were well and truly screwed. There was no way back to Asgard without it, though Loki's concern was more personal, even if he wouldn't admit it. Hoenir had been more of a father figure to him than Odin.

Loki hadn't had anything to say about her sacrifice to the dragon.

He'd stared at her in horror before walking away, and she had no idea what to make of his reaction. Saving his life should be something to be thankful for, right? Thanks, Darcy, you're the best. I happen to like living.

Ugh, God forbid he should admit to a feeling of any sort. Apparently, that went against the supervillain's code of conduct. Drawing Jane's old comforter around herself, she went back inside and threw herself into a chair. Tony appeared from out of nowhere and rolled another chair in front of hers. Then he stared at her as if she was under a microscope. Darcy glared back at him. "No mind control here, if that's what you're looking for. I'm still me, asshat."

At that, he sat back, satisfied. "That you are. You've got a bit of your mom in you."

"Not a compliment."

"It wasn't meant to be. That woman has cost me two PA's so far. No one but Pepper knew how to put her off, but since Pep's doing the CEO thing, I've had to go to more of your mom's parties. She's a stubborn old bat, and any sheer force of will you inherited may have saved your life while adventuring in the stars with Green Goblin. Look, I'm sorry about the bad taste in men wisecrack--"

Tony had been there for the worst day of her life and Darcy shook her head. "At the moment, I can't say that I disagree with you."

"Loki seems really into you." At her snort of disbelief, he persisted. "Does he know?"

"About Grayson? No, and I expect you to keep your mouth shut, Tony." Seeing Tony brought back so much, so much Darcy had tried to put aside. She could remember the party, all the right people mingling, drinks in hand, congratulating Grayson Graham on his new business venture and his new fiancée. It had taken months afterward to get rid of the metallic taste in her mouth from the gun, much longer to come to grips with the fact that she was not worthless. Darcy rolled those feelings up into a ball and kicked it into the darkest corners of her brain. She'd given Loki enough information to put him off and had no intention of humiliating herself by telling him all.

Loki and Thor came back inside. Loki threw himself in a chair while Thor grabbed more beer. Tony turned to face them. "Still here, huh? I guess nobody's listening."

Loki scowled and accepted a beer from Thor. He took a long swig, then held the cold bottle to his forehead and closed his eyes.

"We shall have to keep trying," said Thor. "Loki, there is another possibility."
"I can't worldwalk all of you back to Asgard, if that's what you're asking." Loki didn't open his eyes, and his exhaustion was palpable. Darcy got the sense he was fighting something, probably keeping the dragon from taking over. He was pretending hard that she wasn't in the room, too, like a sulky teenager. Whatevs.

"I speak of Jane's Bifrost," Thor said.

This time, Loki's eyes did pop open, only to narrow. "You jest."

Tony's smile was beatific, and he spun around in his chair. "No joke here. Foster's work with Einstein-Rosen Bridges is genius. Wormholes are not only possible, but we can generate them. We sent a potted plant somewhere in the universe and picked you guys up in the process."

Loki sat up in his chair and put the beer aside. "That explains the last wretched part of the ride."

"It doesn't explain those crazy ladies--"

Loki jumped to his feet, cutting Darcy off. "Show me this Bifrost."

He avoided looking at her, and Darcy rolled her eyes. Maybe those ladies were a hallucination caused by the energy of two competing Bifrosts (don't cross the streams!), but she doubted it. There was a reason he didn't want to talk about it. They all paraded to the other side of the lab, where Jane was discussing things with the two new lab assistants while the Black Widow looked on. There was a rough circle painted on the floor, in a shade of hot pink that Darcy recognized from the time she'd tried to give the faded plastic lizards out front some new life. There was also another new addition. "Janie, honey, there's a hole in the roof."

"Once I realized the bridge was going to work, there was no point in fixing it," Jane said vaguely, not giving Darcy any idea how it came to be in the first place. The astrophysicist had set up an enormous bank of monitors and computer equipment around the circle. On the wall at the back of the room was a blackboard covered with equations. Loki glanced at the equipment, then dismissed it for the blackboard. He studied the equations for a while, then picked up chalk and eraser to make a few changes.

"Hey!" Jane squawked. "Do you know how long I spent figuring that all out?"

Loki had an expression on his face that might almost have been a smile, and he tapped a set of numbers with chalk. "She sent that potted plant to the Sovereign." Then he wrote in a different set of numbers.

"So, are we actually going to do this thing?" Jane asked. "I mean, are we going to help Loki?"

Darcy considered all the faces in the room. The Black Widow was inscrutable, while Thor was hopeful. Jane's expression reflected concern, but her new lab assistants were downright terrified. Loki, of course, appeared indifferent, as if their decision meant nothing. Tony was staring straight at her. "We're going to help Darcy out," he said. "And we're going to help Asgard out. If Antlers gets helped in the process, that's not my problem. But I'm going along."

"We're all going," the Widow said.
"Jane should stay," Thor put in.

"No way," she retorted. "FitzSimmons can run the Bifrost as well as I can. I built it, and if we're using live subjects, I get to go first."

There was no change in Loki's expression, but there was something burning in his eyes, and Darcy thought she saw a hint of relief. He did not express it, simply inclined his head to all of them. Then he put the chalk and eraser down and regarded her intently. "I should like a word in private, milady."

Now he remembered her existence. "Let's take a walk, Magic Man."

It was full dark, and even under the old comforter, Darcy was cold. She'd gotten used to temperate Asgard, and she couldn't be bothered to go get a jacket in the trailer she'd shared with Jane. By unspoken agreement, they both turned away from the desert and started walking toward Puente Antiguo's main street. The diner was lit up, along with Gino's Pizza and the new enchilada place, but there wasn't much foot traffic. The town's two bars were at the other end of the street, the only area where people were about. Considering how they were both dressed, they were going to get some strange looks, but Darcy was past caring. Let them stare. They'd seen weirder in this town.

"You could remain here, if you wish."

That was a hell of an opening and Darcy frowned at Loki. "What about the bracelets?"

"Thor could get Mother to transfer them to someone else."

Since she'd never even heard the possibility mentioned back in Asgard, Darcy had no doubt he'd made that up on the spot. "Not going to be that easy to get rid of me, Loki."

"I am not trying to get rid of you."

"Then what are you doing? If you go back without me, you'll die. I didn't make nice with Smaug just so you could find a different way to off yourself."

He didn't say anything more, scowling down at the sidewalk like it offended him in some way. She kept walking and didn't try to cajole anything more out of him. He wasn't making much sense. Situated on their side of the street, the Bucking Bronco was the worst bar in town, but she'd take it. She needed a good, strong Earth drink, and she had Loki to protect her if things got rough. They often did, as the local police were called at least twice a week. She didn't doubt that Loki would protect her.

Loki's first grasp of her arm missed, and he only got a handful of comforter. The second time he did better, pulling her to a stop before she got through the saloon doors. "Darcy." He halted, started again. "I find that your safety means a great deal to me."

"I know."

"Then you will stay here, far from Thanos."

"Nope."

His nostrils flared and he opened his mouth to argue, but Darcy got there first. "You think your safety means nothing to me? Remember the dragon?"
"I did not ask you to make such a sacrifice for me!"

"You weren't there to ask," Darcy pointed out. Suddenly, she didn't want to fight and she didn't want to wade through catcalling locals to get a drink. She just wanted to go home, and she didn't mean the lab or New York. "Look, we've gotten this far together, and I'm not abandoning you now. And if you utter one more word about being a villain or an undeserving monster, I will smack you again, so help me. Get your shit together, Loki, and let's go fight the real bad guy, 'kay?" With that, she turned and headed back toward Jane's lab. She hadn't gone far when she realized he wasn't behind her. He was still standing in front of the bar, looking as if he'd had a brush with a cattle stampede. "Loki?"

"I still don't understand you. At all."

"You don't have to understand. You just have to trust me."
The L Word

Chapter Summary

Old enemies make a surprise return.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! I'm way, way overdue in posting this, it just wouldn't come together, but I'm glad it's finally here. I'll count it as a victory! The ending is coming soon. Thanks to everyone for you patience and for reading!

Looking forward to Black Panther!!

I seem to have lost my beta reader, so any mistakes are my own.

No copyright infringement intended. Just happy to be here.

But she said where'd you wanna go?

How much you wanna risk?

I'm not looking for somebody with some superhuman gifts

Some superhero, some fairytale bliss

Just something I can turn to, somebody I can kiss

I want something just like this

Something Just Like This, The Chainsmokers & Coldplay

To say that the ride back to Asgard on Jane Foster’s Bifröst was miserable was an understatement too vast to contemplate. Several other words describing it came to Loki, including appalling, wretched and harrowing. Mayhap desperate was in there somewhere too, as he had to be desperate to endure such a trial. Foster’s Bifröst got them where they needed to go, but it lacked the refinements generations of Æsir had built into their version. The trip had been rough, jolting through star systems, cutting far too close to stars and planets alike, with no adjustments for the
pull of gravity. He felt like Thor had thrown him back to Asgard.

They all crash landed on the end of the rainbow bridge where the Bifröst once stood, far too close to the edge of Asgard for Loki’s liking. Having fallen once before, he had no desire to repeat the experience. He hadn’t dared to adjust the coordinates off the top of his head so they could arrive inside the walls of Hlidskjalf. They could have landed in the midst of Thanos’ army, or worse. “Norns, that was ghastly. You’ve still got work to do, Dr. Foster.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Foster returned, standing and brushing herself off. In spite of her nonchalance, she looked a bit green.

Loki reached out to steady Darcy, for she looked ill too, but she waved him off. “I’m okay.”

“I need to puke,” somebody muttered, and it turned out to be Stark, who should be used to extraordinary g-forces. He’d worn his armor, and his mask flipped up as he crawled to the edge to dry heave over the water. Once done, he glared at the spectacular view of the universe from Asgard. “Where’s this battle I keep hearing about?”

“Turn around,” the Widow said. She was already on her feet, as if the bumpy ride hadn’t ruffled her at all. She and Thor stood together and watched as Thanos’ army swarmed over Hlidskjalf. Even in the midst of a siege, Asgard was beautiful, the golden spires of the city glinting from the energy discharge of battle. In contrast, the snowcapped mountains behind it seemed serene. Loki wished he could find a cave up there and live like a hermit for a few hundred years.

Actually, such an existence sounded boring and lonely.

Since when did he care about being lonely?

“Brother,” Thor said in tones of awe, “this is the army you’ve been fighting?”

There was an insult in there somewhere if Loki was inclined to look for it, as if he wasn’t capable of mounting a defense against such a large force. He wanted to remind Thor that they’d both been taught the fine art of war by Asgard’s best, but he was forestalled by Natasha Romanoff. “Here, you’ll need these,” she said, handing out tiny earpieces. “We found it works really well to be able to communicate like this during a battle. Thanks to you.” She nodded in Loki’s direction.

“You’re most welcome,” Loki assured her as he pressed it into his ear and watched Darcy do the same. While she did it, her eyes narrowed as if daring him to argue. That would be a waste of his time, as he couldn’t even convince her of his own villainy. How was he to keep her from the battle if she was determined to fight? Should he even bother to try?

“They’ve seen us,” Stark warned.

They were so far behind enemy lines that they could see what looked to be a food line or feeding trough of some kind. Those taking a break from battle still had weapons, and they dropped everything to start shooting and running toward them. “Time to go.” Loki pulled Darcy to his side, and he was glad she didn’t resist.

“Follow me, my friends! To battle!” Thor took to the sky with Mjolnir in one hand and Jane Foster in the other. Stark followed with the Black Widow, leaving Darcy and Loki standing together.

Darcy wrinkled her nose. “He’s a little too excited about swinging his hammer for my tastes.”
“That’s why I wanted to leave him on Midgard.” Loki wasn’t looking at Thor, but at Darcy. Despite being disheveled from their adventures, she took his breath away. Her dark hair had come loose from the combs keeping it in check to fall about her shoulders. She had left behind the horrendous blanket, once again looking like a shield maiden of Asgard. Her eyes reflected the starlight and some emotion he did not dare to name. Mayhap it was not that she refused to see his villainous nature, but that she saw beyond it. Otherwise, how could she look at him like that? She regarded him like she believed she found good in him, and mayhap something more.

Her mouth curved into an impish smile, as if she had some idea of what he was thinking. “Shouldn’t we be going?"

The Chitauri drew closer, still shooting, though not with much accuracy. Loki used magic to transport them both to his library. Darcy looked around and frowned. “What—?”

“Norns, I cannot live without you, love,” Loki said, resting his forehead on hers. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing her in. “In order to beat Thanos, I need to know you are safe.”

With that, he vanished.

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“Asshole!” Darcy screeched, flinging herself at the balcony doors. They didn’t open, and didn’t even give her the courtesy of a rattle, like they might give way at some future point. “You are such a douchebag. You can’t say that and walk away! You also can’t lock me in here. I’ll find a way out, I swear!”

Who would have thought Loki would bring up the word love first? She’d had no intentions of bringing it up for fear of nursing a serious broken heart. Some guys just ran when they heard it and Loki was infamous for running away. Now was a fine time for him to have an epiphany.

“Oooh, did he use the L word?”

It was Tony. With the earpiece in, they all could hear what was going on. “Tony, you’ve got to let me out. I’m locked in Loki’s library. There’s a balcony that faces the mountains.” Darcy kicked the doors, not because she expected to get out, but because it made her feel better. What she could see of the battle looked fierce, with Chitauri skiffs strafing the palace and the defenders on its walls. Loki needed somebody to cover his backside, or at the very least needed somebody to keep an eye out if Smaug decided to take over again. She didn’t believe for a second any of the Æsir would go out of their way to save him if he needed it, acting king or not.

“Stark.” Loki’s voice was firm. “She’s safe where she is, out of the way.”

Darcy kicked the doors again and winced as pain shot through her foot. He might have decided he loved her, but he still didn’t trust her. “Don’t listen to Loki. Remember how big of a prick he is? He threw you out of your own penthouse. Let me out.”

“Thanks for bringing up those terrible memories, Lewis. Look, unless you got recruited by Coulson out in the desert and became a ninja, I’m going to have to side with Lokes on this one. God, I can’t believe I just agreed with Reindeer Games— shit!”

“We need to rid ourselves of those Chitauri skiffs or we’ll be cut down from above.”
Loki wasn’t talking to her, but giving orders. She gave the door one final kick (with her other foot) and turned to the other exits from the room. She jumped when she ran by the yellow bird in the cage, for it flew at the bars when she passed, twittering and squawking, talons clawing at its prison. It seemed angrier than before, and she hoped Loki had remembered to feed it. She tried the doors to the bedroom and the main salon. No luck. She really was locked in here. What was she supposed to do if she needed to pee?

“I’ll deal with the skiffs,” she heard Tony say. “Just tell your boys not to shoot at me with those flaming arrows. They might get stuck in the joints of my armor. Where the hell is Thor?”

“I am trying to find a safe place for Jane,” Thor himself replied, sounding distracted. “Mother’s ladies have locked themselves in and refuse to open the door.”

“Just as well. That’s like putting her into a cave full of bilgesnipes. Put her in my library with Darcy,” Loki replied. “Lady Widow, your left!”

“I’ve got it,” Natasha said.

Darcy ran back to the balcony doors. She was certainly getting her cardio today. Any minute now, Thor was going to fling those doors open. “Nobody's locking the Black Widow up, and I bet Thor’s not locking Jane up.”

“I am certain Foster knows enough to stay out of the way, and as for Agent Romanoff, I wouldn’t dare.”

Loki sounded out of breath. No doubt he was wreaking havoc among the Chitauri with daggers, magic and his father’s staff. Curse him, why couldn’t he see her as anything but a delicate mortal flower? They were a team. At least Darcy thought they were a team. “I hate you.”

“Are you blushing? Your cheeks turn such a delicate shade of pink when you lie.”

“I’m going back to sleeping in my own bed.”

“How lonely for you.”

“You’re just so damn sure of your own prowess, aren’t you? Let me tell you something, Magic Man—”

“Guys,” Tony interrupted, sounding pained and a bit tinny from inside his suit. “What is this, Real Girlfriends of Asgard? You know we can all hear you, right? TMI.”

The balcony doors popped open. Thor set Jane down ever-so-gently and somehow also managed to catch Darcy in one arm as she was going by. With a fond, “I’ll be back soon,” to Jane, he tossed Darcy toward the table and the doors shut again.

“I hate you too, Thor!” Darcy yelled, but didn’t bother charging the exit again. Loki and his magic would have made sure those doors were securely bolted. Instead, she surveyed the library. The books of magic wouldn’t help, as she had no power of her own to bend the universe to her will. There were, however, a number of artifacts that already had magic attached to them. “Huh. Maybe I can let myself out. Jane, help me. Let’s see what some of this stuff does.”

“Darcy,” Loki warned in her ear. “Touch nothing. Sif! Get some reinforcements down there!”

She had no intention of listening to him, so she yanked the earpiece out and shoved it into a pocket. The desk contained innocuous items, and the table only held books (someone had
straightened up since she and Loki had done the nasty on it. Elven magic, probably). She went to the bookcases. There were all sorts of unidentifiable stuff between the books, on top of them and in open spaces. She found a palm-sized pyramid made of magenta stone and gold accents. Darcy shook it and tried to open it, but neither worked. “Jane?”

The other woman stood behind her, regarding the room as if lost. Her eyes were wide, and she slowly turned in a circle. “This is Loki’s room?”

“It’s his library.”

“What’s with the bird?”

The yellow bird continued to chirp and shriek, but Darcy ignored it. “That’s not important right now. We’ve got to find a way out of here.”

Jane blinked and seemed to come out of her state of shock. “What for? You can’t be serious. There’s a battle going on out there, and last time I checked, you don’t even know how to karate chop a piece of toast.”

“I’m offended, Jane!”

“Oh, please. You’re an adrenaline junkie and we both know it. Give me one good reason why I should help you jump feet first into this fight.”

Darcy had a million reasons. How to explain to Jane what she’d lived through and what she’d learned in the last few weeks? She boiled it down. “Because Asgard is worth fighting for. Loki is worth fighting for.”

Jane stared at her. Then she cracked a smile. “I think you’re crazy, but it’s a good kind of crazy on you. Let’s see what cool Asgardian science toys he’d got.”

Both women turned to the bookcases. Darcy found a glass ball with little floating specks in a rainbow of colors. It was quite pretty and reminded her of a snow globe, though there was no tree or sleigh or anything else in it but those flecks. Maybe it was just decorative. She jiggled it, but the only thing that happened was those glitter blobs started darting around faster. It didn’t seem to be useful, and she put it back and moved on.

An Æsir skiff darted by the balcony, smoke coming from the back of it, and the bird set up a ruckus again. Jane held out a jar with runes all over it. “What do you suppose this is?”

“It says do not touch, though in much stronger language. Something about your teeth falling out and you will produce no more children. I wouldn’t take the top off if I were you. Maybe we’re just looking for a magic sword or crowbar to get the doors open. Is there anything in that corner?”

While they rummaged, it seemed to get brighter in the room. At first, Darcy paid no attention. They found three staffs, a sword and something that might have been a bow, though it had no string. In spite of their best efforts, nothing worked on the doors. Darcy threw the sword aside. “This isn’t working. I guess we keep looking.”

The brightness had become noticeable. “Darcy,” Jane said, pointing to the snow globe. The glow grew until there was a bright flash, and Darcy and Jane had to shield their eyes. When it was over, nothing had changed but the birdcage, which crumbled as if it had been built out of sand. Or magic. Or magic sand. At the end of it, she and Jane were no longer alone in the library, and the bird had transformed.
Sigyn.

Darcy shoved the earpiece back in. “Loki!”

“Well, if it isn’t the Midgard whore, and you’ve brought a friend,” Sigyn said with great satisfaction and shook out her hair. There was a pile of yellow feathers on the floor. “Where is Loki?”

Speaking of which, his voice came through the earpiece. “Darcy, what is it?”

“You and I have really different ideas of what safe means,” she shot back at him as she put herself between Sigyn and Jane. “Most guys don’t lock up their current girlfriend with their batshit ex!” She cursed herself for being so stupid. The noblewoman’s disappearance had coincided with the appearance of the bird, whose feathers had been the exact shade of her golden blond hair, and she had never gotten an honest answer from Loki about where the bird had come from. “I know you want to kill me, Sigyn, but we don’t really have time for this right now.”

“Sigyn is free?” Loki demanded.

“What the hell is going on?” Tony put in. “Who’s Sigyn?”

“Answer me, girl,” Sigyn commanded. She was so furious that she seemed to have a halo of crackling energy around her entire body. “Where is he? Who does he think he is, trapping me in animal form, all for a mortal nobody? Where is he?” She extended her hand to Darcy’s throat, but then drew back.

“You can’t touch me.” Darcy put her hand on the amulet Loki had given her, even as she made sure Jane was still behind her. Jane had her eyes fastened on Sigyn, though she had her hands behind her back, trying to grab one of the weapons they’d found.

Sigyn glowered at Darcy, eyes burning, before her mouth curved into a smile like a crocodile. “Perhaps not, though there are ways around the magic.” She dodged around Darcy, moving fast, and dragged Jane out into the open. Jane struggled, swinging the staff she’d managed to grab, but the Æsir woman knocked it aside. Darcy scooped it up as Sigyn grabbed Jane’s throat and pulled her to the balcony doors. “Let her go,” Darcy said, staff held in front of her. She’d seen Sif use it, and that was the extent of her knowledge of the weapon. Sigyn didn’t need to know that. “It’s me you want.”

“You do not command me.” Sigyn waved her hand at the balcony doors and they popped open. Then she pushed Jane out onto the balcony until she was leaning precariously over the railing. “I command you, mortal. Come here and take off the amulet. Take it off or I’ll throw her off the balcony.”

Jane’s brown eyes were terrified, and Darcy didn’t hesitate. Jane had been her friend when she’d had no one else. She put down the staff and walked out onto the balcony, reaching for the clasp of the necklace.

Then there was a roar, and the balcony disintegrated.
Darcy had a moment to consider how falling seemed to be her lot in life. Then she landed on something solid, though it was not the ground. It was moving, and she scrambled to steady herself. There were scales beneath her hands in brilliant shades of red and gold and brown. She dared to look down, and the army of Thanos whisked by below. They shouted and fired weapons, but it did nothing but irritate her ride. The great dragon Smaug opened his mouth and poured blue fire on those below.

“Darcy, are you okay?” Natasha Romanoff demanded through her earpiece.

“Hanging on for dear life!” She scooted forward to get a better grip on one of the spikes that ran along Smaug’s spine. “Where’s Jane?”

“Thor’s got her.”

Darcy would have been relieved, but she was clinging to the back of an enormous dragon. She glanced back to see Natasha on top of the wall, keeping back the Chitauri. She thought she saw Frigga in that melee too, and a yellow bird sitting above it all on a window sill. She twisted to have a better look and almost slipped off.

“Sit still, girl,” Smaug commanded.

Tony Stark glided alongside the dragon. “So you’ve added Mother of Dragons to your resume? That is both awesome and scary. How about I get you back to safety?”

Darcy shifted, reaching for Tony, but Smaug was having none of it. He twisted away, turning his head at the same time to snap. “Begone, metal man.”

Tony zipped back out of the way, holding up his hands. “Easy, Lokes. I’m not trying to steal your girl. I just want to see that she’s safe.”

“The Lady is safe with me.” Smaug drove him back with a quick blast of fire before circling lower to fly over legions of Chitauri. They broke ranks and fled before the dragon, but in the open battlefield, it was hard to escape his wrath. From Darcy’s viewpoint, she could see hundreds on fire with blue flames so reminiscent of the tesseract. There were a few aliens who were attempting to stop, drop and roll, but the flames were hard to put out.

It occurred to her that with Smaug, the war could be over in the next five minutes.

“Let’s make a pass along the wall,” Darcy said even as she wondered if the dragon would listen. He appeared to be enjoying himself, menacing the fleeing Chitauri, and maybe she was in luck. He took a long turn over the battlefield, then swooped toward the wall.

“Is that my brother?” Thor asked.

She didn’t see the God of Thunder, and that was good. No telling how the dragon would react. “Your brother is inside somewhere. He’s definitely not in control, so stay back.”

“LOKI!”

That shout echoed across the battlefield as if it was magically enhanced. Everything came to a halt, and those Chitauri who had not retreated took one large step back, creating open space in the middle of what had once been Hlidskjalf’s magnificent gardens. That hurt Darcy; she’d never gotten to explore them on the arm of her prince, and now they were gone.

Thanos strode onto the empty battlefield. She’d seen weirder creatures than him, but he still
made her skin crawl. When the dragon landed near him, Darcy scrambled forward so she could sit up near Smaug’s ear. “Be careful,” she whispered. “He wants the tesseract.”

“Well do I know it. A shame the creature is still alive after our last meeting. He will die now.”

Darcy didn’t think the purple guy should be underestimated, but had no opportunity to say so. The Titan wore an evil grin as he held up one hand. It was encased in a golden armored glove. Though it had several empty holes on the back of it, one was filled with a bright red gem. Tendrils like red liquid shot out of the glove and flew at Smaug. The dragon howled in pain and Darcy tumbled off.

At least Smaug had been on the ground, so the landing wasn’t terrible, but the terrain had been beaten into hard packed dirt. She stayed low, covering her head with her arms as Smaug spun in circles, howling. His tail swept over her. His frenzied movements weren’t as purposeless as they seemed, though, as his tail snapped around and took Thanos off his feet. “You will burn!” the dragon shrieked.

From his back, Thanos raised the glove again, red liquid shooting from it. Smaug opened his maw and blue flames poured out. Red power met blue, and they held their own against each other, seemingly different but equal. It stayed that way for a breath. Then there was an explosion.

When Darcy dared to raise her head, the field appeared empty and the only sound was a ringing in her ears. Einherjar ran past her, but she couldn’t hear them.

Then Natasha Romanoff was there, helping her up. “Are you okay?”

The ringing lessened a bit, and Darcy could just make out the widow’s words, though she sounded as if she was a mile away. “I’ll live. Where is Smaug?”

The dragon had landed in a heap against the walls of Hlidskjalf. She knew immediately he was still alive, for his sides rose and fell in quick gasps of breath, but there was a hole in his upper chest that black ichor oozed from. How was that even possible? She started running toward him.

Fuck, but Loki was in there somewhere.

Tony and Thor were already there, though Tony, having been snapped at once already, knew enough to stay back. “Stay here,” she told Thor, slowly walking past them.

“Lady Darcy, are you sure—”

She was, so she ignored him, approaching the dragon. The goop leaking from his wound looked awful and smelled worse, like rotting flesh. Smaug, though, wasn’t real. How could he be wounded? Then again, how could he be here, saving her from certain doom? “Hey, big guy. The battle’s over for the moment. Can I see your boo boo?”

The one enormous eye she could see glared at her, and she probably should not be treating a dragon like a small child or a puppy. He was a lot bigger, for starters. “Begone,” Smaug hissed. “I am Smaug the Impervious—”

“First you want me to swear myself to you and then you tell me to go away. You and Loki have that in common. You can’t make up your minds about a woman. Honestly. And it doesn’t look like you’re impervious.”

“Is this truly my brother?”
Darcy hadn’t heard Thor approach, but even as she turned to shoo him away, Smaug’s great snout snapped out and Thor was gone. She had no idea what to do for a moment. “Oh! No, no, no! Bad Smaug!” She poked him, though not in a place where he was wounded. Clearly, Loki’s attitude toward his brother was having an effect. “Spit Thor out.” She didn’t have a rolled up newspaper big enough to do justice to this nonsense.

“As you wish,” he replied indifferently and heaved Thor out again.

Thor sat stunned in the mud of the battlefield, covered in dragon saliva. Then he turned to glare at Smaug. “Loki!”

“I did warn you,” Darcy said. Somewhere off to her right, Tony was laughing and even Natasha smirked. Good thing someone was entertained. Darcy turned back to Smaug. “Can I look at your wound?”

He looked away, and Darcy took that for tacit consent. She took a step closer and more black ichor exploded out. The edges of the wound were ugly, as if someone had taken a blunt weapon to his hide and ripped it open. Blue energy glowed along the edges of the wound, the same color as the tesseract, and as she watched, the wound began knitting itself back together. Cautiously, she reached out to touch the dragon’s cheek. When he didn’t jump or snap, she stroked him, working her way around to his snout. His scales were dry and sharp if she wasn’t careful. His breathing calmed under her hand. “I think you’re going to be okay.”

He snorted, as if disbelieving, and Darcy ignored his heated breath, just kept soothing him. “Thank you,” she added, “for saving me again.”

“Your godling does not keep you safe.”

She smiled and put her cheek against his scales. “He does his best and I don’t make it easy for him. You need to rest so you can heal.”

“You wish me dead so you can be with your godling.”

Darcy hummed softly. “Yes, I want to be with Loki, but I don’t want you dead. You were created from my memory, so you’re just how I imagined you to be, magnificent and cunning, though I would add that you don’t have to stick to the script. You don’t have to be the bad guy.” She almost laughed at herself for using Lego Movie logic. Not the right fandom.

“I will not release you from your promise.”

In truth, she hadn’t expected anything different, but it was worth a try. “Hush now. Rest.” She kept stroking the scales until he vanished from beneath her touch.

Thor, Tony and Natasha were standing well behind her with varying degrees of pride. “Dragon mom and dragon whisperer? Good job, Lewis,” said Tony. “Is that Antler Boy?”

There was a black and green lump against the wall, and sure enough, it was Loki. He was unconscious and thankfully did not have the same wound as Smaug had. There was, however, another problem.

“Uh,” said Tony. “Is he supposed to be blue?”
A Lovely Shade of Blue

Chapter Summary

Things heat up again between Loki and Darcy, and Loki finds help in an unexpected place.

Chapter Notes

Hello All! It's been too long, as usual. Thanks for all your kind comments. I normally like to reply to each one, but I didn't get there this time. I swear to do better, because each and every comment means the world to me. You guys are the best.

No Infinity War Spoilers here.

There will be sexytimes, so if you wish to avoid, skip the middle of the chapter. Some of you have waited a long time for this. You know who you are. ;)

No copyright infringement intended. I luv u, Marvel. That is all.

Baby, this is what you came for

Lightning strikes every time she moves

And everybody's watching her

But she's looking at you

This is What You Came For – Calvin Harris (feat. Rihanna)

The chains weighed upon him, heavier than ever, at wrists, ankles and neck. Loki could not even lift his head, but stared at the damp stones before him. Blood dripped from his nose, darkening those cobbles further, and with every painful breath, there was a gurgle in his chest, as if one of his ribs had pierced a lung.

“Look at me.”

When Loki did not respond, someone yanked his head back by the hair. A gray wraith-thing with a death’s head grin loomed over him and Loki fought off a shudder. Ebony Maw. “You
should be honored, Prince of Asgard,” the alien said. “The Mighty Thanos has graced you with his presence.” Then he forced Loki to face the Titan.

“You cannot win, boy,” he said in his deep, rumbling voice. “You know this is for the best. Surrender now, and one day, the universe will thank you.”

Between agonizing breaths, rage rose in Loki’s chest. He found the strength to spit in the Titan’s face. “I will not lose. Asgard will not fall, not if I have anything to say about it.”

***

When Loki awoke, he had no sense of how much time had passed or whether anything he remembered was real. He wanted to think Thanos could no longer access his mind without the diabolical star creature in his chest, and mayhap it was just a nightmare. If it was genuine, Thanos and Ebony Maw would have laughed at him. Playing the hero now?

He was not a hero. He wasn’t sure what he was, but that didn’t mean he was about to roll over and give Thanos what he wanted.

Loki also awoke with the most god-awful taste in his mouth, like he’d been chewing on metal. Recalling an episode of his youth where he’d taken a whack from Mjolnir in the chops, he stared at the ceiling of his bed chamber and tried not to think of the possibilities. “Did Smaug eat my brother?”

“Yes.”

It was Darcy, who sat on the bed near him, reading. Her braided hair shone, as if she’d just stepped from the bath, and she wore a nightgown of pale blue. “Then he spit Thor back out.”

“Curst dragon, can’t even do me that favor.”

Darcy chuckled and put her book aside. Then she reached for a goblet and helped him sit up. “Your mom sent this over. She said it’ll help you recover. How do you feel?”

“Like the floor of the Great Hall.” Every part of his body hurt. Loki took the goblet and finished it in one go, a cider made from Idunn’s apples. The screaming headache behind his eyes eased somewhat, but he knew he was walking a dangerous path. Madness lay in wait for the sorcerer who consistently emptied their magical reserves, and he had nothing left once again. Why did Smaug use him rather than the tesseract to manifest? Of all his troubles, the dragon might prove to be his end.

Darcy perched on the edge of the bed next to him. Her eyes were warm and concerned, and he wondered what he’d done for the Norns to bless him with this woman. Loki dragged his hands over his face, in a vain attempt to banish his exhaustion. “What of Thanos?”

“He crawled away again, no doubt crushed that he couldn’t destroy Smaug. Thor thought he used another of the Infinity Stones.” As Loki attempted to squirm by her, she put a hand on his chest to stop him. “Hey, wait, you need to rest.”

“I must see to Asgard’s defenses.” He’d meant what he’d said in his dream; Thanos would not win. He’d already swallowed his pride and gone to Midgard for help. Hopefully Stark had seen all
he needed and was installing one of his arc reactors into the palace shields at that very moment. The only thing left to do was see that his army was prepared and then grovel to the dragon. Smaug already had a promise from Darcy and there was very little else Loki wouldn’t give for the wyrm’s cooperation.

“Thor and your mom are keeping an eye on things, and I know that’s not what you wanted, but you’re in no shape to go stand out on the battlements and look cool and rally the troops. You’ve got no magic, no clothes, and you may not want to be seen as you are.”

He was about to point out that clothes were easy to come by, but then he realized what she was talking about. His skin was blue. “Norns!” Loki flew up to a standing position, and dizziness jumped him. The room whirled around and he snatched at a bedpost to steady himself.

Darcy, though, easily pushed him back down onto the bed, as if he were naught but a feather. “Whoa there, buddy, it’s okay.”

“’Tis not okay. Do not touch me. In this form, you will get frostbite.”

“Umm, nope. I’m fine.” Darcy waggled her fingers, then flopped down next to him to deliver the lightest of kisses. “You taste good, like mint and winter and sweet apples. It doesn’t hurt me to touch you, since I’ve undressed you twice now while you looked like a smurf. Have you ever considered you might not be a full Frost Giant? You’re not nearly as tall as Bylæster or Helblindi, and they don’t have hair.”

Loki was not at all comforted by her chatter. “I am a mongrel, then? Thank you, Darcy.”

“Shut up, you dork, you know what I mean.”

“I do not.”

“You might be half-Asgardian. Would that be so terrible? It would mean that you really do belong to this place, as least a little bit.” She traced the contours of his face with one finger. “It’s still you, you know. See, here’s the same sassy eyebrow that cocks at me when you think I’ve said something stupid. I never say stupid things, of course, but you’re entitled to your opinion. Here’s the same nose and the same chin and the same cheekbones that regular Loki has, they just happen to be blue at the moment. It’s a lovely shade of blue, by the way.”

“You’re quite mad.”

“What do I have to do to convince you? You’re hot as a white dude or a frosty one.”

“Inflating my ego, Miss Lewis?”

“Your ego needs no inflation, and don’t you Miss Lewis me. Considering your vulnerable state, I think I’m going to make you my prisoner until you get your head on straight.”

Loki usually had a visceral reaction to the word prisoner, but this was Darcy, and he was curious to see what she had in mind. He’d always been amply rewarded for letting her have her way with him. He reminded himself of Thanos again, but it was half-hearted. “How will you keep me here, milady?”

“Let me show you.” Getting to her knees, she took her time gathering her nightgown up to her thighs. Then Darcy straddled him, grinding her hips against him. Despite all he’d been through and all he had on his mind, his cock had no trouble coming to attention. “See?” she asked with a gamine little grin that made him harder still. “You don’t want to go anywhere, do you?”
“Hussy.” Indeed not. The heady warmth of her draped over him sent all intelligent thought out of his head, and he should have guessed that a Frost Giant would be attracted to heat. She kissed him, with more force this time, and Loki let himself go with it. If she wanted to prove that she didn’t find his Frost Giant side repellent, he should let her. What was the worst that could happen?

She could discover she could not bear this chill form after all.

“Shh,” Darcy murmured. “Stop fighting me and relax. Let me love you.” Her lips moved down his neck, kissing and licking, her tongue chasing the raised lines of his skin. A cold, prickling sensation shot straight to his groin and he groaned. It was not unlike the feel of spellcasting in this form, the shimmering, icy thrill of cold magic in his veins. This must be what arousal felt like to a Frost Giant.

Darcy followed those lines downward. “Are those, like, erogenous zones?”

“Possibly,” he said, gritting his teeth as her fingernails dragged along the lines of his chest. He normally had better control, but her eager exploration tantalized him. She pulled the nightgown off over her head and tossed it aside. She wore nothing underneath. He dragged his gaze along her body, from her toes all the way to the top of her head and all the luscious curves in between. Norns, but she was magnificent, and mayhap he deserved a moment of peace with her, away from the Titan, the dragon and the war.

Shimmying backwards, Darcy stood up, and as she looked down at him, her smile was naughty. “I think this is the moment you tell me to kneel.”

“I think this is the moment you dazzle me with your expertise.” Loki was certain he had better repartee than that, but Darcy dropped to her knees before him and he forgot how to think. She ran her hand along his shaft and he forgot how to breathe. Those raised lines on his skin were present even there, and she used her tongue to trace them before swirling around the head. He wanted to close his eyes and revel in the pleasure she was giving him, and at the same time, he wanted to watch her.

With a wanton sparkle in her eye, she wrapped her lips around his cock and sucked gently. Loki muttered a curse. Then her hot mouth worked him, not so gently, taking him deep. Her tongue stroked him, alternating light caresses with firmer ones, drawing him higher. The wench knew what she was doing, and she seemed to be enjoying herself, if the erotic noises in her throat were anything to go by. He had a death grip on the sheets. No one had ever sucked him so thoroughly and with so much enthusiasm, not even the sensuous elves.

He should be ashamed, letting her do this to a monster.

She didn’t see him as a monster.

When Darcy finally released him, she left him exquisitely hard and gasping for air. “Was that dazzling enough for you?” she asked.

“Hellborn strumpet,” he spat between clenched teeth and dropped his head back onto the mattress. “Impertinent, saucy baggage. You’ve made your point. Finish me before I die of your ministrations.”

“Not getting away from me that easy.” Crawling up his body, she kissed him. “God, you’re absolutely delicious. Touch me, Loki.”

He had not laid a hand on her, out of some irrational fear that just because she could touch him
did not mean he could touch her back, but he obeyed. Her skin did not freeze, and she was like a fire beneath his hands. When she pressed herself into his touch with a moan, he took care to fondle every place he knew she favored: the sensitive backs of her knees, her inner thighs, her breasts. He swirled his thumb over her nipple. “How does it feel?”

Her eyes closed, and her tongue slipped out to dampen her lips. Then she spoke. “Like heaven. Like running naked in the snow. Like my skin is so sensitive I could jump out of it. I need… I need to fuck you.”

For a moment, Loki didn’t believe her. No one would lay with a Frost Giant of their own free will. Then again, Darcy was a terrible liar, and her lips were swollen and pouty, her breathing coming in quick gasps. “Are you certain?”

“You tell me,” she said, guiding his hand to her pussy.

She was soft and wet and ready for him, and that was more than he could reasonably expect to resist. Loki sat up as she arranged herself, legs spread and open to him. Then she sank down on top of him until he was buried in her to the hilt.

Norns, he could expire from this, happily.

“You, woman, will be the death of me,” he croaked as she rose as if to release him, then descended upon him again. Darcy wriggled and pressed down harder, as if making sure she’d encompassed all of his shaft, and he bit back a groan. “I don’t care if you kill me. Until that time, I want you by my side.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

It wasn’t the reply he was looking for, nor did he miss the melancholy in her eyes even as she rode his length. He didn’t use the word forever, but it was there, between them. It was the one thing he could not give her. Loki tried to banish all thought, focusing on Darcy: her touch, her breathing, the way her body arched as she took him deep. Her arms were twined around his neck, gaze locked to his.

He’d finally found a woman who accepted him for what he was, and yet he already knew he would lose her.

With his hands on the swell of her hips, Loki let her fuck him mindlessly, pushing both herself and him to the edge. Even as he came, she shuddered around him, crying out his name, nails digging into his back. He hung on to her fiercely. Mayhap he could not keep her, but there must be a way to keep her safe, even after he was gone. He promised himself he would do this.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to go about fulfilling that promise.

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It was late morning when Loki blew into Frigga’s rooms with the ferocity of the fire demon Surtur beginning Ragnarok, slamming doors open and stomping in. “Let us speak, Mother.”

All of the queen’s ladies (minus Sigyn) had gathered in a circle, folding bandages and repairing clothes damaged in battle. A few let out shrieks at Loki’s sudden arrival and one swore when she
stabbed herself with a needle. Lady Gudrun jumped to her feet. “Sire—” she began, but Loki didn’t appear to hear her. He marched into the queen’s scrying room without saying another word.

Frigga watched him, open-mouthed, then stood. No doubt this behavior, added to what had been revealed in yesterday’s battle, would be fodder for gossip for years to come. Her perfect son had somehow so forgotten himself that he’d come to see her in a half-buttoned tunic and tight pants, his hair untamed. At least he’d remembered boots and hadn’t appeared until he looked Æsir again. A shame, she thought, that his secret had to come out in such a way. No one had dared to bring up the subject to her, but she knew what they were talking about when they thought she was out of earshot. “I’ll see to this,” Frigga said to no one in particular and hurried after him.

Loki waited, arms crossed at his chest, standing before a window. Frigga could see the stiffness in his posture and wondered what could have propelled him out of Darcy’s arms after yesterday’s adventures. She closed the door, ensuring none could overhear. “What troubles you, my son?”

He whirled on her. “What have you done, Mother?”

There was a dangerous question, and she’d do well to get more information before confessing to anything. She had so much to confess. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You practically threw her into my arms!”

This was about Darcy. “You brought her here,” Frigga pointed out. “And I haven’t heard you complain until now. She’s lovely and a bit headstrong, but you’d be bored—”

“She’s mortal!”

So Loki had decided she mattered enough to him to care about her mortality. Frigga’s expression softened and she went to him as he threw himself down at the edge of the scrying pool.

“If this was some sort of lesson in the value of humanity, consider it learned,” he said bitterly, eyes full of anguish. “I might as well say goodbye to her now. Whatever years she has, ’tis nothing. Whatever time I have to give her, it’ll never be enough.”

“She means so much to you then?” His silence was all the answer she needed. He allowed her to get close enough to stroke his hair, smoothing it down like when he was a child. “There are ways to fix this difficulty.”

Loki snorted. “Idunn will not give one of her precious apples without the Allfather’s blessing, and I doubt he’s much in charity with me at the moment. Who am I, after all, but the cuckoo in the nest, the less perfect son who turned out to be no son at all.”

“Stop it,” Frigga commanded. Her eyes burned, and how she wished she could go back and undo it all. She should have disobeyed Odin and told Loki of his origins as a child. “I could have sent you to be fostered elsewhere, but when Odin placed you in my arms, I knew you were meant to be a part of our family. Your father—”

“He’s not my father!”

“Then am I not your mother?”

There was a moment of silence. Then, “Of course you are,” he said tiredly. “In every way that matters. You know of what I speak.”
He had forgiven her for the lies, but not Odin. She had no idea how they were to untangle this mess that was their family, but it needed to be dealt with at another time. Now, though, she wasn’t sure there was anything she could say to comfort him. What she knew of the future, she would keep to herself. He had to make his own choices. “Mayhap there is a lesson to be learned from Darcy. Mortals strive to make the most of their time. They call it living as if every day is your last.”

Loki shook her off and headed for the door without comment.

Frigga sighed. “Have faith, Loki.”

“In what? In the Allfather? The Norns? In Yggdrasil, that all will be well?”

“In Darcy.”

If he looked any less devastated, it might have been her imagination. Loki inclined his head to her, and then he was gone.

The Queen of Asgard stood as if rooted for a long time after he left. Had she done right, pushing them together? No, she had not been wrong, for Darcy had given life to Loki’s defeated and broken heart. Now it was up to Frigga to see it wasn’t dashed to pieces again. Gathering her skirts, she rushed out the door. “Fetch me a shawl,” she commanded Gudrun, who was standing by. “I would speak to Idunn.”

***

Faith, ha.

Loki had no intention of waiting around until Yggdrasil or the Norns or somebody else decided Darcy was worthy of protection and the near-immortality of the Æsir. He needed to know that she would be safe.

For there was no if to his future. If he survived Thanos, the Allfather would punish him or turn him over the SHIELD. It seemed the Norns also wanted a piece of his hide. From what he’d seen when they hijacked his and Darcy’s trip to Midgard, they wanted to drop him into a cave for some sort of reckoning. He might never see Darcy again.

His mother was right about one thing: he had to make the most of the time he had left.

He strode out onto the battlements, burning a bit of magic to put on more appropriate battle armor. Surveying the battlefield, there was little to see. The enemy had indeed retreated, and the lights of their camp were distant, across the empty city. What the hell was Thanos up to?

In spite of the ferocious battle hours before, the walls were well guarded. The warriors of Asgard had acquitted themselves with honor, but he was quick to note that most avoided his gaze. There seemed to be a fair amount of whispering going after he’d passed by, and he wondered what he’d missed.

Loki pulled aside an Einherjar officer. “Anything to report?”

He seemed surprised to see Loki, but after behaving like a fish out of water, he spoke. “Nay.
They’ve retreated and we’ve seen no sign that they mean to renew the fight.”

“Inform me immediately if anything changes. I want to know if they so much as spit in our direction.” Loki didn’t wait for acknowledgement of his orders. His next stop was the bowels of Hlidskjalf, to see if any progress was being made on the palace shield. He only made it as far as the Feasting Hall. Outside in the corridor, staring moodily out a window, stood a familiar mortal. “Stark?”

“Hey, Antlers,” he said before returning to contemplating the universe, or his lot in life. Mayhap he was nursing regret for having come to Asgard at all. He took a long swig from a flask and said nothing more.

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Are you drunk?”

“Not nearly.”

Loki took the flask, sniffed it, then tasted its contents. It burned all the way to his stomach, and not in a good way. “This is one of Hoenir’s wretched home brews. Do yourself a favor and don’t ask what’s in it.”

“Just because it tastes like what’s left over after cleaning the carburetor of a ’67 Impala doesn’t mean it’s bad. Hoenir assured me I wouldn’t have a liver left when I’m done and that sounded good to me. Give it back,” Stark added as Loki took another swig.

“You owe me a drink, and you’re no use to me if you get crocked.”

“Hoenir sent me to get some sleep, but I can’t. Nightmares, you know, like being thrown out of my own building and aliens coming from a hole in the sky. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.” Loki guided him to an empty alcove with a firepit and two benches that faced each other. He planted Stark on one and took the other. “How goes getting the palace shield back up?”

“Now you’re welcome, Mister Potter. Stark Tech is compatible all over the galaxy, apparently, because the reactor works with your shield. Marketing is going to have a field day with that information. Anyway, there’s a short in your system that’s going to be hell to find, but we’ll have to find it to get the shield up. You know, I thought the whole science/magic thing would be a lot more fun. Hoenir and Jane are working on it now. He says his other assistant is in the infirmary.”

“Magnus?”

“Think so.”

Loki was glad the other man was still alive. If Hoenir needed help, though, he should get down there. As he stood, Stark stretched himself out on the bench. “You have nightmares too?”

The question brought Loki to a standstill. Surely Darcy would not have told? No, he had no doubt his secrets were safe with her, and he wasn’t about to share his troubles with this fool. “I do not.”

“Liar. If you could sleep, you’d be snuggled up nicely to Darcy instead of wandering around like a zombie.”

He hadn’t the faintest idea what a zombie was, but there was a ring of truth to Stark’s words. Loki found himself sitting down again as the other man swiped the flask back from his unresisting
fingers. Was he so transparent that even Thor and a self-centered clown like Stark could see through him? That was unsettling.

“What do you dream about? Aliens? Dragons? That was quite a trick you pulled earlier, the dragon thing. And do you regularly turn blue afterwards? Sorry, I am drunk. I’m babbling.”

That explained the whispering among the soldiers of Asgard. Thanks to Smaug, everyone knew his secret and he was damned lucky he didn’t have a mutiny on his hands. If they knew he’d been under the influence of Thanos, he’d be in the dungeon or strung up on the battlements. “I dream of my own screams.”

That wasn’t supposed to come out of his mouth.

Tony Stark sat up, fixing him with a sharp, knowing look, and suddenly there was nothing of the drunk in his demeanor. “Thor thinks you were tortured. By who? The big purple Grape Ape outside? Did he send you to conquer Earth?”

Loki had gotten so used to translating Darcy’s nonsense that he didn’t question Stark’s words. “Does it matter? If you are here out of some misguided sense of pity, I shall gladly send you and your arc reactor home.”

“I’m here because Darcy seems to think a whole lot of you.”

Loki stared at him.

Stark gave the flask back. “You look like you need this. I’ve known her since she was a kid. Not the greatest home life and bad taste in men as a teenager, but she learned her lesson and I trust her judgement. You should be treating her like a queen, by the way, or she’ll kick you to the curb.”

Just like that, there was the answer to Loki’s most pressing problem, and he wondered why he hadn’t thought of it sooner. He shot to his feet and drained the flask, then tossed it back. “Stark, you are brilliant. For a mortal.”

“I know. Go refill the flask before you rush off, will you?”
**I Love You... I Know**

Chapter Summary

Loki asks a question. Most people don't like Darcy's answer.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! As promised, an update!

This fic has taken me far longer than it should have, but life doesn't always let me have my fun. I am thankful, though, for all of my faithful readers who have been so patient. I haven't been good at replying to all your comments, but know that I read them all and they are like gold to me. I love you guys.

Looking forward to Captain Marvel and even Endgame, though I suspect it will be painful. Also looking forward to the Loki series and the Bucky/Sam Wilson series on Disney Plus. Disney, take my money!

As usual, no copyright infringement intended. I'm not making money here, just keeping my sanity while playing in the Marvel sandbox.

_Hold my head inside your hands_

_I need someone who understands_

_I need someone, someone who hears_

_For you, I've waited all these years_

_For you I'd wait 'til kingdom come_

_Until my day, my day is done_

_And say you'll come and set me free_

_Just say you'll wait, you'll wait for me_

_'Til Kingdom Come - Coldplay_
Morning arrived, whether Darcy was ready or not. She rolled over and smiled at the ceiling, ignoring the aches and pains that life in Asgard gave her. She wasn’t sure which was the better workout, battle or making love to Loki, but she damn sure knew which one she preferred. Loki’s side of the bed was empty, but Darcy didn’t let that bother her. She’d taken her millennia-old space prince and shown him something he’d never seen before. She’d proven to him that she wasn’t afraid of his Frost Giant side, and she must have made her point, because he’d kept her close most of the night. Darcy smirked at the pillow next to her. “I won that argument, Magic Man.”

As her maid, Jofrid, came in with a breakfast tray, there was a rumble of thunder. Either Thor and Jane were getting it on, or Asgard was getting more of the weather that sieges and battles and cities in flames deserved. Jofrid opened the curtains to reveal that the skies were a forbidding gray, but it was not rain that scoured the windows. Great white flakes of snow floated down from above, mixed with sleet that struck the glass like tiny pebbles. There was a flash, and more thunder. She could have sworn yesterday was a reasonable, spring-like day, and wondered if Hoenir or Magnus were having their way with the weather.

Darcy wrapped herself in a robe and grabbed her Starkphone, then hurried over to the balcony doors. She opened them and it was breathtakingly cold, with a stiff wind blowing the icy snow inside to chill her bare feet. She watched the storm, taking a video of it. “This one’s for Jim Cantore and the Weather Channel! Thunder snow on Asgard!”

Of course, SHIELD would never let anyone see it, which was a darn shame. The city was covered in a blanket of snow that made it look new in spite of being ravaged by marauding aliens, and the mountains beyond could not be seen. The storm showed no sign of stopping, and she hoped Thanos and his Chitauri were squatting miserably in the snow.

“Come back inside, Milady. It’s frigid this morning.” Jofrid was the only one taking care of Darcy, as Brunhilde had gone to be with her family during the siege. “Prince Loki has asked for you to join him in the throne room.”

“That’s weird.” They hadn’t stepped foot in the throne room since she’d arrived. If she’d given it any thought, she should probably wonder why Loki had never made any effort to sit on the throne and hold court. With Odin asleep and Thor not present (until now), he’d had plenty of opportunity. Whatever. Darcy inhaled some breakfast and got dressed. She paused to admire her latest outfit in the mirror, black and white and purple with copper shaded armor, then off she went. The hallways were as crowded as ever and no one spoke to her, but they watched as she passed by. She wished they’d stop staring, but forged ahead anyway. If she was going to stay here with Loki, she’d have to get used to it. Then again, he hadn’t asked her any such thing. For all she knew, he was taking advantage of her and waiting for his first free moment to send her back to Earth.

No, she wasn’t going to think that way. After last night, it wasn’t just about the sex. He was the Intergalactic Man of Mischief and an unpredictable asshat to boot, yet she’d come to know him pretty well. She wasn’t the only one in this relationship that had a bad case of the feels.

Is that what they had? Something as concrete as a relationship?

Even in the throne room, there were families camping, though they’d left space around the throne itself. Darcy halted just inside the massive room as she realized the campsites were deserted. There were blankets and baskets of food and clothing and children’s toys, but no sign of sir. Then she looked up.

Loki sprawled on the throne, dressed in full armor and helm and royal staff, and no doubt that had something to do with everyone scattering. Darcy sighed. They feared him, now more than
ever. They’d probably always dreaded his magic and his unpredictability; being outed as a Frost Giant only made matters worse. His forbidding expression didn’t help, but she suspected he was deep in thought. The only way to find out was to poke the dragon (figuratively, not literally), and she climbed the steps toward him. “Look at you, brooding up here like a proper dark king. *All shall love me, and despair!*”

He cocked one eyebrow at her. “I rather like the sound of that.” He rose to his full height, made even more impressive with his horned helm, and brought her hand to his lips. “There is, however, one thing a dark king needs that I lack.”

She could be forgiven for thinking he was backsliding into supervillain mode except for the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “ Hmm, let’s see. Fancy golden weapon, check. Golden headgear, check. Your own army, yep, you’ve got that too. Stylin’ chair and fabulous hair, check and check. What you don’t have,” Darcy added, “is the truly black heart that every successful dictator needs.”

Loki grimaced.

“I meant that as a compliment!”

“As compliments go, it isn’t what a dark king would want to hear. Surely you can do better.”

“I’m not here to tell you what you want to hear, Your Majesty. I’m here to fuck you until you can’t see straight anymore.”

That brought a bark of laughter from him. “Foul mouthed wench.” Putting the staff aside, Loki sat again and tugged her down into his lap. “Mad as well, I expect, as only a lunatic would do what you did last night.”

“Sounds like you enjoyed yourself too,” Darcy translated with an impish smile. And she had revealed in making love to him. No guy she’d ever been with had another side to him the way Loki did, and the cold had aroused her in ways she hadn’t expected. She hoped they could explore it further. Wiggling around in his lap, she heard him catch his breath, no doubt because those leather pants of his suddenly had no extra room. “You okay, Slytherin?” she asked with a too-innocent twinkle, drawing a growl out of him. “BTW, why are we here in the throne room? I’m afraid sitting in your lap like a disrespectful skank on the throne of Asgard will wake Big Daddy Odin.”

“You have no idea how I long for you to meet the Allfather. He’ll have no more luck putting you in your place than I,” Loki returned. “I have something I wish to say to you, and this puts a certain official spin on matters.”

Darcy still had no idea what the hell was going on, but she wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. Since when had they done anything that required it to be ‘official’? “You can’t send me home,” she pointed out. “Haven’t we already had this conversation? Jane’s Bifröst is about as reliable as a sponge in a rainstorm and I don’t think Hoenir’s works anymore and I thought we agreed we were a team. Wait, are you going to offer me the position of official royal mistress? Is that a thing here? It’s not unheard of on Earth. Madame de Pompadour was awesome, or at least she was on Dr. Who.”

“I suspect if I offered you the affront of such a position, I’d have to guard the family jewels. Stop chattering, milady, and tell me you’ll marry me.”

Darcy blinked and sat back. His words didn’t make sense. When they did, she wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly because, of course, that was ridiculous. She was mortal and not princess
material. She felt like she’d been hit with the *petrificus totalis* spell.

Loki was still talking. “In truth, I have little to offer but a checkered past, a heart that’s been broken too many times to count and a kingship that is naught but a sham and may not last through the next twenty-four hours. Hel, I may not last through the next twenty-four hours, but I would make you a queen, Darcy Lewis. I would make you *my* queen.”

He was proposing. To her. Loki was *freaking proposing to her.* She made a gulping sound, not unlike a frog, before putting her hands over her mouth. She’d never given this a thought, not even in her craziest fantasies. Princes only married girls like her in Hallmark movies. She shrieked and threw herself at him, arms around his neck.

“Is that a yes?”

Darcy untangled herself from him enough to see his face when her good sense caught up with her. “What are you up to?”

“Woman, are you deaf? I asked you to marry me. Why must I be up to something?”

“Because you always are. You seem to have forgotten that I’m not Æsir or immortal.”

“Neither am I.”

“You barely know me or anything about my past.” That was actually a huge sticking point for Darcy. Not about Loki’s previous adventures, because she knew the most important bits and the rest could wait. No, she had never gotten up the gumption to tell him about her earlier life and the ex-fiancé who had defined so much of who she was. What did that say about her? Apparently, that she was more afraid of her past than a thousand-year-old Norse god who had more baggage than a 747. Not good.

Loki cupped her face, drawing her gaze to his. “Darcy, listen to me. The past doesn’t matter, not now. Whatever happened, it cannot be changed and I doubt it will alter our situation. It certainly can’t be any worse than the things I’ve done, and you were kind enough to accept me as I am. I would be honored to do the same for you. Consent to be my wife, and I will face Thanos knowing I have done one good, worthy thing in my life by marrying you. You deserve no less from me, and I need you by my side.”

His words touched her, even more so when she realized her bracelet wasn’t tingling. He was telling the truth, and that should have been enough, but things were moving way too fast. “What about our lifespans? Can we have kids? Do we even want kids? We’re way different species, after all. Maybe we should just start with a dog or a cat or even a fish and see if we can keep it alive. And oh my God, your fanclub is going to lynch me, especially Sigyn. What’s your mother going to say? I haven’t even met your dad yet and you haven’t met any of my family. Trust me, my mom might be a deal breaker.” She trailed off when she realized he was staring at her expectantly. “What?”

“What are you quite finished? Unless I am much mistaken, Mother will be overjoyed and she’ll talk the Allfather around when the time comes. No one else’s opinion matters.” He brought her hand to the chestplate of his armor. “Will you trust me?”

Trust and Loki Odinson didn’t exactly go together like peanut butter and chocolate, but he’d never let her down. She wished more than anything she could have a conversation with Gran about all of this, but that wasn’t in the cards. The best Darcy could do was recall her grandmother’s words. “*You need to find a man worth your time, Darcy Elizabeth.*” Was Loki
worth her time? Why was she even asking herself that question? Of course he was, and maybe it was time to leave her own baggage on the runway. “I love you, Silver Tongue.”

“I know.”

“Don’t you Han Solo me!”

“I’ve no clue what that means,” Loki said with a cheeky grin, “but I am presuming your answer is finally yes.” He rose, scooping her up in his arms to carry her bridal style toward the door. “Come, Milady, let us plight our troth before you change your mind.”

Darcy blinked, and tried to grab onto something to pull him to a stop. As he carried her out of the vast throne room, though, there was nothing to halt Loki’s progress. “Wait, hold on a sec. Now? Like, right now?”

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“Mother!” Loki burst into Frigga’s chambers, still carrying Darcy. As usual, he ignored the noble ladies gathered there, but Darcy paid close attention to who was present. Lady Gudrun (Darcy preferred to call her Porcelain Doll Lady), Basket Lady and Ballerina Lady were sewing and taking tea, but there was no sign of Sigyn. Too bad.

Frigga sat at a loom and she rose at their entrance. Loki stopped before her and put Darcy on her feet. “We wish to get married. As soon as possible.”

For a second, there was dead silence. Then one of the ladies dropped their tea cup and it shattered on the floor while Lady Gudrun gracefully crumpled into a faint. Loki’s lips twitched, and Darcy suspected him of enjoying the shocked reaction, but it was Frigga’s response he was waiting for.

The Queen of the Universe burst into a wide smile.

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After leaving Darcy with her maid, Loki made his way to the infirmary. Eir gave him a strange look, and he presumed the rumors of his impending nuptials had already made it this far. He didn’t stop to chat, for he had a mission. Going straight to one of the small private rooms, he stuck his head in. Magnus was sitting on a bed, pulling on a tunic. His entire right arm was bandaged from wrist to shoulder, and he was pale, but no longer at death’s door, and that suited Loki. “Why?” he asked the other sorcerer.

Magnus looked up and glowered. “Why what? Why did I save your sorry excuse of a life? You were my friend once. We shared a master of magic for over a century.”

“Mayhap it was less about me and more about impressing Lady Darcy.”

Magnus snorted and went back to pulling on the tunic one-handed. “You’re a halfwit if you
think she has eyes for anyone but you, and if it’s never crossed your mind, Loki, let me assure you that not everyone has ulterior motives.”

Loki had learned early few were to be trusted, no doubt the effect of growing up in the Æsir royal fishbowl known as Hlidskjalf. What he had never learned was to separate the trustworthy ones from the herd. “Then I am unsure whether I should thank you for saving Darcy and I or apologize for being, as Darcy says, a jackass. I find myself in need of a friend.”

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The first person to try to talk Darcy out of getting hitched was Tony Stark. “You don’t have to do this, Lewis.”

Darcy had just walked into Loki’s chambers to get ready for the ceremony, and somehow Tony was there ahead of her. He was sprawled in a chair, and it did not escape her notice that he was wearing dark sunglasses. Leaning on the arm of the chair, she shouted in his ear, “Good morning to you too, Tony!”

“Jesus!” He jumped, dislodged the sunglasses, and glared over the top of them at her. “No need to wake the dead.”

“Oh, are you dead? I thought you were just hung over. Also, the Asgard grapevine strikes again. How did you hear I was getting married? The queen gave us permission, like, five minutes ago.”

“Thor asked me if kneeling is common in our culture when it comes to a marriage proposal. For a sec, I thought he was going to ask Jane.” He put his sunglasses on top of his head and squinted at her. “This is the villain of the Battle of New York you are marrying. Prove to me you’re not under his mind control.”

“Loki is the biggest asshole I’ve ever met,” Darcy offered. “See, not brainwashed. I can talk smack about him. Besides, you guys seemed to be getting along fine yesterday, fighting side by side and all that jazz.”

“Fighting with the guy is a bit different than serving up a friend to him on a silver platter.”

Her heart warmed, since Tony had never before referred to her as a friend, but rather as Francesca Lewis’ weird kid. Darcy took his hand and squeezed it. “You of all people know I’ve made some bad choices in men, but I don’t think I’m making one now. Can you trust me? Loki’s been given a chance to turn his life around, and I’d really like to be there to see him do it. Isn’t that what the Avengers are all about? Second chances? I remember who you used to be, Tony Stark. The king of the weapon you only had to use once.”

Tony rubbed a hand over his face and groaned. “I hate your logic.”

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Loki and Magnus met Thor deep in the bowels of Hlidskjalf, and for some reason, his brother had Tony Stark in tow. Loki frowned at the Avenger. “Why did you bring Stark?”

“You need a fourth for the ritual, and I thought you’d be more comfortable with Stark than Fandral or Volstagg,” Thor said.

Since when did Thor give any care for his feelings? This was new. After some consideration, Loki confessed (only to himself) that Thor might be right. The Warriors Three had been present for centuries of his humiliations, while Stark had been witness to only one disastrous battle. Meanwhile, the Man of Iron, in dark glasses in spite of the fact they were far below ground, threw his arm around Loki’s shoulders. “Let’s chat, Rock of Ages. I just tried to talk Darcy out of this horseshit, but she gave me some pretty compelling reasons why she’s going to get hitched to you. She’s sharp, but she also has the biggest heart of anybody I know. You, on the other hand, are the biggest liar I know. What are you up to?”

Magnus brushed past them, rolling his eyes as he did. “For pity’s sake, Loki, tell them what you told me.” He walked on ahead to a barely seen staircase set into the stone wall and started down.

Loki would rather not lay himself bare to Thor and Stark, but it seemed he had little choice. He could have fifteen years to marry Darcy, or fifteen minutes, depending on how long the Titan chose to wallow in the snow. “Think, you fools. Whatever happens, I am a dead man. Thanos will kill me if he can, for I have betrayed him. If by some chance I survive, punishment for Midgard will surely come, whether from the Allfather or the Norns—”

“The Norns?” Thor’s blond brows drew together. “What have you seen?”

Loki had tried to banish what he’d seen with Darcy on their ill-fated trip to Midgard, but it kept coming back to haunt him. The Norns had plans for him. “It matters not. The point of all this, though, is Darcy. When I am gone, she could be sent back to Midgard with no thought to her future safety. To the Allfather, she would be nothing more than a traitor’s mortal whore.”

Stark glanced back at Thor, though how he could see anything in the sunglasses was a mystery. “Your dad’s more of a dick than mine, and that’s saying something. Also, your brother has it bad.”

Thor’s answering grin was broad. “Aye. I’ve known his feelings for the Lady Darcy since they arrived on Midgard. How do you say it? He’s wrapped around her finger?”

“It’s called being whipped.”

“Do the two of you have anything useful to contribute to this conversation?” Loki asked frostily. This was why he hadn’t wanted to tell them any more than was necessary; of course they would beleaguer him with their nonsense and could not be expected to take anything seriously. Unfortunately, he needed them.

“Mother will intervene on Darcy’s behalf,” Thor said. “As will I.”

Of course they both would, for Mother adored Darcy and Thor seemed to treat her like a little sister, but Loki did not trust Odin. After all, he was fond of casting out the troublesome. “I know. However, I am still a prince of Asgard. If I marry her, the old man wouldn’t dare banish his own daughter-in-law, mortal or not. Darcy will be safe.”

“That’s… sensible.” If anything, Thor’s goofball grin got bigger, making Loki want to hit
him. “And ‘tis a fine excuse to get her to the altar.”

Tony punched Loki in the arm with a cackle. “Alright, Reindeer Games, we’ll help you. I can’t believe I just said that. The apocalypse must be coming, kids. What are we doing?”

Loki gestured to the staircase that Magnus had gone down. “A groom requires a sword of his ancestors to present to his bride, so we go down to the crypts beneath the vault, where Asgard’s finest are laid to rest. Stark, take off the sunglasses and let me do something about your hangover. It will only get darker the deeper we go.”

“Nope. I’m fine,” Tony answered before walking into the wall next to the stairs. He grunted, backed up and tried again, this time finding the door and starting to descend the circular steps. “See, a-okay.”

Loki and Thor exchanged glances. Then Thor shrugged and pointed at the stairs. “After you, Brother.”

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“Darcy, we need to talk.”

“Are we actually going to talk, Jane, or are you going to yell at me?”

Jane was the next to show, marching into the dressing room of Loki’s chambers, where Darcy was seated before a mirror while Jofrid did her hair. She had chosen her favorite white LOTR gown for the ceremony. Jane looked around at all the clothes hanging neatly in long rows, but before Darcy could point out that most of it wasn’t hers, Jane spoke. “This is crazy. Look, I understand you’ve got a craving for adrenaline and Loki probably feeds it like nobody’s business, but that doesn’t mean you should marry him.”

Darcy’s world was spinning so fast she wasn’t sure whether she should demand to be let off or just puke and get it over with. She wasn’t about to change her mind, though. The more she stared at herself in the mirror, the more she knew she belonged in Asgard, with Loki. She’d been fighting that feeling for a while. “This has nothing to do with adrenaline. Let me ask you something, Jane. If your hunk of godliness asked you to marry him, what would you say?”

“It’s not the same at all!” Jane sputtered.

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The stairwell did indeed get darker as Loki, Tony Stark and Thor descended. Stark gave up on his sunglasses, and then Loki had to expend some magic to light a few torches. At the bottom, they found several dark tunnels leading in different directions and a compass with runes set into the floor. They also found Magnus, who had his own torch. He held it over the compass. “Which way?”

In truth, Loki had no idea. He had always been taught that he would be guided to the right
ancestor, but it had belatedly occurred to him that these people were not his ancestors and this might be a fool’s errand. He chose the tunnel that was marked with an X rune, meaning gift. Mayhap one of Thor’s ancestors would take pity on him.

The tunnel was short, and soon opened up into a cavern of immense proportion. From the light of their torches, he could make out the far wall, with row upon row of barrows in between. The ceiling, far above, could not be seen. The barrows were topped with stones shaped like ships and covered with carvings of names and great deeds. One looked very much like another, and he had neither the time nor the inclination to read every one to find a name he recognized.

“Damn,” said Tony. “No one told me we were doing Ghost Adventures. Don’t you burn your dead in a ship funeral pyre thing?”

“Some prefer to become one with the universe,” Loki replied, “but they would still have a barrow for their family to remember and honor.”


Far across the cavern was a barrow that had a soft glow about it. Someone was taking pity on him after all. As Loki and his cohorts drew closer, he could see that it was not a trick of light or illusion; the barrow had a green radiance to it. “This one,” Loki said, setting his torch into a sconce. The others followed suit. He leaned over the barrow and brushed the dust and debris of centuries away and tried to read the carvings. “Aevar son of Odvar, husband of Dyrfinna, father of Asvald and Arnora. Great warrior and sorcerer, master of the Collegium of Magic. Hmm. He must have been the master before Hoenir.”

“Arnora, isn’t that the name of the woman in the painting in Hoenir’s office? The one he always keeps covered?” Magnus wondered.

“This guy had a fondness for names beginning with A,” Tony commented. “Now what?”

“We ask the dead for their blessing,” Thor said.

Loki stood at the foot of the barrow as the others dropped to one knee around him. He had Magnus to his right, Thor on his left and Tony following along a few paces behind him. By tradition, these were to be his groomsmen, his comrades-at-arms, his closest friends. This lot would have to do, and as he looked to each of them, Loki decided he could do much worse. Magnus and Thor were appropriately somber, but Tony Stark gave him an irreverent grin and a thumbs up. With a roll of his eyes, Loki turned back to the barrow. He whispered the words of the spell petitioning the dead and dropped to one knee himself.

The barrow remained silent, and he wondered if he was being tricked, or he’d been mistaken about the glow. Mayhap the shade of this dead mighty sorcerer took one look at him, recognized the blood of Frost Giants in him, and changed his mind.

Then a mist began to creep from between the stones.

It formed a vague shape. It was somewhat humanoid, like a warrior in a cloak with his hood up. It remained a mist, though the edges were distinctly green. Loki didn’t see anything that resembled eyes or a mouth, but it began to wail.

“Shit!” he heard Tony hiss behind him. “I was kidding about Ghost Adventures! I didn’t bring a full spectrum camera or an EVP recorder.”

“If either of those involve communicating with spirits, I don’t think we’re going to need them,”
Loki replied out of the side of his mouth, though he doubted whether Stark heard him over the keening.

The wailing broke off, and the ghost spoke in a voice that sounded like falling gravel. “Who disturbs my slumber?”

Loki was not one for honesty, but it seemed the answer was already known and this was a matter of form. He hoped so, anyway. “I am Loki, adopted son of the House of Odin. I come for the blessing of the ancestors.”

Nothing else was said by the phantom, and it dissipated like fog under the morning sun. A deep silence descended over the barrows, and Loki wondered how long he should wait for some sign of approval. Then again, why did he ever think he’d be accepted in any way in Asgard?

Mayhap because Darcy had accepted him, he’d thought his life here was changing for the better.

The floor shook with a rumble as if Thor was kicking up a ruckus. A swift glance to his left revealed that his brother was unmoving. Then there was a crack, and the top of the barrow before them split open. Once the dust settled, Loki rose and peered into it. The body within had long since dried out, but in its mummified hands lay a sword. It had a glow to it too, like the barrow had earlier. He reached in to pull it out, and it came free easily. Sliding it from the scabbard, he discovered the blade looked as though it had been polished the day before, not lying for centuries among the dead. The hilt was black and gold, set with emeralds, as if made for him. Aevar son of Odvar had excellent taste.

Thor’s meaty hand descended onto Loki’s shoulder, jarring him. “Congratulations, Brother. You’ve been blessed by the ancestors.”

“That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” Tony Stark said.

“Then you haven’t had the pleasure of Hoenir’s office at the Collegium,” Magnus replied, leading the way out. “He has some of the Nine’s most strange artifacts…”

Loki tuned them out as he followed, though he glanced back at the barrow. It was dark and silent once again. “Thank you,” he murmured, and was surprised to think he heard a reply, no more than a breath of air close to his ear.

Your mother would be proud.

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“Do you know what you’re doing?”

Darcy decided this visit was the weirdest one yet. Just as Jofrid finished her hair and went to find her mistress a snack, Natasha Romanoff had appeared in the doorway, body language loose and expression neutral, and Darcy tried to guess what the woman was thinking. So far, the general consensus on marrying Loki was oh hell no. All of the Warriors Three had been by, though Hogun had little to say and Volstagg was too busy stuffing his face, as he claimed to eat when nervous. Fandral put himself at her disposal, if she felt the need to escape before the ceremony. As they were in the middle of a siege, Darcy wasn’t sure where they would go and he was vague. Good
thing she didn’t actually want to bolt. She turned to the super spy/assassin. “Nope. I’m going
with my heart and my gut here, and they both say I should go for it with Loki.”

“He’s the God of Mischief and Lies. He could be playing you.”

“He could be,” Darcy acknowledged. In other circumstances, she’d be having a serious squee
that the Black Widow was even talking to her. She congratulated herself on her composure. “But
why? I’m just a coffee fetching, paper pushing mortal. Playing me gains him nothing.”

“You’re a friendly face to present to SHIELD.” Natasha came to perch on the end of Darcy’s
bench to study their side by side reflections. “If you’re certain about this, then I’m here to back
you up. If, in the future, you want him murdered, I’m here for that too.”

Darcy wrinkled her nose. “That was too easy to convince you. Everybody else wanted to pry
off my scalp and check my brain. Then they wanted to bleach it.”

“You’ll keep Loki from going all King and Conqueror on the Earth again.”

“I think I’m offended by your lack of romance.” She flashed Natasha a grin to let her know she
wasn’t, really, and felt quite honored that the Black Widow thought so highly of her on such short
acquaintance. Though she might need to insist to SHIELD she wouldn’t be spying on Loki or
Asgard for them.

“Don’t be,” the assassin said as she stood and headed for the door. “I’m a pragmatist. I’ve
only met two people so far who have any influence with Loki, and Thor isn’t one of them.”

“Hey, wait! Come to the ceremony. Be one of my bridesmaids!”

Natasha inclined her head, and Darcy decided to take that as a yes.

No sooner had the door closed behind the widow when Frigga swept into the room with
something wrapped in white. Sif followed behind, and though she had her sword at her side, she
also carried one. Frigga paused behind Darcy to smile in the mirror at her. “My dear, you look
positively radiant. Does she not, Sif?”

Lady Sif looked as awkward as Darcy felt, considering that the challenge had never been
resolved. She tried to catch Frigga’s eye, but the queen was focused on unwrapping whatever gift
she brought. Then Sif stepped forward. “Lady Darcy, I wish to apologize. I made some
assumptions about you when you first arrived, assumptions that I have since seen are in error. You
are definitely not in thrall to Loki, and I admire that you have fought to bring him to his senses.”

Darcy stared up at the warrior woman, dumbfounded for what felt like an hour before getting
her power of speech back. “Thanks, that’s nice of you to say.” She threw a shrewd look at Frigga,
who continued to pretend ignore them. The queen had meddled in some way.

“In recompense for the trouble I have caused you, I have a gift.” When Darcy opened her
mouth to protest, Sif interrupted and held out the sheathed sword. “You will need a sword to
exchange with Loki during the wedding ceremony. My aunt was a Valkyrie and died without
children. I think she would be honored that her Dragonfang would go to you, for you have the
heart of a Valkyrie.”

This was one weird ass day, as she’d been berated by people she considered friends and given
encouragement by those she barely knew. Darcy gratefully took the sword. It was shorter than
average, with a silver blade and white and gold handle. Sif had called it a Dragonfang, and that
was so awesome. The warrior had also likened her to a Valkyrie, those famed warrior women of
Asgard, and Darcy didn’t think her grin could get much bigger. “I’m only accepting this if you teach me how to use it.”

Sif laughed. “You will give this sword to Loki, who will keep it in trust for your daughter, and he will give you one that will hold for your son. If you wish, though, I can teach you to defend yourself.”

“I do wish. Thank you, Sif. Will you be my third bridesmaid?” Darcy asked. “Jane and Natasha already said yes.” That was stretching the truth a bit, since Jane had said she would have no part of this nonsense, but Darcy had faith. Jane would show. So would the Black Widow.

“You honor me. I accept.”

As Sif bowed and headed out, Darcy turned to Frigga, aka the future mother-in-law. That thought should probably have given her the heebs, but it did not. If everybody had such a mom-in-law, they wouldn’t have such a bad rap. Darcy had yet to meet anyone as kind, and she’d stood by Loki even when he didn’t deserve it. “Did you do that?”

“Sif came to me,” Frigga said in the same way that Loki did when leaving something out. Darcy wondered what Sif had actually come to talk to the queen about. Meanwhile, Jofrid arrived with a snack.

“You must eat something,” Frigga insisted. “Has everyone been by to discourage you?”

“I can’t imagine how you guessed that.” Darcy took the plate, settling it on her lap. There was cheese and bread and sliced fruit, and the centerpiece was a perfect, shining apple. Darcy felt some disappointment to find that the magic apples of Asgard were a myth; if they were magic, she doubted the mortal in the room would be offered one. It looked mouthwatering, and she took a bite. It tasted as sweet and tart as it looked, but she didn’t feel any different as she chewed.

Meanwhile, Frigga was speaking. “Though no official announcement has been made, everyone knows a marriage celebration is at hand and it is an enormous scandal. Planning a wedding takes great time and care and negotiation between families. Sometimes it takes years, because there are alliances and money and property involved. The court is shocked by the speed of it and that you have the temerity to agree to marriage without your family’s approval.”

Her dad would give his absent-minded blessing, while her mother wouldn’t hear anything but the word prince and her older sister would be furious Darcy was getting married first. Only Gran would have useful advice and support, and Darcy wished she was going to be there. “This has given everybody even more reason to hate me.”

“Worry not,” Frigga reassured her. “Once they see how Loki looks at you, they’ll understand. Marriages are made for gain, so a love match is rare, and Asgard will be charmed by your grand romance with my son.” She held out the unwrapped bundle, and in its folds sat a delicate circlet of gold leaves and tiny jewels. “Before a wedding, it is our tradition for the bride to leave her kundsen, or maiden crown, behind for a bridal crown. This was my bridal crown, and I’d like you to have it.”

Darcy swallowed a lump in her throat the size of a softball. “Thank you.” Those words didn’t begin to cover how she felt, but it was the best she could do. She watched as Frigga began to pin the tiara into her hair. Maybe the wise queen would make a good stand-in for Gran. “Am I doing the right thing?”

“Only you can answer that.”
That was so not what she wanted to hear. “I love Loki, I know that. Everybody thinks I’m crazy, and I don’t care. But… I feel a little selfish too. Asgard is the bomb, and I’ve dreamed of living in a place like this my whole life. I feel like I should want to go home, but I don’t. Am I making any sense?”

Frigga smiled gently at her. “My child, look in the mirror. What do you see?”

“I see a human who’s a long way from home and doesn’t have any idea what she wants from life. She’s been caught up in this whirlwind and she doesn’t know what it all means and why she’s here and if she should be here.” Darcy grimaced and rubbed her face with her hands. “Argh, I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to have an existential crisis on you. Sometimes I feel like a kid playing dress up.”

“May I tell you what I see?” Frigga finished with the circlet and put her hands on Darcy’s shoulders for a gentle squeeze. “I see a lady of great heart. She is beautiful and strong and unafraid to fight for what she wants and to love where she sees fit, no matter where it takes her or who thinks it’s a terrible idea. She knows where she belongs, and most of all, she knows her worth. My dear child, you belong here with us now.”

Darcy burst into tears.
You May Now Kiss the Bride

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Loki tie the knot, but it's not without its complications.

Chapter Notes

Hello All! It's been far too long! Thanks for leaving comments. It does my heart good.

If there's anything good to be said about the strange times we live in, it's that many of us are forced to stay home and actually finish what we started. If you have to be out on the front lines of the pandemic, be safe and thank you for doing what you can. I hope an update after so long gives you all some cheer.

Warnings: There's a lot going on in this chapter, including talk of suicide, torture and (if you squint) sexual abuse. Tread carefully, though I think you'll find there's more happy than sad.

Disclaimer: No money is being made here, just joy. I love you Marvel.

You love the hell out of me
And heaven’s where we could be
I’ve stood on the edge of love
But never took the leap
And you took my armor off
And did it delicately
And I let my guard down
To show you what’s underneath
Katy Perry, Never Worn White

Loki paced the confined space of a small chamber off the throne room. It had been used since
time immemorial by the royalty of Asgard to wait and prepare for ceremonies. In spite of everything that was oversized in Hlidskjalf, this area was no better than a broom closet. He could go no further than six strides, turn, and six strides back again.

If his mother was here, she would scold. _Loki, a prince must not reveal disquiet to his enemies or his people._

He was calm, he assured himself. In spite of the pacing and his collar being too tight and the sweat on his forehead—

_Mayhap he felt this way for a reason. He checked to see if the dragon stirred. He could sense nothing of Smaug, as if when the beast slept, he did not exist at all. Loki wondered what the dragon would think of his marriage to Darcy. No doubt he would be derisive. _What do the ceremonies of men and gods mean to me? Do you honestly think this will stop me from possessing what is mine?__

A wedding did not solve his dragon problem, but it did solve his Odin problem, at least in regards to Darcy. Shaking off his morose thoughts, Loki brushed a curtain aside to peer into the Throne Room. Frigga had rearranged everything, moving those who were squatting to make room for a swarm of wedding guests. Under normal circumstances, these guests would be the cream of Æsir society, but with the entirety of the city within the walls of Hlidskjalf, everyone not on duty on the walls was invited. With the exception of a path to the throne, the room was packed from wall to wall.

_The irony did not escape him. They weren’t here because they loved or admired him, but because of his scandalous rush marriage to Darcy. A cottage industry had sprung up over the Æsir betting on the reason for the hasty nuptials; many thought Darcy was pregnant, while others thought he was trying to anger his father by marrying a mortal._

_No one came anywhere near the truth._

_He closed the curtain and went back to pacing. He was calm, he assured himself. Serene. Unruffled. What, after all, did he have to be nervous over? This was for Darcy’s sake, not his own, and he had little doubt that whatever punishment Odin and the Norns had in store for him would put an effective end to the marriage. Even if he should be imprisoned, his mortal wife would be long dead by the time he would be released._

_That hurt, and Loki could not deny it._

_The door opened behind him, and he whirled. It was only Frigga. She cast a critical eye over him, and finding him acceptable in the dress armor he hadn't worn since the days of Thor's almost-coronation, gave him an encouraging smile. Then she shoved Darcy in the door and shut it firmly, leaving Darcy and Loki alone._

_He’d seen that white gown before, its gold belt riding low on her hips, the neckline too demure for his tastes. It was a favorite of hers. She had worn it the first time she put off Midgard clothing in favor of Æsir dress, and he recalled in exquisite detail how she’d tasted that day when they’d shared their first kiss. He understood that white was the traditional bridal color on Midgard, but here, it was his mother’s wedding crown nestled in her loose dark hair that proclaimed her special status. She had a glow to her he’d never seen before, and it took longer than it should have for Loki to remember how his tongue worked. “You are, without doubt, the most beautiful woman in the palace.”_

_Darcy’s cheeks flushed, and a small smile touched her lips. “Thanks. You look good too.” Her body language conveyed nervousness, but she seemed calm enough as she took his hands in hers._
"You know, on my world, it’s considered bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the ceremony, but I had to talk to you. Are you sure about this?"

Now was not the time for cold feet, for his scheme to keep her safe depended on marriage. “I’ve never been more certain,” Loki replied, surprised by the depth of his assurance. He wanted her safe, but he also wanted her by his side. “What of you?”

“Your ass is mine, Slytherin.” The teasing in her voice did not reach her eyes. “Loki, I have to tell you something, before we do this. If you change your mind, I won’t be offended.”

In hurrying her to the altar, he’d hoped to avoid such a scene. He was quite used to reading people’s unspoken truths, and he could guess what she was about to tell him. “Darcy—"

She put a hand over his mouth. “Shut up, Silver Tongue, and listen. You asked me a question once about my past. There was a guy, older, rich, not Tony Stark but same type. I was too desperate to get out of a bad home situation and too young and stupid to know I was good enough for his bed and for arm candy, but not good enough for a marriage proposal. When he announced his engagement to someone else, I lost it.” Darcy took a breath, more of a gulp. “I took my mother’s gun—"

“You murdered him, I trust.”

“Worse. I tried to murder me.”

There it was, that unspoken thing that had always drawn them together. On the surface, they had little in common; beyond acquaintance with various Avengers, they had lived different lives in two diverse parts of Yggdrasil. Once he’d gotten to know her, though, he had realized she was a kindred spirit on a road few took and fewer lived to tell of. Before Loki could consider his next words, Darcy blurted out the rest of the story. “I got into his engagement party and stood up on a table and announced to all his guests that he liked his side pieces as virginal as possible before he used them up and tossed them aside like so much trash. Then I tried to put the gun in my mouth and blow my brains out over all of his guests. Tony and my sister stopped me.” Tears glistened on her eyelashes, but she blinked them back. “God, it must sound so stupid to you. But I thought we were in love. I thought – I thought he was the one. I was humiliated. The world would be better off without me and there had to be—"

“There had to be something better in whatever comes next.”

Her eyes shot up to meet his. “How did you know what I was going to say? Oh. Oh.” She considered his words before adding, “You didn’t fall off the Bifrost by accident.”

“Nay,” he said, pulling her close. Once, he would have mocked her and her story of love gone wrong, and he certainly wouldn’t have shared his next words. “Thor and Odin could have pulled me up. I let go. Falling into the abyss, dying there, seemed better than the disgrace awaiting me if I stayed in Asgard.” He was quiet for a moment, enjoying her in his arms. The time he had available to hold her was running out fast. “Now I find myself glad I lived.”

She rested her cheek against his armor. “Me too.”

“Tell me the name of this man who hurt you so grievously, so I may slay him when I am next on Midgard.”

“Not gonna happen, Magic Man.” She raised her head to look into his eyes. “I just wanted to
tell you. I didn’t want you to find out later and then think I wasn’t worthy to be your boo-thang.”

How charming she thought there was going to be a later for him, and he didn’t even try to suss out how the word boo-thang equaled wife. “Silly wench. You have been kind enough to not inquire overmuch into my past, and that fact alone makes you far more worthy than I to be royalty of Asgard.”

Darcy pursed her lips, her eyes bright. “You are worthy, Loki, and don’t let anybody tell you different.”

She believed those words, and with enough time, mayhap he could believe them too.

There was a soft crack, almost like distant thunder, followed by the smell of ozone that reminded him of Hoenir’s magic. Then there was a thump.

The golden bracelets tying them together lay on the floor, broken in two.

***

The next hours were a blur to Darcy.

She and Loki walked up the aisle together, the gathered Æsir mostly quiet. There were whispers, but Darcy ignored them and clung to Frigga’s words instead. If the Queen of the Universe thought she belonged in Asgard, who was she to argue?

Loki had three groomsmen, and of those three, only Magnus was not a surprise. Somehow, Loki had forced himself to ask Thor, and maybe that hinted at a détente between the brothers. Tony Stark was the most astounding of all, and she wondered what had changed his mind. They stood to the left of a priest type guy in gold robes, while behind them stood the Warriors Three, temporarily freed from duty on the walls. Hoenir and Frigga stood behind the priest, both beaming. All three of the ladies she’d asked to be a part of her wedding party showed, too, and she grinned at them. Sif and Natasha stood to the right of the priest with Jane between them. Darcy had never doubted her for a moment. Whether she disapproved or not, Jane was as loyal as they came.

The priestly guy spoke and she responded at the appropriate times. As Sif had said, there was an exchange of swords and Frigga tied her and Loki’s hands together with a delicate ribbon. She’d been told this was called handfasting, and Hoenir cast a spell on the binding, and it glowed like moonlight before dissolving into a cloud of stars.

Darcy’s eyes blurred, and she blinked yet again to banish tears. She’d done a lot of that today. She’d admitted her biggest secret to Loki and he’d taken it in stride. Most guys didn’t know what to say to her once they found out about her suicide attempt and looked at her like she had sprouted a second head before getting the hell out of her life. Loki had understood because he’d been there himself.

He caught her eye and grinned and waggled his eyebrows. Then he scrunched up his face and mimed along with the priest, an imitation that would have been hilarious if it had been at a less serious time. Stop it, she mouthed, even as her lips curled up into a reluctant smile. The priest droned on about the sacredness of marriage, unaware of Loki mocking him.

She marveled that Loki was still here. The bracelets tying them together were gone, and he
could have thrown the metaphorical middle finger to both Thanos and all of Asgard and taken one of his secret ways off the planet. Instead, he was standing with her, going through with the marriage rite. She still suspected this was part of some deep scheme, but if he was up to something, maybe she could let him get away with it. Maybe it was even okay to believe she was worthy of his love.

Thankfully, Frigga stepped in, deftly cutting the priest short and guiding him out of the way. “It is my understanding that this is an important wedding custom on Midgard,” she announced, her smile bright as she looked down at them both. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Loki’s naughty mouth curved into a boyish grin, and Darcy’s heart puddled into goo at her feet. She’d never stood a chance, had she? The snarling villain she’d met on Earth was a far cry from the man who stood before her now. She’d been able to crack the façade and see what was beneath. No wonder she’d fallen in love with him.

Loki leaned in and murmured, “Mine now, Miss Lewis.”

“That’s Princess Darcy to you, Mischief Managed.”

He laughed and drew her in, one hand on her jaw. It was probably the most gentle kiss they’d ever had, and the most perfect. A cheer went up from the crowd, and there was a lot of clanging, swords against shields, which she took to be approval. Flower petals showered over them. When they turned to the spectators, Darcy was surprised at all the happy faces staring back. It seemed Frigga was right (as she was about most things) that the people of Asgard were charmed by their romance. Both Tony and Jane were taking videos, and she was glad. She was going to share that with Gran, SHIELD be damned. Darcy smiled up at Loki. To the shouts and the ringing swords and shields, she stood on tiptoe to pull him into another kiss.

Then the cheering died.

***

There were uninvited guests at his wedding. Loki wished he could be surprised.

The crowd parted, pouring out of the sides of the throne room like water in an effort to get away. At the opposite end of the room stood the Other. He had with him a dozen Chitauri with weapons, though they had yet to fire a single shot. A visit from an emissary of Thanos was overdue, though he was surprised that it was not one of the Titan’s so-called children, like Gamora or Ebony Maw. Loki was unsure whether to be insulted that he only rated a bootlicker like The Other or concerned that the Children of Thanos were elsewhere. If they were away from their master during the siege, there was a good reason for it and it boded ill for him. “How did you get in here, fiend? You are not welcome.”

The Other was clapping slowly. “I see that congratulations are in order.” His rotten mouth settled into a bloody grin as he walked across the vast floor to stand before Loki. “We were not informed of a nuptial celebration. We would have brought a gift.”

“If you didn’t get an invitation, there was a reason for it,” Darcy threw in. She had not moved from his side, and he muttered a curse under his breath. She should run, but of course she would not, as she was too stubborn and loyal for that. Behind him, Stark, Thor, the Widow, Sif and the
Warriors Three were forming up, ready for a fight. Frigga grabbed Jane and hauled her out of the room while Hoenir did the same for the injured Magnus.

“What do you want?” Loki asked The Other.

“My Lord Thanos is most displeased. He considers you as a son, and to carry on this defiance hurts him to the very core. He has requested so little. If you would hand over the tesseract, he would still contemplate leaving Asgard to you.”

“Loki,” Thor said, hefting his hammer, “you cannot believe his words.”

“I do not.” Loki gave his brother a withering look before facing The Other again. “Asgard is too strong for the Titan to turn his back on for long. I’ve refused to give you the tesseract, and you’ve been unable to take Hlidskjalf, in spite of your best efforts.” He swept out his hand in a gesture that included all the warriors behind him. “We have beaten you, and as you can see, we have solidified our alliance with Midgard. Tell your master that I expect him to quit the field of battle and never lay eyes on Asgard again.”

“The Mighty Thanos will be disappointed. You have forgotten all you have learned at his feet.” The Other snapped his fingers, and it had a peculiar echoing sound to it, as he had two thumbs. Loki could swear he’d never heard the noise before, and at the same time, an awful dread churned his gut.

Then all he heard was his own screaming.

***

*You think you know pain? We’ll make you long for something as sweet as pain.*

Norns, but the Titan and his associates had made good on those words. One snap of The Other’s fingers and Loki remembered.

He wasn’t sure if he was screaming aloud or if it was in his own head. Thanos had him starved and whipped until his back was flayed clean of skin. His lackeys ripped out Loki’s fingernails and broke bones. They’d shoved rags into his airways, then taped his nose and mouth shut to take him to the edge of asphyxiation. Though they quickly learned cold didn’t bother him, heat made him claw desperately at the stone walls for even a drip of condensation. The worms that Darcy suffered through had invaded his brain as well, uncovering every weakness, his every lie. Then they’d opened up his chest and put in the star creature. Thanos had stood over him during it all and smiled. “Now, boy, you will obey me.”

Through blood and tears, Loki had sworn himself to the Titan. Being a quick-witted liar, he hadn’t meant anything he’d said, but it had shamed him nonetheless. Such evil deserved honest contempt from a Prince of Asgard.

From somewhere in his subconscious, the great dragon Smaug snorted. “Well, that happened, didn’t it?”

“Loki? Loki!”

He could hear Darcy’s voice from far away and latched onto it like he was once again dangling
on the edge of the abyss. Because of her, he was no longer an angry outcast, and it was past time for him to stop allowing his enemies to manipulate him. Loki was a Prince of Asgard, trained in war since childhood, and he was also the God of Mischief and Cunning and Chaos. Darcy would tell him to get his shit together.

Loki drove the memories aside, using magic to shove them behind a door in his mind and slam it shut. He would deal with them later. Coming back to himself, he was on his knees, Darcy and Thor on either side. The dragon was with him too, somewhere in his mind, laughing in his ear. “You are not much of a godling. You are weak. Puny. The creature who walks through your head took you apart easily. I enjoyed the spectacle.”

“Enough!” Loki stood, shaking off both Thor and the voice of Smaug. Darcy still had ahold of his arm, but he looked at Sif and gave his bride a gentle push in her direction. “Take her somewhere safe.”

“Hey!” Darcy squawked. “Team, remember?”

Loki was already walking toward The Other.

***

Darcy tried to dodge Sif, but she wasn’t quick enough. She didn’t want to leave, as Loki’s appearance was downright scary. He was as white as a sheet fresh from the Clorox load and she didn’t like the look in his eyes. She hadn’t seen that brand of Supervillain Fury™ in a while, and she was glad it wasn’t directed at her. “I need to stay!”

Sif wasn’t in the mood to listen and dragged her out of the throne room. Darcy almost wrenched from her escort’s grip, and for a second, she was impressed with her own strength. Then again, Sif was exhausted from day after day of siege warfare. Looking up and down the corridor for help, Darcy was out of luck. All of her fellow homo sapiens had stayed in case of a fight, and word had gotten out that there were Chitauri in the throne room. The hallway was clearing fast. “Sif, listen to me—”

“Nay. I’ve seen that look before. Loki does not want you to witness what he is about to do.”

“You mean that he’s going to butcher The Other? I know that. It’s well deserved, believe me. I just want—” Darcy dragged her feet, pulling Sif to a stop. “I just want to make sure he’s okay when it’s over.”

“I’ll bring him to you as soon as I can,” Sif promised. “Come, let us find the queen.”

With hand outstretched, she let go of Darcy, then she held that pose. Darcy frowned, and the warrior woman remained still. “Sif?” After a few more seconds passed, Darcy poked her, and she rocked like the weird conquistador statue her mother had in the corner of the living room all the time Darcy was growing up. “Dammit,” she muttered, steadying the other woman. “Petrificus Totalis. Who—?”

“Your nonsense never stops dribbling from your lips, does it?”

The voice sounded like it was right in her ear. Darcy jumped and turned, seeing no one, but she knew that tone. “Where are you, Sigyn? You’ve got the worst timing in the history of ever. You’re
either too late to stop the wedding or your stunning entrance has gotten lost because The Other got here first.” Darcy grabbed a dagger at Sif’s belt, but it wouldn’t come free. Sif started to wobble again. “Oh, fuck my life.”

A yellow bird flew down from the rafters high above. As soon as the creature touched the floor, it transformed into Darcy’s nemesis. “Don’t bother calling for help,” Sigyn said with a smile. “No one can see or hear you. Because of the necklace, I cannot touch you, but I can surround you in illusion. As far as anyone is concerned, this hall is empty.” She pulled a long, evil-looking dagger from her sleeve and tapped the underside of Sif’s chin. “I can gut her in the blink of an eye.”

“Why?”

“Take off the necklace.”

So that was the game they were playing, and Darcy’s mental answer was a resounding Oh Hell No. Without her magic amulet, she was defenseless, and once again, she cursed Loki for not wanting her to learn to protect herself. If he couldn’t find her because the bracelets no longer tied them together, she was definitely screwed. She’d have to get herself out of this. “If I take it off, then what?”

Sigyn reached out, as if to touch Darcy’s face, then pulled back. Her blue eyes narrowed into slits. “Then, mortal, you become useful for the first time in your sorry existence.” She dug the point of the blade into Sif’s throat, bringing out droplets of blood along the blade. “Take off the necklace or she dies. Now.”

Darcy swallowed hard. She and Sif were certainly not close, but there had been signs of friendship today, and her eyes had awareness in them, as if she knew what was happening but could do nothing. Darcy would never forgive herself if Sif died like this, for there was no honor in such a death.

She’d been hanging with the Æsir for too long.

Darcy reached up to undo the necklace. “Loki won’t ever forgive you. Hell, Frigga will never forgive you.”

If either gave the woman pause, she didn’t show it. “I need no one’s forgiveness, and the queen has made it clear that I have never been good enough for either of her precious sons. Stop stalling.” The point of the dagger sank deeper, and Sif’s lifeblood began dripping faster.

With a twist of her fingers, Darcy unlocked the necklace. Maybe it was her imagination, but she felt like magic was draining from her. Without giving herself time to think, she flung the amulet at Sigyn. “Here you go, then, bitch!”

Darcy grabbed up her skirts and ran, not daring to look back. Behind her, Sigyn screeched.

Then she heard the flap of wings, and right over her left shoulder, she could see enormous black claws. They were attached to a much bigger bird than she’d ever seen, and as it swooped in for the kill, she knew she was done for.

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With Darcy gone, the throne room fell silent, and the click of Loki’s boots on the intricate stone floor echoed in the rafters. He wondered if The Other heard his intentions in the forbidding sound, and rage built with every step he took. The distance between them was not great, but it seemed to take a lifetime to walk it. He knew what he was going to do long before he stopped in front of The Other. “The Mighty Thanos will have to live with his disappointment in me,” Loki snarled. “And I have forgotten nothing.”

He plunged a dagger into the creature’s guts.

The Other made a gurgling sound and leaned into Loki. His Chitauri had yet to realize something was wrong. “You and your master have made the mistake of still thinking me the spoilt prince you plucked from the abyss,” Loki hissed in his ear. “You ripped me apart and put me back together in a way that suited you. You turned me into a weapon to be used, believing the torture you put me through guaranteed my obedience.” He twisted the dagger. “You were wrong.”

Then all hell broke loose.

The Other reeled back, groaning, spurring the Chitauri into action. They raised rifles and took a couple of shots at Loki, but they splashed wide. That was more than enough to bring Thor and friends into the fray. The Other straightened, and with an dreadful grin, yanked the bloody dagger out of his belly and threw it at Loki. He ducked the blade as The Other swung his oversized hand and caught Loki in the side of the head. The power behind the hit hurled him to the floor, but he rolled away, leaving a copy of himself behind. The Other towered over the illusion, planting a boot squarely on its chest. “Boy, you will obey your master. If you will not obey, you will be destroyed. All you love will be destroyed.”

Purple glop was leaking from between The Other’s fingers as he held his middle, and Loki presumed it was a more grievous wound than the creature wanted to let on. He let the illusion of himself melt away from beneath The Other’s boot, and the creature tottered. Then some sixth sense told Loki to duck aside. Mjolnir flew by where his head had just been. “Thor!”

“Sorry!” His brother was beating on three Chitauri at once.

Leaving him to it, Loki charged The Other again. He had a dagger in each hand, but The Other was ready this time, and deflected them both. Loki took the opportunity to punch him in his wound, and the creature howled in a most satisfactory manner. He wound up for another hit, but The Other produced a knife of his own. “I always liked your fire, young prince. And your screams. Such lovely sounds. I had you to do with as I pleased for a little while. Do you remember?”

The implication was plain, and on some level, Loki shuddered. Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look, he repeated to himself. If he opened that door in his mind to find out the truth, he might never get it shut again.

The Widow was nearby, wrestling with a Chitauri over his gun. Even in the middle of that, she looked over at him, eyebrow cocked. Loki shook his head. He was not in so dire a position that he needed rescue. With a sharp nod, she returned to her battle, hitting the alien with electricity before burying a knife in its chest.

For some reason, that steadied Loki. She had his back, if needed. The Other was chuckling but still holding his midsection. His purple life’s blood was beginning to leave a trail on the floor. “I wonder what your lady would think if I told her what you suffered, and what you may have enjoyed at my hand.”

Loki slashed again, catching The Other in the shoulder. “She would call you a douchebag,
jagoff, oxygen thief and other colorful terms from her planet. I, on the other hand, would just like to call you dead.” This time he used magic as his weapon. He had little enough of it, but he poured everything he had into a curse. Let The Other’s blood boil. Green light flew from his fingertips, but The Other stumbled out of the way. The curse attached itself to a Chitauri that had been fighting with Fandral. The alien screamed and began to melt.

Fandral jogged over behind Loki as he continued to stalk The Other. “That one was mine, sorcerer,” he said, his tone mild. “Need help?”

“Not at all.” Loki glanced back to see that Fandral was serious. Here was another one who seemingly had his back, and he wasn’t sure what to make of all this forgiveness. “Make sure our new Midgardian friends don’t die needlessly.”

“Aye. For Asgard!”

Loki stepped into the reach of The Other and nailed his chin with his elbow, snapping his head back. The Other recovered quickly, the point of his knife skittering across Loki’s chest plate. He jumped aside, circling the alien carefully. One opening was all he needed. The Other swung his blade again, catching Loki above the eye. As he stepped back to wipe the sudden stream of blood, The Other used his shoulder as a battering ram to bring Loki down to the floor again.

“Your lady is quite important to you, is she not?” The Other asked, gasping for air. He leaned over Loki, knife near to his throat. “My Lord Thanos knows this as well. How do you expect to keep her safe?”

Loki brought his knee to The Other’s groin, and he was fortunate that it was a soft spot on the alien. He bellowed as Loki leapt to his feet and brought up his favorite dagger, one that his mother had given him. With The Other on his knees, he went for the throat, forcing the dagger into the soft tissue above the breast bone. “I expect to lay waste to any who threaten her. I would tell you to take that message back to your master, but you won’t be seeing your master ever again.” Loki pulled out the dagger and plunged it in again. “I’m certain, however, that he’ll get the message anyway.”

Later, he wasn’t sure how many times he stabbed The Other. Mayhap he’d opened that door in his mind just a crack and gotten a taste of horror. Mayhap all the rage he’d been missing for so long had gotten poured into this one moment. Either way, the next thing Loki knew, Thor was shaking him.

“Loki! Loki, he is dead.”

Finally, he let Thor pull him away. He stared at the corpse of The Other, now a sack of raw meat, and a shudder ran through him. “Send him back to Thanos, with my compliments,” Loki croaked, rubbing his face. He was a bloody mess, and it was hard to tell whether it was his own or not.

Tony Stark walked by in full Iron Man, dragging a Chitauri corpse. “What should I do with this?” He paused and took in the mess that was The Other. “Dude, what did he do to piss you off?”

Loki opened his mouth and for once, the Silver Tongue was silenced. He felt numb again and also like he wanted to find a corner to throw up in. Stark’s mask flipped up, and he marched over to put a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “You’re okay.”

Once again, it was an Avenger who reached out and steadied him. Loki took a deep breath and forced something akin to a smile. “Coming from a madman like you, that’s comforting.”
“That’s my favorite asshole!” Stark slapped him on the back and went back to hauling Chitauri dead. “Are we going to have a bonfire or are we just chucking these guys over the walls? You must have a trebuchet.”

At that moment, Frigga marched into the room, in armor and dressed for war. “I see I am too late.” She grabbed a corner of Thor’s cape and held it out to Loki. “Here, clean up. Your bride will be horrified if she sees you like that. Where is Darcy?”

Mental alarms began going off in Loki’s head. “I sent her to you, with Sif.”

“I haven’t seen either of them.”

Loki bolted for the door where he’d last seen his wife and Sif. The corridor beyond was empty, and yet, there was something off. The walls had a certain shimmer to them that wasn’t right. With a quick spell, he cleansed the hallway and quickly found the problem. An illusion had been set to appear as if everything was as it should be. Instead, Sif was frozen in place, blood dripping down her chest. Frigga touched the warrior woman’s forehead, and she was released from the spell. “What happened?” the queen asked as Sif wobbled.

Loki, however, already knew the answer. Lying on the floor were two items: Darcy’s amulet and a golden feather. “Sigyn,” he said grimly.

With that, he threw himself into Erebor, to come face to face with the dragon. Immediately, Smaug’s great head rose from his gold pile to regard him with satisfaction. “I knew you would come to me.”

Loki scowled at him, but he had nowhere else to turn. “Then, monster, let us make a deal.”

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